

## 8. Associations Between Gender Characteristics and Marital Outcomes. A Test of Identity Theory in Established Marriages

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### 8.1. INTRODUCTION

The present study considers whether gender characteristics are related with marital outcomes in the specific way predicted by *identity theory*. According to identity theory, gender and its associated meanings represent an important part of individuals' self-identity. *Identity theorists* (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Stryker, 1980) assert that the identities and gendered meanings of being masculine or feminine motivate actions that result in the social confirmation of the male respective female identity, and therefore can be considered as a key element in understanding spousal behavior and affect in marriage. This view extends theories, which assume that actors respond to others based on membership in certain status categories, such as one's biological sex (see Burke, 1980; Stets & Burke, 1996). In this respect, men as higher status individuals should display more negative communication whereas women as the lower status category should use more positive and open communication. According to identity theory, however, it is not only the fact of being male or female in a biological sense but also the meanings that individuals attribute to themselves as masculine or feminine (i.e., gender role identity) that determine individuals' interaction behavior. Because *being male* is linked with dominance, independence and competitiveness whereas *being female* is related to affiliation and cooperation, this theory presumes that negative and positive communication behavior is more likely to be used when subscribing to a masculine and feminine identity respectively (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999; Stets, 1995; 1997; Stets & Burke, 2000). In this way, the identity theoretical assumption that actors' identities guide their conduct is compatible with the "doing gender" approach (Kroska, 1997).

*Gender role identity versus other gender-related characteristics and marital communication*

By focusing on someone's attribution of stereotypical feminine (expressive) and masculine (instrumental) traits, identity theory still uses a limited conceptualization of gender identity. Neither attitudes towards sex roles nor engaging in stereotypical sex role behavior such as domestic labor are explicitly included in the concept of gender identity. This conceptualization contrasts the principles underlying a *multifactorial theory of gender*. In this perspective and in a gender perspective in general, it is believed that individual behaviors and roles have gendered meanings as well (Ferree, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Therefore, one's gender identity is composed of several gender-related characteristics such as gender preferences, gender attitudes and gender behaviors. These characteristics, though, are not self-evidently incorporated in one's self in a consistent manner but rather organized in multiple and loosely connected ways (Aube & Koestner, 1992; Aube & Norcliffe, 1995; Huston & Geis, 1993; Katsurada & Sugihara, 2002; Koestner & Aube, 1995; Orlofsky & O'Heron, 1987; Spence, 1984; 1993; Twenge, 1999). To define one's self as masculine or feminine does not necessarily mean that one also endorses specific sex role attitudes or behaves in a masculine or feminine way. This so-called multifactorial perspective to gender not only attacks the traditional thinking on gender as a bipolar construct, that identity theorists assume as well, but also questions theories built on the notion that gender behaviors, gender attitudes and gender identity are closely related (Bem, 1985).

Nonetheless, the framework of identity theory offers a theoretical tool to assume that stereotypical role behavior and sex role attitudes are similarly related to marital communication than is one's gender identity. Indeed, identity theorists assert that identities serve as a compass to steer individuals' behavior and attitudes in a mass of social meanings (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Stryker, 1980). Identities act as a sort of reference frame in which to interpret one's actions and attitudes. In their turn, these behaviors and attitudes reinforce and support one's identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; 1991; Stryker, 1980). For example, a man may affirm his instrumental self-identity by *not* doing the laundry but by repairing the car while his wife may do exactly the opposite to confirm her expressive identity.

However, not every person experiences specific behavior and attitudes to be as relevant and important in reaffirming one's identity (Burke &

Reitzes, 1981). Some women, for example, may not consider doing the laundry as essential for their female identity. Moreover, also other dimensions of meanings, which are associated with other roles or identities, might apply. We are not only men or women, but also relatives, employees, and so on.

Therefore, one's gender identity, sex role attitudes and sex role behavior do not need to be necessarily consistent. According to Spence (1993), men are more consistent than women are in this respect. Conventional sex role attitudes and behavior that give men superior status are part of their overall assessment of how masculine they are. Women, in contrast, are less likely to perceive conventional aspects of gender ideology as a relevant part of their self-image as feminine. This might be due to the more negative consequences men experience when deviating from gender stereotypes (O'Heron & Orlofsky, 1990). Thus, it might be hypothesized that on the one hand, men display more congruence between different gender aspects; and on the other hand that the latter have more consistent effects on men's marital outcomes than on women's (Aube & Norcliffe, 1995; Twenge, 1999).

Inconsistencies notwithstanding, identity theorists assert that identities are the basis for one's attitudes and related behaviors and thus they assume that identities can predict behavior more accurately than do attitudes (Kroska, 1997). Therefore, adherents of identity theory expect that identities, and thus gender identity, guide marital communication over and above the effects of other gender-related characteristics such as sex role attitudes or sex role behavior.

#### *Identity theory and marital satisfaction*

Identity theory cannot only be extended to a broader range of gender characteristics but also to the marital outcome that is studied. Besides the attention paid by identity theorists to the link between gender identity and marital communication, one could pursue a similar line of reasoning with respect to marital satisfaction. In a behavioral perspective, for example, it is assumed that masculine and feminine characteristics influence marital satisfaction through the behaviors that spouses display toward each other and more specifically through their marital communication (Miller, Caughlin & Huston, 2003). Moreover, previous research has demonstrated positive

associations between marital satisfaction and open communication and negative correlations between marital satisfaction and negative communication (Kerkstra, 1985). Hence, understanding the link between gender identity and communication on the one hand and between communication and satisfaction on the other hand, may also specify how gender characteristics become associated with marital satisfaction.

This speculation, however, must be put in the proper perspective, as marital satisfaction is an affective evaluation of the marital relationship and hence a more general and broader marital outcome than is communication. Besides an evaluation of the marital communication, marital satisfaction also includes evaluations of other elements deemed important to the partner. Therefore, gender characteristics that are (not) meaningful related to communication should not be necessarily (un)associated with marital satisfaction.

According to a multifactorial approach to gender, this link is indeed not obvious. Inherently associated with the multifactorial nature of gender is precisely the idea that the same gender characteristic might be differently related to distinct relationship outcomes such as satisfaction or communication (Koestner & Aube, 1995). Previous empirical work in this area provides support for this assumption. For example, evidence is obtained for the idea that men's expressiveness is positively related to spousal marital satisfaction (Antill, 1983; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Lamke, Sollie, Durbin & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Peterson, Baucom, Elliott, & Farr, 1989) but unrelated to spouses' negative communication styles (Huston & Geis, 1993). For women, expressiveness may be unrelated to their marital satisfaction but tends to reduce a negative interaction style towards their husbands (Aube & Norcliffe, 1995). Hence, identical gender characteristics may be differently related to husbands and wives' marital outcomes.

The inconsistencies of gender effects become also apparent from the finding that different characteristics, which both reflect stereotypical femininity (or masculinity) lead to different marital experiences. Despite men's higher marital satisfaction when adopting feminine traits, they tend to report lower satisfaction when displaying feminine role behavior such as doing housework (Aube & Norcliffe, 1995; Broman, 1988; Parmelee, 1987; Shelton & John, 1996). For women, feminine role behavior seems to positively predict marital satisfaction as well as higher levels of sharing

during interactions. Thus, whereas some aspects of femininity may encourage positive marital experiences, others seem to have the reverse effect.

The different manifestations of feminine-related characteristics within marriage are intriguing because of the social appraisal of feminine qualities in contemporary partnership (cf. Chapter 1). It looks as if a distinction needs to be made between the actual performances of traditional - and socially lower valued - feminine role behavior and the social emphasis on mere feminine qualities. As to this distinction, three important qualifications need to be borne in mind. First, the present study examines Dutch married couples with children. Characteristic for Dutch wives is their low labor market participation in terms of worked hours. Hence, Dutch women take the large burden of family work and considerably 'do gender'. Second, studies examining the consequences of the division of household labor, suggest that the link between household tasks and marital outcomes must be sought in the perception of 'fairness' rather than in the absolute amount of housework (Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994; Yogeve & Brett, 1985). This assessment of fairness does not strongly relate to the actual share of housework but is rather based on elements such as the different value attached to family chores, role expectations, and one's relational identity (Garrido & Acitelli, 1999; Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994). Third, the majority of literature on family work does not distinguish between household tasks and childrearing tasks (Coltrane, 2000). The latter, however, might be a more important source of marital satisfaction than household chores since expectations about father involvement have risen. As Knijn (1997) asserts, a hierarchy of care might be operating within marriages with caring for children more socially valued than the performance of household tasks, and therefore probably also more positively associated with spousal evaluation of marriage than household labor (Knijn, 1997).

*Towards a new research agenda*

All in all, the above findings illustrate the complex associations that exist between gender characteristics and marital features. Although several of these associations received empirical support, there are still some gaps in our understanding. First, the majority of studies addressed gender in relation to global marital outcomes such as marital quality or marital satisfaction. With the exception of expressive and instrumental traits, we know

relatively little about how gender attitudes and gender role behavior are associated with more specific marital behavior such as communication (Aube & Norcliffe, 1995). Nevertheless, the latter may be particularly relevant in understanding the processes responsible for the relation between gender and marital satisfaction.

Second, the bulk of research dealt with gender and marital experiences in younger or newlywed couples (e.g., Antill, 1983; Aube & Norcliffe, 1995; Lamke et al., 1994; Parmelee, 1987). This focus means that little is known about the influence of gender-related characteristics on different marital behaviors in established marriages. Some speculate, for example, that husbands' feminine characteristics become more important in later stages of the relationship, especially when more children may be present (Antill, 1983). In the early stages, husbands' satisfaction should depend on their wives filling in the traditional female role whereas later on, wives' marital satisfaction should become more dependent on their husbands' ability and willingness to perform nurturance tasks. This study examines the gender theme in a sample of couples averagely married for 22 years.

Third, previous work only paid limited attention to the possibility that the complex relations between gender and marriage are different according to spouses' social position. There is no doubt, however, that gender intersects other social divisions such as class (Jackson & Scott, 2002). As Dillaway and Broman (2001) denote, each intersection of structural location, such as class and sex, has the ability to shape marital experiences and behavior. It has been found, for example, that traditional gender traits, attitudes and behavior may be more strongly endorsed in lower social strata (Komarowsky, 1964; Prince-Gibson & Schwartz, 1998; Rubin, 1976) whereas unconventional gender orientations are more prevalent in higher social strata (Huston & Geis, 1993; Straver, van der heiden, & van der vliet, 1994). Perry-Jenkins and Folk (1994) contend that working-class wives' adherence to traditional attitudes affirming the provider role for men, attach great importance to do 'the women's work' whereas in middle-class couples this behavior may result in conflict (Burriss, 1991). It might therefore be hypothesized that gender identity in the broad sense is more consistently enacted within lower than in higher social classes.

It must be stressed, however, that despite the expectation that traditional gender identities are more consistently affirmed in lower social

classes, great importance is attached to feminine qualities in developing egalitarian partnership in higher social classes. At an aggregate level, Arrindell (1998) demonstrates that a feminine mentality is more easily maintained within a wealthier environment. Hence, it might be tentatively anticipated that within higher income groups, husbands especially live up more strongly to a female identity. Thus, despite the expectation that identity theory may hold particularly in lower income groups, it can also be hypothesized that the female identity is stronger enacted by men in higher income groups.

## **8.2. PRESENT STUDY**

In the present study, different linkages between gender characteristics and marital outcomes in established marriages are examined by measuring both constructs in multiple ways. In order to test whether associations between gender and marital outcomes are consistent with identity theory or with a multifactorial gender approach, besides instrumental (masculine) and expressive (feminine) traits as self-concepts, also attitudes towards stereotypical gender roles, and behavioral reports on domestic household tasks and childrearing tasks of husbands and wives are assessed. Three marital outcome variables are used: marital satisfaction, open communication, and negative communication.

First, it is tested whether expressiveness and instrumentality are characteristics for wives and husbands respectively. According to strict identity theoretical positions, wives and husbands would be identified with merely one trait.

Second, it is tested whether instrumentality predicts negative communication and whether the same results are obtained in case of stereotypical gender role attitudes, and lower scores on behavioral reports of household and childrearing tasks. In a similar vein, it will be tested whether expressiveness, less stereotypical gender role attitudes and higher scores on behavioral reports of household and childrearing tasks predict open communication.

Third, it is examined whether instrumentality, lower scores on household and childrearing behavior and a stereotypical gender role attitude negatively predicts marital satisfaction. Similarly, it will be examined

whether expressiveness, higher scores on household and childrearing behavior, and a more egalitarian gender role attitude positively relates to spousal marital satisfaction. As to behavioral reports of household and childrearing tasks, it is expected that childrearing behavior yields more positive results than household behavior.

Fourth, based on identity theory it is hypothesized that instrumentality and expressiveness influence marital outcomes independent of the effects of sex role attitudes and gender role behavior.

Fifth, based on previous research it can be anticipated that gender characteristics and their effects on marriage are more consistently for men than for women.

The final question is whether family's income position (i.e., at the household level) mitigates the associations between gender characteristics and marital outcomes. It is expected that more traditional gender – marital outcome patterns will prevail in lower income couples. Additionally, it is hypothesized that men from higher income couples more strongly confirm a feminine identity than husbands from lower income groups.

Our analyses are conducted using structural equation modeling in LISREL, which allows for testing husband-wife jointly.

### **8.3. METHOD**

#### **8.3.1. Participants**

The research sample consists of married men and women participating in the longitudinal research project "Child-rearing and family in the Netherlands". In 1990 and 1995 the same family members (mother, father and target child) provided information about similar sets of measures. Families were recruited using a multi-stage sampling method. In a first stage, a sample was taken of all Dutch municipalities distinguished by regional zone and degree of urbanization. In a second stage, a sample of children was taken in the selected municipalities. The children were selected in such a way that in each city as many boys as girls and as many children aged 9 to 12 as children aged 13 to 16 were chosen. In 1990 this procedure resulted in a sample of 1829 families. The response ratio was 43% ( $N=788$ ) and as required, the sample was representative regarding regional zone and degree



of urbanization. Of the 656 families who agreed in 1990 to participate in the second wave, 627 were contacted and 484 (77%) actually did participate in 1995. This sample proved to be still representative for regional zone but not for degree of urbanization. More technical details on the database can be found in Chapter 3 and in Gerris et al. (1992; 1993; 1998). The data were gathered by means of structured interviews and questionnaires.

Because the original sample includes married couples - both first and higher order marriages - as well as one-parent households, we restrict our research sample to first marriages because of the potentially different social processes involved when considering higher-order marriages. This selection resulted in a research group of 646 couples of which 386 couples were still married after five years and were prepared to participate in the second wave. At the second measurement point, the average marital duration is 22 years.

Using logistic regression, we examined the selective character of the panel attrition between the first and the second wave. The inclusion in "both waves" versus "first wave" was regressed on the variables of interest in this study, except from household and childrearing tasks as well as expressiveness and instrumentality, which were only inquired in the second data wave. Results demonstrate that there were no significant differences between both groups with respect to the *independent* variables. However, in comparison to those who participated twice, women who dropped between the first and second measurement point reported more negative marital outcomes in terms of marital satisfaction, negative and open communication. The satisfaction of women, who participated once, averages 5.13 in contrast to the mean satisfaction of 6.09 for women who remained in the panel. Despite the smaller difference, a similar conclusion may be drawn for women's open and negative communication. For those taken part both times their scores were 5.53 and 2.69 respectively whereas women who dropped from the panel scored 5.49 and 2.79.

The men in our sample are on average 47 years old and women average 45 years of age. Men reported higher levels of education than did women. One quarter of the male sample has a university degree, whereas for women this figure is approximately one out of eight. For husbands, 48% reported to have a middle low (lower secondary education) or low school degree; for women this is 61%. The majority of the couples in the

present study can be characterized as traditional couples in terms of paid labor. About nine out of ten husbands are employed whereas only 57% of the wives participate at the labor market.

### **8.3.2. Measures**

*Income position* is indicated by the net family income, measured in Dutch guilders. One guilder is approximately 0.45 Euro. Seven income groups were distinguished: 1 = "1100-1600", 2 = "1600-1800", 3 = "1800-2100", 4 = "2100-2500", 5 = "2500-3250", 6 = "3250-4500" and 7 = "more than 4500".

*Instrumental and expressive traits* were measured by two scales derived from the Personal Attributes Questionnaire of Spence & Helmreich (1978). The scale of instrumentality contains items about instrumental and independent characteristics, which are more likely to be endorsed by males than females. The expressiveness scale consists of seven items about expressive, communal characteristics of which it is believed that women possess them in greater abundance than males. The questionnaire consists of bipolar items with 5 boxes between the two poles. The respondents have to indicate which characteristic is more applicable to them by putting their mark near the pole representing the characteristic. If they think that both characteristics are somewhat applicable to them, they put their mark in the box in the middle. The validity of both scales is described in Gerris et al. (1998). Because some items did not significantly load on one but two dimensions, they were removed from the scale and hence, the remaining items do not cover all information included in the original scales. However, as indicated in the previous chapter, we use the original labels 'expressiveness' and 'instrumentality' to identify the scales, allowing us to situate our study within the scientific tradition on femininity and masculinity. Cronbach's alpha for the instrumentality scale is .75 for men and .76 for women. For the expressiveness scale these figures are .71 and .70 respectively.

*Sex role attitudes.* The scale "Orientation toward traditional sex roles" measures the degree to which the respondent reports to value a traditional division of roles and tasks between males and females in household, career, child rearing and education. This orientation is measured with a scale consisting of 6 items. The response scale is a 5-point Likert scale ranging

from 1 = "totally agree" to 5 = "totally disagree". After recoding, higher scores indicate higher valuation of this orientation. The internal consistency of this scale is .78 for men and .83 for women.

*Sex role behavior.* Two domains of family tasks were selected: household tasks, and child-rearing/child care tasks. The respondent was asked whether he/she thinks that he/she performs this task more often or less often than the other members of the family. The answer scale consisted of 7 points, ranging from 1 = "in our family I always carry out this job" to 7 = "in our family I never carry out this job". After recoding, higher scores indicate that the individual performs a task more often than the other family members. For men, Cronbach's alpha is .67 for the childrearing scale and .82 for the household scale. For women these figures are .76 and .78 respectively.

*Marital satisfaction* refers to the satisfaction with the partner and the relationship in general. It is measured by the marital satisfaction scale described in Chapter 4. In order to formulate the items, satisfaction with the relationship and/or the partner was used as the guiding principle (e.g., "Generally, I'm dissatisfied with the relationship with my partner" or "If I could choose again, I would choose the same partner"). The scale consists of 7-point Likert items, ranging from 1 = "not at all applicable" to 7 = "very applicable". The replies are added together so that a higher score indicates a more satisfied relationship. For women the alpha reliability coefficient is .87. For men this coefficient is .85.

*Negative communication.* The negative communication scale, discussed in Chapter 4, maps out the negative communication styles of the *couple*. Respondents were asked to indicate to what degree certain forms of negative communication are characteristic of their marital relationship (e.g., "My partner often blames me when we are quarreling" or "My partner and I interrupt each other a lot when we are talking together"). The focus is on the subjective perception of the respondent and not on individual communication skills. The perception of own behavior and partner's behavior is included, but the focus is on partner behavior. The negative communication scale consists of six items (7-point Likert items, ranging from 1 = "not at all applicable" to 7 = "very applicable"). A higher score on the scale indicates more negative communication. For women, alpha reliability coefficient is .80 whereas for men this coefficient is .83.

*Open communication.* The open communication scale maps out the open communicational style of the *respondent* and couple. For more information on this scale, see Chapter 4. Previous studies confirmed the positive effect of the selected items on marital satisfaction (Buunk & Nijsskens, 1980; Kerkstra, 1985) Respondents were asked to indicate to what degree personal feelings and experiences were shared (e.g., "I often talk to my partner about things we are both interested in" or "I often talk to my partner about personal problems"). The focus is on the subjective perception of the respondent and not on individual communication skills. Items refer to verbal behavior. The open communication scale consists of three items (7-point Likert items, ranging from 1 = "not at all applicable" to 7 = "very applicable"). Higher score on the scale indicates more positive or open communication. The alpha coefficient is .73 for women and .68 for men.

*Control variables:* Because they could affect the dependent as well as the independent variables of interest, marital duration, women's employment (dichotomized into employed versus non-employed, regardless of how many hours women work), educational level and age of the spouses were included as control variable.

#### **8.4. RESULTS**

We began by examining the correlations between the distinct gender-related characteristics included in our study. Next, to test the assumptions of identity theory, we estimate regression models in LISREL using multiple indicators for gender as well as marital outcomes.

##### *Multidimensional nature of gender*

Table 8.1 presents the mean scores and correlations of the gender characteristics of interest. Considering the mean scores of husbands and wives, paired t-tests show that men report significantly higher scores on instrumentality ( $t = -8.12, p < .001$ ) and sex role traditionalism ( $t = 5.24, p < .001$ ) whereas women score higher on expressiveness ( $t = 10.27, p < .001$ ), the performance of household ( $t = -41.04, p < .001$ ) and childrearing tasks ( $t = -14.34, p < .001$ ).

For both husbands and wives, positive correlations exist between one's instrumentality and expressiveness. This finding contrasts the

assumption of gender identity theory that both concepts are negatively associated.

Our findings do not demonstrate strong associations between traditionalism towards sex roles, expressiveness and instrumentality. Traditional women are no less instrumental or more expressive than those with non-traditional sex role attitudes. Traditional men, however, are less likely than their more egalitarian male counterparts to define themselves as expressive.

With respect to gender role behavior, Table 8.1 shows complementary findings for men and women. Men who define themselves more expressively are more likely to perform childrearing tasks whereas expressive wives seem less likely to perform childrearing and household labor. There is no evidence that instrumental husbands or wives are less apt to perform childrearing and household tasks than less instrumental spouses.

Husbands' with a traditional attitude toward sex roles are less involved in household tasks than egalitarian husbands, but do not participate more or less in the upbringing of their children.

**Table 8.1**  
**Correlation Matrix of Gender-Related Characteristics, Men [below diagonal] and Women [above diagonal]**

|                    | 1       | 2       | 3       | 4       | 5       | Mean | Sd   |
|--------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|------|------|
| 1 Instrumentality  | /       | .14 **  | -.07    | -.07    | .01     | 3.23 | 0.63 |
| 2 Expressiveness   | .18 *** | /       | .01     | -.11 *  | -.10 *  | 3.77 | 0.53 |
| 3 Traditional role | -.08    | -.13 *  | /       | .16 **  | .07     | 1.92 | 0.68 |
| 4 Household        | -.05    | .07     | -.15 ** | /       | .31 *** | 5.85 | 0.77 |
| 5 Childrearing     | .06     | .20 *** | .01     | .25 *** | /       | 4.76 | 0.79 |
| Mean               | 3.68    | 3.44    | 2.16    | 2.53    | 3.84    |      |      |
| Sd                 | 0.58    | 0.56    | 0.71    | 0.89    | 0.68    |      |      |

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

*Note.*  $N = 386$ , Traditional role = sex role traditionalism, Household = perception of performing household labor more than other members, Childrearing = perception of performing childrearing tasks more than other members

*The effect of gender-related characteristics on marital outcomes*

Paired t-tests firstly indicate that women ( $M_{95} = 5.65$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) have a significantly higher score on open communication than men ( $M_{95} = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) ( $t = -7.56$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). The negative communication scores are

not significantly different between men and women, implying that men are no more or less likely than women to blame their partners, to interrupt or get angry.

Testing the assumptions of identity theory, three separate multiple regression models were conducted for the three marital outcome measures. Each model includes different sets of gender-related characteristics: (1) expressiveness and instrumentality, (2) sex roles traditionalism and (3) performance of household and child-rearing tasks. Six control variables were included in each model: husband's and wife's age, marital duration, husband's and wife's educational level, and women's employment (1 = yes, 0 = no). Net family income was included as well to test for the interactions between income and the gender characteristics of interest.

Since husbands and wives in our sample are married with each other, they represent dependent observations. Therefore, we ran the regression analyses in LISREL, allowing us to consider the data of husbands and wives simultaneously in one model and to test for significant differences (Kenny & Cook, 1999). Variables were defined as observed variables with an error variance equal to zero and an item loading equal to one. Consequently, we did not exploit the advantage of LISREL to model measurement errors because our focus is directed to wife-husband differences regarding the interrelationships between gender characteristics and marital outcomes. The proceeding of this task involves two major steps. In a first step, the regression model is fitted in LISREL for husbands and wives simultaneously. The set of exogenous variables as well as the set of endogenous variables are allowed to correlate. In a second step, non-significant correlations between exogenous variables were fixed to zero. In the following steps, paths from the gender characteristic of interest to the marital outcome under study are successively constrained to be equal between husbands and wives. Chi-square difference tests between the unconstrained and the constrained models indicate which paths significantly differ between the marital partners. Only the final models are presented in this chapter.

To investigate whether gender aspects are differently related to marital outcomes in higher and lower income couples, the product term between net family income and the gender characteristic(s) under study were included in the model. To solve the problem of multicollinearity when using interaction terms, we first mean-centered all the variables and then

computed the cross-products using the mean-centered variables (Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990). Comparable to the procedure indicated above, it was tested which interaction terms could be constrained to equality between husbands and wives.

In the following, each set of gender characteristics are discussed in relation with the three marital outcomes. The regression coefficients are presented in the Tables. The effects of the control variables are not shown in the Tables because our main interest is directed towards the gender characteristics themselves.

*Expressiveness, instrumentality and marital outcomes*

Table 8.2 presents the regression coefficients from the models examining the effect of expressiveness and instrumentality on spousal marital outcomes.

First, our results show that expressive husbands communicate less negatively and more openly than do non-expressive husbands. The latter effect appears to be stronger for men belonging to higher income couples. The former effect becomes clear in wives' perception of negative communication because this latter measure focuses on one's partner communication rather than on one's own communication behavior.

Second, expressiveness of the husband is also associated with higher marital satisfaction of both spouses. Yet, this association is stronger for women's satisfaction than for men's satisfaction.

Third, husbands' expressiveness does not only affect their own open communication behavior but also that of their wives. The same holds when considering wives' expressiveness. The more women endorse expressive qualities, the more open they communicate with their partner and the more open their partners communicate with them.

Fourth, wives' expressiveness is differently associated with their husbands' marital satisfaction in higher and lower income couples. The higher the family income is, the more negative is the effect of wives' expressive qualities on their husbands' marital satisfaction.

Fifth, it also appears that the higher the income level is, the more positive is the effect of women's instrumental traits on both spouses' satisfaction with marriage.

**Table 8.2**  
**Effects of Expressiveness and Instrumentality on Spousal Marital Outcomes, Unstandardized Effects and Associated T-Values**

| <b>Women's satisfaction</b>    |      |       | <b>Men's satisfaction</b>       |      |       |
|--------------------------------|------|-------|---------------------------------|------|-------|
|                                | b    | t     |                                 | b    | t     |
| Inst, H                        | -.13 | -1.19 | Inst, H                         | .11  | 1.08  |
| Inst, W                        | .17  | 1.79  | Inst, W                         | -.06 | -0.71 |
| Expr, H                        | .39  | 3.64  | Expr, H                         | .18  | 1.90  |
| Expr, W                        | .15  | 1.60  | Expr, W                         | .15  | 1.60  |
| Income                         | .08  | 1.40  | Income                          | -.07 | -1.41 |
| Income * Inst, H               | .01  | 0.18  | Income * Inst, H                | .01  | 0.18  |
| Income * Expr, H               | .02  | 0.29  | Income * Expr, H                | .02  | 0.29  |
| Income * Inst, W               | .11  | 1.96  | Income * Inst, W                | .11  | 1.96  |
| Income * Expr, W               | .10  | 1.17  | Income * Expr, W                | -.17 | -2.24 |
| R <sup>2</sup> = .08           |      |       | R <sup>2</sup> = .07            |      |       |
| Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = .42 |      |       | p = 0.98 RMSEA = .00 CFI = 1.00 |      |       |
| $\chi^2(63) = 41.87$           |      |       |                                 |      |       |
| <b>Women's neg. com.</b>       |      |       | <b>Men's neg. com.</b>          |      |       |
|                                | b    | t     |                                 | b    | t     |
| Inst, H                        | -.05 | -0.50 | Inst, H                         | -.05 | -0.50 |
| Inst, W                        | -.21 | -2.64 | Inst, W                         | -.21 | -2.64 |
| Expr, H                        | -.25 | -2.73 | Expr, H                         | -.25 | -2.73 |
| Expr, W                        | -.12 | -1.24 | Expr, W                         | -.12 | -1.24 |
| Income                         | -.03 | -0.45 | Income                          | -.01 | -0.09 |
| Income * Inst, H               | -.08 | -0.89 | Income * Inst, H                | .00  | -0.02 |
| Income * Expr, H               | .03  | 0.32  | Income * Expr, H                | -.07 | -0.82 |
| Income * Inst, W               | -.03 | -0.39 | Income * Inst, W                | -.12 | -1.65 |
| Income * Expr, W               | .03  | 0.31  | Income * Expr, W                | .07  | 0.75  |
| R <sup>2</sup> = .07           |      |       | R <sup>2</sup> = .06            |      |       |
| Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = .44 |      |       | p = 0.66 RMSEA = .00 CFI = 1.00 |      |       |
| $\chi^2(32) = 29.23$           |      |       |                                 |      |       |
| <b>Women's open com.</b>       |      |       | <b>Men's open com.</b>          |      |       |
|                                | b    | t     |                                 | b    | t     |
| Inst, H                        | .12  | 1.41  | Inst, H                         | .12  | 1.41  |
| Inst, W                        | .04  | 0.50  | Inst, W                         | .04  | 0.50  |
| Expr, H                        | .36  | 4.30  | Expr, H                         | .36  | 4.30  |
| Expr, W                        | .19  | 2.13  | Expr, W                         | .19  | 2.13  |
| Income                         | .08  | 1.85  | Income                          | .08  | 1.85  |
| Income * Inst, H               | -.03 | -0.46 | Income * Inst, H                | -.03 | -0.46 |
| Income * Expr, H               | -.03 | -0.36 | Income * Expr, H                | .30  | 3.29  |
| Income * Inst, W               | .00  | -0.04 | Income * Inst, W                | .00  | -0.04 |
| Income * Expr, W               | -.03 | -0.45 | Income * Expr, W                | -.03 | -0.45 |
| R <sup>2</sup> = .11           |      |       | R <sup>2</sup> = .11            |      |       |
| Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = .22 |      |       | p = 0.49 RMSEA = .00 CFI = 1.00 |      |       |
| $\chi^2(40) = 39.64$           |      |       |                                 |      |       |

Note: Inst, H = instrumentality, husband; Inst, W = instrumentality, wife; Expr, H = expressiveness, husband; Expr, W = expressiveness, wife

<sup>(a)</sup> t = 2.58 (p < .01); t = 1.96 (p < .05); t = 1.64 (p < .10)

<sup>(b)</sup> Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = Correlation between husbands' and wives' marital outcome variables



Sixth in contrast to identity theory, the more instrumental traits wives ascribe to themselves, the less negative is their communication. At a weaker significance level, our results additionally show that this effect is stronger the higher is the income.

*Sex role traditionalism and marital outcomes*

The regression analyses reported in Table 8.3 reveal that wives nor husbands appear to be more or less satisfied when they or their partners endorse (non)traditional attitudes towards sex roles. Only at a weak significance level ( $t = - 1.64$ ), the analysis shows the negative influence of husbands' sex role traditionalism on both spouses' marital satisfaction.

However, it appears that traditional women communicate more negatively than more egalitarian women. This finding becomes clear in their husbands' perception of negative communication. Besides, traditionally orientated women have also a more negative perception of the marital communication and this effect appears to be even stronger in higher income couples. At a lower significance level ( $t = 1.78, p < .10$ ) support is also found for husbands to communicate more negative when holding traditional attitudes towards sex roles.

In line with identity theory, husbands who embrace attitudes representing a superior status for men, communicate less openly. This finding does not hold for women. However, wives communicate less openly when married with a husband endorsing traditional sex role attitudes.

**Table 8.3**  
**Effects of Traditional Sex Role Orientation on Spousal Marital Outcomes, Unstandardized Effects and Associated T-Values**

| <b>Women's satisfaction</b>    |      |       | <b>Men's satisfaction</b>        |      |       |
|--------------------------------|------|-------|----------------------------------|------|-------|
|                                | b    | t     |                                  | b    | t     |
| Trad. orient., H               | -.13 | -1.64 | Trad. orient., H                 | -.13 | -1.64 |
| Trad. orient., W               | -.03 | -0.36 | Trad. orient., W                 | -.03 | -0.36 |
| Income                         | .08  | 1.33  | Income                           | -.07 | -1.37 |
| Income * Trad. orient., H      | -.03 | -0.47 | Income * Trad. orient., H        | -.03 | -0.54 |
| Income * Trad. orient., W      | -.04 | -0.52 | Income * Trad. orient., W        | -.02 | -0.25 |
| R <sup>2</sup> = .02           |      |       | R <sup>2</sup> = .04             |      |       |
| Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = .47 |      |       | χ <sup>2</sup> (11) = 15.35      |      |       |
|                                |      |       | p = 0.17 RMSEA = .036 CFI = 1.00 |      |       |
| <b>Women's neg. com.</b>       |      |       | <b>Men's neg. com.</b>           |      |       |
|                                | b    | t     |                                  | b    | t     |
| Trad. orient., H               | .14  | 1.78  | Trad. orient., H                 | .14  | 1.78  |
| Trad. orient., W               | .20  | 2.46  | Trad. orient., W                 | .20  | 2.46  |
| Income                         | -.05 | -0.82 | Income                           | -.01 | -0.15 |
| Income * Trad. orient., H      | -.07 | -1.13 | Income * Trad. orient., H        | .06  | 0.81  |
| Income * Trad. orient., W      | .21  | 2.74  | Income * Trad. orient., W        | .02  | 0.24  |
| R <sup>2</sup> = .08           |      |       | R <sup>2</sup> = .04             |      |       |
| Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = .46 |      |       | χ <sup>2</sup> (11) = 16.05      |      |       |
|                                |      |       | p = 0.14 RMSEA = .039 CFI = .99  |      |       |
| <b>Women's open com.</b>       |      |       | <b>Men's open com.</b>           |      |       |
|                                | b    | t     |                                  | b    | t     |
| Trad. orient., H               | -.21 | -2.62 | Trad. orient., H                 | -.21 | -2.62 |
| Trad. orient., W               | .06  | 0.72  | Trad. orient., W                 | .06  | 0.72  |
| Income                         | .07  | 1.39  | Income                           | .07  | 1.39  |
| Income * Trad. orient., H      | .11  | 1.71  | Income * Trad. orient., H        | .06  | 0.87  |
| Income * Trad. orient., W      | -.03 | -0.45 | Income * Trad. orient., W        | -.05 | -0.56 |
| R <sup>2</sup> = .07           |      |       | R <sup>2</sup> = .04             |      |       |
| Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = .28 |      |       | χ <sup>2</sup> (13) = 21.19      |      |       |
|                                |      |       | p = 0.07 RMSEA = .046 CFI = .99  |      |       |

*Note:* Trad. orient., H = traditional attitudes towards sex roles, husband; Trad. orient., W = traditional attitudes towards sex roles, wife

<sup>(a)</sup> t = 2.58 (p < .01); t = 1.96 (p < .05); t = 1.64 (p < .10)

<sup>(b)</sup> Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = Correlation between husbands and wives' marital outcome variables

*Role behavior*

The last regression models test the effect of the performance of household and childrearing tasks on spousal marital outcomes. Our results show that spouses communicate more openly and are more satisfied when men do the greatest share of childrearing tasks. This finding confirms our expectations. As can be seen in Table 8.4, the effect of husbands' childrearing

involvement on communicating more openly is even stronger the higher the couple's income level.

In contrast with identity theory, however, our results indicate that wives perceiving to spend more time at childrearing than their husbands communicate more negatively and are less satisfied. The latter effect, however, is moderated by the income level of the couple. The higher the family income is, the more husbands and wives report to be satisfied when women take the bulk of childrearing tasks at their expense.

When considering household labor, both spouses appear to be less satisfied with their marriage when husbands take main responsibility for these tasks. Women in higher income couples are even more dissatisfied in case husbands' doing the bulk of household tasks. Notice that the latter not only holds when husbands take primary care of the household in higher income families but also when women do that. Moreover, to the extent that the family income is higher, women communicate more negatively when doing most of the household tasks.

To test the independent effect of gender role identity, all gender aspects of interest were included in one model. The interaction effects were not brought into the analysis because they are not the point of interest here. Results are presented in Table 8.5. Our findings firstly demonstrate that husbands' expressiveness is positively associated with both spouses' marital satisfaction and open communication behavior. Wives' expressiveness too has a positive effect on their open communication behavior.

Second, it appears that instrumental wives communicate less negatively whereas husbands' negative communication is not meaningful related to this characteristic. In sum, our analysis seems to provide partially support for the idea that one's gender role identity in terms of expressiveness and instrumentality has an effect over and above role attitudes and role behavior.

**Table 8.4**  
**Effects of Perceiving to Take the Burden of Childrearing and Household Tasks on Spousal Marital Outcomes, Unstandardized Effects and Associated T-Values**

| <b>Women's satisfaction</b>    |      |       | <b>Men's satisfaction</b>                                    |      |       |
|--------------------------------|------|-------|--|------|-------|
|                                | b    | t     |  | b    | t     |
| Household, H                   | -.14 | -1.84 | Household, H   | -.14 | -1.84 |
| Household, W                   | -.03 | -0.38 | Household, W   | -.03 | -0.38 |
| Childrearing, W                | -.19 | -2.28 | Childrearing, W  | -.04 | -0.55 |
| Childrearing, H                | .19  | 2.29  | Childrearing, H  | .19  | 2.29  |
| Income                         | .05  | 0.84  | Income   | -.03 | -0.58 |
| Income * Household, H          | -.22 | -3.01 | Income * Household, H  | -.08 | -1.17 |
| Income * Childrearing, H       | -.03 | -0.52 | Income * Childrearing, H                                     | .07  | 1.20  |
| Income * Household, W          | -.28 | -3.55 | Income * Household, W  | -.28 | -3.55 |
| Income * Childrearing, W       | .10  | 1.92  | Income * Childrearing, W                                     | .10  | 1.92  |
| R <sup>2</sup> = .09           |      |       | R <sup>2</sup> = .08   |      |       |
| Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = .39 |      |       | χ <sup>2</sup> (28) = 32.23 p = 0.27 RMSEA = .022 CFI = 1.00 |      |       |
| <b>Women's neg. com.</b>       |      |       | <b>Men's neg. com.</b>                                       |      |       |
|                                | b    | t     |  | b    | t     |
| Household, H                   | .10  | 1.24  | Household, H   | .10  | 1.24  |
| Household, W                   | .10  | 1.04  | Household, W   | .10  | 1.04  |
| Childrearing, W                | .18  | 2.41  | Childrearing, W  | .18  | 2.41  |
| Childrearing, H                | -.02 | -0.26 | Childrearing, H  | -.02 | -0.26 |
| Income                         | -.04 | -0.73 | Income   | .00  | -0.08 |
| Income * Household, H          | .07  | 1.00  | Income * Household, H  | .07  | 1.00  |
| Income * Childrearing, H       | .08  | 1.32  | Income * Childrearing, H                                     | .08  | 1.32  |
| Income * Household, W          | .02  | 0.20  | Income * Household, W  | .19  | 1.99  |
| Income * Childrearing, W       | .05  | 0.74  | Income * Childrearing, W                                     | -.08 | -1.18 |
| R <sup>2</sup> = .06           |      |       | R <sup>2</sup> = .05   |      |       |
| Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = .44 |      |       | χ <sup>2</sup> (29) = 38.33 p = 0.12 RMSEA = .032 CFI = .99  |      |       |
| <b>Women's open com.</b>       |      |       | <b>Men's open com.</b>                                       |      |       |
|                                | b    | t     |  | b    | t     |
| Household, H                   | -.04 | -0.47 | Household, H   | -.04 | -0.47 |
| Household, W                   | -.04 | -0.48 | Household, W   | -.04 | -0.48 |
| Childrearing, W                | -.09 | -1.28 | Childrearing, W  | -.09 | -1.28 |
| Childrearing, H                | .25  | 2.96  | Childrearing, H  | .25  | 2.96  |
| Income                         | .08  | 1.75  | Income   | .08  | 1.75  |
| Income * Household, H          | -.01 | -0.08 | Income * Household, H  | -.01 | -0.08 |
| Income * Childrearing, H       | .02  | 0.25  | Income * Childrearing, H                                     | .13  | 1.94  |
| Income * Household, W          | -.05 | -0.62 | Income * Household, W  | -.05 | -0.62 |
| Income * Childrearing, W       | .04  | 0.73  | Income * Childrearing, W                                     | .04  | 0.73  |
| R <sup>2</sup> = .08           |      |       | R <sup>2</sup> = .06   |      |       |
| Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = .23 |      |       | χ <sup>2</sup> (33) = 43.48 p = 0.10 RMSEA = .032 CFI = .99  |      |       |

Note: H = husband, W = wife

<sup>(a)</sup> t = 2.58 (p < .01); t = 1.96 (p < .05); t = 1.64 (p < .10)

<sup>(b)</sup> Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = Correlation between husbands' and wives' marital outcome variables

This conclusion can be further founded by comparing the total model and the separate models, indicating that gender role identity overrules some effects that were significant in the separate models. For example, the positive effect of husbands' performance of childrearing tasks is no longer significant in understanding spousal open communication. Presumably, the positive association between husbands' participation in childrearing and spouses' open communication is due to the expressiveness of these husbands.

Also husbands' traditional sex role orientation is no longer significant in understanding spousal negative communication. Considering the correlational analysis, it appears that this characteristic is positively associated with women taking care of childrearing. The latter overrules the effect of husbands' traditionalism on spousal negative communication.

As can be seen in Table 8.5, husbands' expressiveness seems to take precedence over the negative influence of wives' childrearing involvement on spousal satisfaction. Indeed, the more expressive husbands are, the less women seem to take responsibility of childrearing ( $r = -.11, p < .05$ ) and thus the more satisfied are women.

**Table 8.5**  
**Standardized Effects and Associated T-Values For the Models With**  
**All Gendered Characteristics**

| <b>Women's satisfaction</b>    |         |       | <b>Men's satisfaction</b>       |         |       |
|--------------------------------|---------|-------|---------------------------------|---------|-------|
|                                | $\beta$ | t     |                                 | $\beta$ | t     |
| Inst, H                        | -.02    | -0.39 | Inst, H                         | -.02    | -0.39 |
| Inst, W                        | .09     | 1.49  | Inst, W                         | -.05    | -0.81 |
| Expr, H                        | .09     | 1.87  | Expr, H                         | .10     | 1.87  |
| Expr, W                        | .07     | 1.42  | Expr, W                         | .08     | 1.42  |
| Trad. orient., H               | -.07    | -1.34 | Trad. orient., H                | -.08    | -1.34 |
| Trad. orient., W               | .00     | 0.01  | Trad. orient., W                | .00     | 0.01  |
| Household, H                   | -.10    | -1.67 | Household, H                    | -.11    | -1.67 |
| Household, W                   | .00     | 0.06  | Household, W                    | .00     | 0.06  |
| Childrearing, W                | -.07    | -1.41 | Childrearing, W                 | -.08    | -1.41 |
| Childrearing, H                | .08     | 1.64  | Childrearing, H                 | .09     | 1.64  |
| R <sup>2</sup> = .07           |         |       | R <sup>2</sup> = .09            |         |       |
| Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = .40 |         |       | p = 0.94 RMSEA = .00 CFI = 1.00 |         |       |
| $\chi^2(75) = 57.94$           |         |       |                                 |         |       |
| <b>Women's neg. com.</b>       |         |       | <b>Men's neg. com.</b>          |         |       |
|                                | $\beta$ | t     |                                 | $\beta$ | t     |
| Inst, H                        | .00     | 0.01  | Inst, H                         | .00     | 0.01  |
| Inst, W                        | -.14    | -2.73 | Inst, W                         | -.13    | -2.73 |
| Expr, H                        | -.06    | -1.24 | Expr, H                         | -.06    | -1.24 |
| Expr, W                        | .00     | -0.01 | Expr, W                         | .00     | -0.01 |
| Trad. orient., H               | .02     | 0.41  | Trad. orient., H                | .02     | 0.41  |
| Trad. orient., W               | .12     | 2.28  | Trad. orient., W                | .11     | 2.28  |
| Household, H                   | .06     | 0.95  | Household, H                    | .06     | 0.95  |
| Household, W                   | .03     | 0.53  | Household, W                    | .03     | 0.53  |
| Childrearing, W                | .11     | 2.01  | Childrearing, W                 | .10     | 2.01  |
| Childrearing, H                | -.02    | -0.40 | Childrearing, H                 | -.02    | -0.40 |
| R <sup>2</sup> = .14           |         |       | R <sup>2</sup> = .10            |         |       |
| Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = .44 |         |       | p = 0.69 RMSEA = .00 CFI = 1.00 |         |       |
| $\chi^2(76) = 70.24$           |         |       |                                 |         |       |
| <b>Women's open com.</b>       |         |       | <b>Men's open com.</b>          |         |       |
|                                | $\beta$ | t     |                                 | $\beta$ | t     |
| Inst, H                        | .06     | 1.33  | Inst, H                         | .06     | 1.33  |
| Inst, W                        | .01     | 0.29  | Inst, W                         | .01     | 0.29  |
| Expr, H                        | .13     | 2.70  | Expr, H                         | .12     | 2.70  |
| Expr, W                        | .16     | 2.70  | Expr, W                         | -.01    | -0.21 |
| Trad. orient., H               | -.12    | -2.37 | Trad. orient., H                | -.11    | -2.37 |
| Trad. orient., W               | .04     | 0.79  | Trad. orient., W                | .04     | 0.79  |
| Household, H                   | -.04    | -0.58 | Household, H                    | -.03    | -0.58 |
| Household, W                   | .03     | 0.46  | Household, W                    | .03     | 0.46  |
| Childrearing, W                | -.01    | -0.19 | Childrearing, W                 | -.15    | -2.34 |
| Childrearing, H                | .08     | 1.50  | Childrearing, H                 | .07     | 1.50  |
| R <sup>2</sup> = .12           |         |       | R <sup>2</sup> = .10            |         |       |
| Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = .20 |         |       | p = 0.94 RMSEA = .00 CFI = 1.00 |         |       |
| $\chi^2(74) = 55.91$           |         |       |                                 |         |       |

*Note.* Inst, H = instrumentality, husband; Inst, W = instrumentality, wife; Expr, H = expressiveness, husband; Expr, W = expressiveness, wife; Trad. orient., H = traditional attitudes towards sex roles, husband; Trad. orient., W = traditional attitudes towards sex roles, wife

<sup>(a)</sup> t = 2.58 (p < .01); t = 1.96 (p < .05); t = 1.64 (p < .10)

<sup>(b)</sup> Correlation (Eta1, Eta2) = Correlation between husbands and wives' marital outcome variables

## 8.5. DISCUSSION

The central objective of this study was twofold. On the one hand, basic assumptions of identity theory were tested in relation to marital communication. On the other hand, we evaluated the extensions we made to identity theory. In accordance with a multifactorial perspective on gender, this extension firstly concerns the consideration of other gender characteristics beyond expressiveness and instrumentality. Secondly, not only marital communication but also marital satisfaction was taken into account. Finally, it was examined whether and to what degree family's income position moderates the linkages between gender characteristics and marital outcomes.

The strict assumption based on identity theory that wives and husbands are identified with one stereotypical sex trait is not supported. Spouses who define themselves in terms of their stereotypical qualities are also found to attribute qualities of the opposite sex to themselves.

Our study, however, provides evidence for the assumption underlying identity theory that one's *gender role identity* can explain spousal communication behavior beyond one's biological sex. It becomes clear that expressive individuals, husbands as well as wives, communicate more openly than less expressive spouses. According to identity theory, the explanation must be sought in the adoption of a more open and vulnerable attitude of lower status individuals in comparison to higher status people. In contrast with identity theory, instrumental wives and husbands do not communicate more negatively than do non-instrumental wives. Hence, it seems that identity theory holds with respect to our measure of open communication rather than to negative communication. This finding might be due to the different measurement of both communication styles. The former is formulated from the perspective of the respondent (e.g., "I often talk to my partner about personal problems") whereas the latter refers to the dyadic communication (e.g., "My partner often blames me when we are quarreling"). A measure of negative communication with the individual as the unit of analysis might have produced different results. Moreover, the measurement of communication through observational methods, as did Stets (1997) in his study on identity and marital interaction may also yield other results than when using self-report instruments.

The idea formulated by the multifactorial gender approach, indicating that besides expressiveness and instrumentality, also sex role attitudes and sex role behavior might be viewed as an expression of someone's gender identity is reasonably supported. As expected, it appears that husbands, embracing *sex role attitudes* that represent a superior status for men, communicate less openly.

Less consistent evidence, though, is obtained for *sex role behavior* in relation to communication. Performing a stereotypical feminine role like household labor does not systematically relate to communicating in a specific way. However, this does not hold with respect to the performance of childrearing tasks. The latter is associated with more negative communication by women but with more open communication by men. Husbands' open communication behavior is even stronger to the degree that the family income is higher.

As already indicated, men also communicate more openly when defining themselves in expressive terms and when orientated towards egalitarian sex roles. Thus, it may be speculated that being expressive, being egalitarian orientated towards sex roles and being responsible for taking care of the children is part of husbands' view on 'being feminine'. At least they act in accordance with it. Apparently, these phenomena share a common underlying meaning of interpersonal orientation resulting in more open communication behavior of husbands. By displaying this behavior, men transform the culturally steered expectations associated with their biological sex.

It is striking, however, that when women subscribe to attitudes and perform behavior, which is consistent with being feminine in our culture, this does not have a large impact on spousal marital outcomes. This conclusion is supported in previous research as well (Aube & Norcliffe, 1995). Despite the fact that expressive women also communicate more openly, their role attitudes or performance of stereotypical female tasks are not consistently related to their communication behavior. Thus it may be hypothesized that neither conventional role attitudes nor stereotypical female role behavior seem to be a relevant part of women's identity; at least this cannot be derived from their communication behavior. A similar conclusion was reached by Spence (1993). She asserts that gender oriented attitudes and behavior are part of men's overall assessment of how masculine they are whereas this does not hold for women.



Besides communication behavior, our study also addressed *marital satisfaction* as an outcome. Our findings lend some support to the multifactorial gender idea that gender characteristics are differently related to marital communication and satisfaction. Our results suggest that gender role identity and attitudes are more closely tied up with marital communication while gender role behavior is more closely associated with marital satisfaction. Roughly spoken, however, the associations between gender characteristics and marital outcomes are relatively consistent.

Our study also obtained evidence for sex-specific experiences in the associations between gender and marital outcomes. For example, expressive husbands display more open communication behavior to the degree that the family income is higher whereas this finding does not hold for women endorsing expressive qualities (*infra*). Moreover, the positive effect of husbands' expressiveness on spousal satisfaction is stronger for women than for men.

In sum, our research findings account for the fact that marital behavior and marital experiences are not simply reflections of individuals' social position as man or woman (Stryker, 1980). The likelihood of displaying positive and negative communication behavior is linked with one's gender identity in terms of instrumentality and expressiveness but also closely associated with gendered meanings associated with other gender characteristics such as sex role attitudes and sex role behavior. By having (non)egalitarian sex role attitudes and doing specific family tasks, individuals might affirm gendered selves and produce gendered interaction (Coltrane, 2000).

This is not to say that all gendered characteristics meaningfully relate to spousal marital outcomes. Our study yielded several non-significant associations. For example, it appeared that in contrast to our expectations, instrumental husbands do not communicate more negatively nor do egalitarian women communicate more openly. In this respect, identity theory may possibly offer a way out by introducing the concept of *salience*. Salience indicates which identity is the most likely to be played out in a particular situation and thus the most likely to affect behavior in this situation. Because it is assumed that people are not always aware of this salience, one has to look at the behavior of individuals to be informed about the ranking (Stryker, 1980). In a similar vein, it can be argued that salience indicates

which gender characteristics are the most likely to be played out in the marital context and to determine marital behavior. At present, this question as to whether some gender aspects may be higher in the salience hierarchy than other gender aspects is relatively unaddressed in the literature and awaits further investigation.

The different importance of gender characteristics becomes noticeable when considering the context-specificity of gender. This yielded several findings supporting the idea that spouses in higher income couples are less likely to act in accordance with cultural expectations associated with 'being male' or 'being female'. In other words, identity theory might be more valid in lower than in higher income groups. For example, the higher the income level of the couple, the less negative women communicate when adopting instrumental traits. Moreover, higher-income women communicate more negatively when spending much time on doing the household.

An intriguing finding, however, is that this reasoning does not hold when considering 'femininity' and marital outcomes. In higher income couples, it appears that expressive and childrearing husbands communicate even more openly, which is totally in line with identity theory. This result demonstrates that higher income couples appraise men acting feminine.

However, the appraisal of 'femininity' in higher income groups holds with respect to childrearing but not regarding domestic labor. Hence, despite the fact that expressiveness, childrearing as well as household labor may be associated with an interpersonal or relational orientation of the person involved, their effects on marital outcomes in higher income couples are distinct. Hence, this finding does not capture a tension between female discourse and day-to-day reality. Although a female *discourse* (i.e. role egalitarianism and expressive self-meanings), particularly on part of the husband, positively colors current partnership experiences in higher income layers whereas female daily *praxis* like doing the household is negatively valued, the latter does not hold when considering childrearing tasks.

The finding that childrearing has more positive effects on marital outcomes in higher layers, must be due to the different meanings attached to these tasks. The performance of both household labor and childrearing tasks is an imperative need and therefore less permissive. For lower income women, the performance of domestic labor may be less problematic because role expectations and the performance of expected behavior are

more closely tied up within lower groups. Traditional notions on men as providers and women as homemakers may serve among lower class spouses as a comparison referent in perceptions of fairness (Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994). For higher income groups, however, considerations of career and self-development may be an excuse for being released from domestic labor (Pyke, 1996). Or, they have sufficient financial assets to pay for this service. By examining the income level as a moderating context, the different meanings attached to household chores and childrearing tasks became particularly apparent. Household labor is more practically orientated whereas childrearing is more emotionally laden. Women do not want to take the entire burden of this latter task any longer, increasingly expecting men to take part in childrearing tasks. Our finding that wives report more negative marital outcomes when they have childrearing responsibility whereas spouses report more positive marital outcomes when husbands are more involved with taking care of the children lends support to this idea. Hence, fathers' involvement in parenting rather than their household participation has become a salient and pivotal issue in couples' evaluations of their marriage (see also Kalmijn, 1999). Apparently, a 'hierarchy of care' is operating with taking care of children getting priority over performing household tasks (Knijn, 1997). This hierarchy is even more pronounced in higher income groups. In some respect, one can assert that husbands' performance of childrearing tasks is more valued in higher income groups because these strata appraise feminine features in men. Higher income groups may attempt to re-negotiate the masculine identity so that "doing fathering" is not considered to be contradictory to dominant images of "being man" (Morgan, 2004). However, the argumentation can be easily reversed. By socially allowing and expecting men to take care of children, parenting loses its sex-specific character. Hence, by limiting their involvement to activities that have increasingly become defined as sex-neutral (e.g., paying attention to children) and avoiding stereotypical female tasks (e.g., cleaning), men might affirm their masculinity and at the same time respond to new norms of parenthood. In a similar vein, higher income women might distinguish themselves from their female counterparts in lower income groups by a weaker identification with household labor and a somewhat stronger identification with childrearing.

We contend with Perry-Jenkins and Folk (1994) that, besides gender, social class remains another important identity steering spouses' marital behavior and affect. Turning attention to social class as playing a part in understanding the linkage between gender and marital outcomes can clarify the inconsistencies in past research about the role of expressiveness versus instrumentality and about the effect of household versus childrearing tasks.

Besides the attention paid to social class, an important strength of this study is the inclusion of husbands and wives into the same analysis, capturing the dynamic nature of partnership. In addition to the premises of identity theory, we found that expressiveness not only results in more open communication of the individual him/herself but also in that of his/her partner. Similarly, expressive husbands do not only communicate less negatively but so do their partners. This dynamic reveals that the effect of one specific gender quality of one of the partners not only positively contributes to marriage by that partners' behavior but also by the behavior evoked of the other partner.

Our research is limited on eight points in particular. First, the study deals with a sample of married couples that all have children. Therefore, the findings may be strongly related to the marital stage under study and not generalizable to newlywed couples or childless couples. Second, 'positive behavior' and 'negative behavior' between marital partners was indicated by a limited set of communication items. A more differentiated measurement of both behaviors may demonstrate that some gender characteristics are more or less likely to result in 'positive' or 'negative' behavior. Third, gender role behavior was not measured as the actual share of family work in terms of hours but as the perception of one's share. However, Yogeve and Brett (1985), using a similar measurement, argue that the interpretation of the spouses with respect to housework and childcare behavior might be more important for examining marital outcomes. Fourth, it is worth mentioning that we did not test causal relationships. For example, the finding that wives are happier if their husbands are more involved with childrearing might also be true in the opposite direction. However, indirect support for the former interpretation is provided by the long-term analysis of Amato and Booth (1995) showing that men with more egalitarian attitudes have less tensions and conflicts. Fifth, the women under study appear to be the most satisfied one's from the initial sample. They represent a group of

'marital survivors'. On the one hand, this might imply that some gender effects are already ruled out and thus fall beyond our scope; but on the other hand, it demonstrates the importance of particular gender characteristics in enduring marriages. Sixth, the family income position was used as an indicator for discerning higher and lower social classes. It reflects family's capacity of how many financial assets are available (to spend). This indicator must be distinguished from cultural indicators such as spousal educational level. The latter rather reflects someone's opinions, attitudes and beliefs and therefore touches upon a different aspect of social class. Future research may examine to what degree our results hold when using, for example, occupational status and educational level as indicators of class. The use of a class indicator for each spouse is advisable because in their study on the division of labor and marital assessments, Perry-Jenkins & Folk (1994) demonstrated that wives' class level rather than husbands' was related to the division of household labor. Seventh, a qualitative research design might supplement the present study by investigating the different meanings attached by husbands and wives to household and childrearing labor. Can we explain, for example, the different results regarding household tasks and parental tasks by the more instrumental meaning associated with the former and the more emotional connotation associated with the latter? In this respect, Vandemeulebroecke et al. (2000) demonstrated that wives consider household labor as 'care' whereas husbands consider their labor force participation as an expression of care. The question arises to what degree husbands and wives in higher and lower social classes differ in these connotations? Eighth, the variance explained in the different models is quite limited. When comparing the different models it appears that the included gender characteristics explain more variance in the distinct communication aspects than in marital satisfaction. This might suggest that these gender characteristics influence marital satisfaction indirectly by the communication behavior with which it is associated.

We see two avenues for future research that derive from the present effort. First, this study highlights the importance of measuring both gender identity and marital evaluations in multiple ways. To gain more insight in the role of gender in longer-term versus newlywed marriages, it is recommendable to unravel the complex issue of gender and marriage in different spousal samples. Using the framework of identity theory and the concept of

salience in particular, a deeper understanding of gender in marriage may be accomplished. The second direction concerns the issue of conditionality. Future research should shed more light on the social contexts surrounding couples since it was demonstrated that valued gender-marriage outcomes differ for lower and higher-class spouses. The consideration of couples' income position enabled us to clarify the importance of women's instrumentality in higher social strata as well as the lower importance of their performance of stereotypical feminine role behavior like household labor. The question arises whether and to what degree women 'being masculine' can be seen as a social differentiation mechanism between higher and lower social strata in their evaluation of partnership. Conceivably, not only a 'new man' but also a 'new woman' is in the make.

## 9. Marital Relationships and Parenting Experiences in Established Marriages. Short-Term and Long-Term Interrelationships

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### 9.1. INTRODUCTION

Parental and marital roles are one of the most salient sources of identity (Thoits, 1992). Therefore, experiences in the parent-child system are closely tied up with experiences in the marital system (Rogers & White, 1998). Nonetheless, the parent-child bond does not depend as much on individuals' role experiences as most other role relationships (Rogers & White, 1998). Whether parents are satisfied or not, has hardly any consequence for the persistence and stability of the parent-child relationship. This qualification notwithstanding, parenting satisfaction and childrearing experiences are an important issue for research. Parenting satisfaction does not only appear to be pivotal to the quality of parenting during marriage but also to parenting after divorce (Belsky et al., 1991). Besides, a better comprehension of parenting experiences is vital in light of the widely supported finding that parents are generally more distressed and unhappy than non-parents (Crnic & Acevedo, 1995; McLanahan & Adams, 1987; Twenge, Campbell & Foster, 2003; White, Booth, & Edwards, 1986).

The latter finding raises the question why parenthood, being socially valued and an important source of identity, is hardly reconcilable with individuals' well-being? Some explain this negative association by the high proportion of couples that remain unhappily together precisely because of the presence of children (Glenn & McLahan, 1982; White, Booth, & Edwards, 1986). However, other macro as well as micro-theoretical explanations might be put forward for the negative association between children and individuals' well-being. With respect to the former, the changing social and personal meaning of children is of special interest. The increase in childrens' affective-emotional value seems to be inversely proportional to their economical value, being prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some demographers interpret the trend in decreasing fertility, already started in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as an important signal of larger parental investment

in a smaller number of children. However, as the result of broad social transformations, a dominant parental model is absent, leaving open several ways of parenting, and enhancing the risk of 'parenting insecurity' (du Bois-Reymond et al., 1993). The latter is further fueled by a generational gap. Contemporary parents with adolescent children face the difficulty that the material and immaterial space of their children is very different from the one they had available during their childhood. Hence, parenting has become a difficult and tough psychological 'job', creating tension and strain.

The latter explanation is in line with a micro-theoretical approach of children's effect on marital relationships, focusing on roles and role changes. Indeed, the time men and women devote to parenting reduces the time they can spend at other relationships and activities of interest. Managing this time schedule may lead to role conflict and feelings of overload, resulting in lower satisfaction with marriage (O'Neill & Greenberger, 1994). Particularly employed women might be confronted with conflicting role expectations associated with their role as marital partner, mother and worker. This role perspective suggests that the negative effect of children on the marital system is due to the stress caused by the parental role.

The present study is directed towards this issue, attempting to gain a deeper insight in the interrelationships between parenting experiences and marital relationships. Assuming that parenting experiences actually affect the marital system, it is examined whether husband-wife communication can be considered as a mechanism linking aspects of parenting with marital satisfaction. Drawing on the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA)-model of Karney & Bradbury (1995), individuals' resources, which may affect both the parental and the marital system, are also taken into account. In a second part of the study, the cross-sectional analysis is extended with an examination of the long-term relationship between parenting and marital experiences. It is investigated whether experiences within the child-parent system are rather an antecedent or a consequence of experiences in the marital system. Because the majority of studies did not endeavor to establish the relative strength of the two directions, further investigating the nature of this relationship is indispensable.



## **9.2. SHORT-TERM RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PARENTING EXPERIENCES AND MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS**

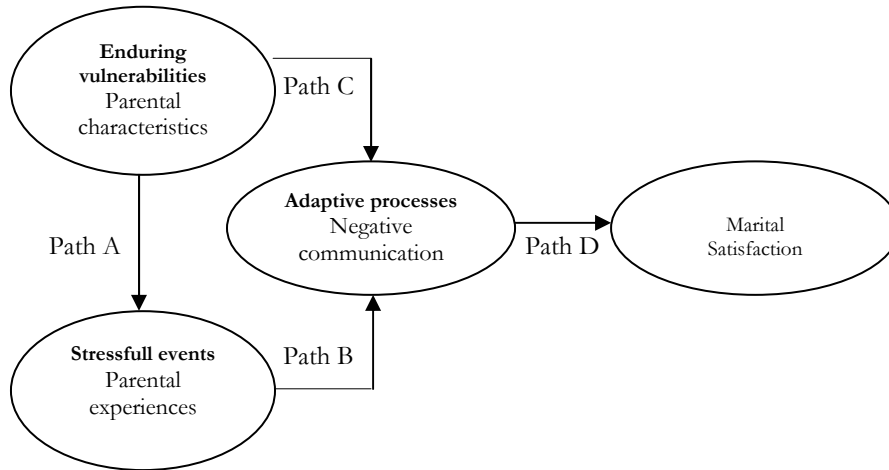
As indicated above, it is assumed that parenting may negatively affect the marital system due to the stress and difficulties with which it is associated. However, stress in general, and hence parental stress, is not deemed intrinsic to parenting but rather a response to it (McCubbin et al., 1980). It seems clear that not every individual is likely to perceive a similar situation as being equally stressful. In research on family stress, two types of stressors<sup>12</sup> are commonly dealt with: normative and non-normative stressor events. The former refers to predictable stressors that are associated with the stages of the life cycle (e.g., birth of a child, retirement) whereas the latter refers to events that occur unexpectedly (e.g., death of a child) (Burr, 1973; Hill, 1949; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). In addition to these normative and non-normative events, there is also a third type of stressor, related to the (cumulative) demands with which families need to cope. This source of stress is engendered by the ongoing role strains and difficulties experienced in the daily family reality (Lavee, McCubbin, & Olson, 1987). However, unlike normative and non-normative events, strains have no discrete onset but rather result from unresolved tensions associated with the ongoing interpersonal relations among family members. In this respect, difficulties in performing one's parental role may produce specific tension or strain, impinging on the individual and the marital relationship. Lavee, McCubbin, and Olson (1987) even argue that strains might be more strongly associated with individuals' well-being than stressor events.

To understand why some people experience the parental role as more stressful than others and, to get a more solid grip on how this stressful experience relates to the marital relationship, this study draws upon the VSA-model of Karney & Bradbury (1995). In explaining marital quality and stability, this theoretical framework presupposes dynamic relationships between individuals' vulnerabilities, the stressful events couples encounter as well as their adaptive capacity (see Chapter 3). The conceptual model that will be tested in the present study is visualized in Figure 9.1. In the following, we elaborate upon the different hypothesized paths.

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<sup>12</sup> Stressors are defined as "events that produce a change in the family social system" (Burr, 1973, p. 201).

**Figure 9.1**  
**The Hypothesized Model of the Relationship Between Parenting and Marital Satisfaction**



*The effect of individuals' vulnerabilities on stressful events (Path A)*

Path A implies that vulnerabilities, i.e. "stable demographic, historical, personality and experiential factors that individuals bring to marriage" (Bradbury, 1995, p. 461), have an influence on the degree to which individuals experience the parental role as a strain or as stressful. Three groups of vulnerabilities are discerned for the present study: (a) role demands, (b) life cycle and socioeconomic resources and (c) the spillover of multiple roles (Lavee & Sharlin, 1996; Rogers & White, 1998).

*Role demands* that may affect parenting experiences include the number and age of children. As to the former, research has shown that a larger number of children may put parents under greater pressure (Lavee & Sharlin, 1996; Umberson, 1989). McLanahan and Adams (1987), however, conclude that the mere presence of children is more important than their absolute number. Regarding the age of children, studies demonstrate that children under the age of 18 are less beneficial for parents' well-being than adult children (see Umberson, 1989). Rogers and White (1998), in contrast, found no significant association between child characteristics and parenting satisfaction, eliciting that role demands do not necessarily say anything

about role commitment, or about the sacrifices one is willing to make in sustaining a role. Therefore, it can be argued that one's commitment to a role, rather than role demands, causes role performance to be less problematic, and hence increases the likelihood of role satisfaction.

Second, the VSA-model assumes that parenting strain may be relieved by the *resources* available to individuals. This idea is a longstanding view already accentuated in crisis theory and in the ABCX-model of stress<sup>13</sup> (Hill, 1949). It is asserted that the stability and quality of a family system is the result of both stressful experiences as well as the available resources to cope with these experiences (McCubbin & Patterson, 1982). As to the latter, some individuals may experience less strain or stress because they have more resources for performing their role well or because they dispose of resources preventing stressors to result in a major crisis (McCubbin et al., 1980). For example, role performance may improve by *age*. Umberson (1989) found that older parents, regardless of their children's age, report more parenting satisfaction. This might be due to the better financial and psychological equipment of older parents, suggesting that parenting becomes more positive and less stressful across the life course.

Greater *socioeconomic resources* (SES) may also be beneficial for adequate role performance (Rogers & White, 1998). This premise, however, is inconsistently supported. Some studies showed that economic distress adversely affects the marital relationship and exacerbates parental strain (Conger et al., 1990; Pittman, Wright, & Lloyd, 1989) whereas Twenge, Campbell, and Foster (2003) provide no evidence for this conclusion. In their meta-analysis, high SES groups showed more parental dissatisfaction than middle-class parents. Instead of an advantage, SES was found to be a source of role conflict in higher social strata. A similar conclusion was drawn by McLanahan and Adams (1987). The fact that higher educated parents in general, and women in particular, have more negative views about children is consistent with the idea that the opportunity cost of children is higher in these social groups. The presence of children may hinder higher-class

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<sup>13</sup> The Family Stress or ABC-X model was initially developed by Hill (1949) in his study on separation and reunion of family members after the war. In the ABC-X model it is asserted that a crisis (X) is the result of stressor events (A) that interact with family's resources (B) and with the definition which families make of the event (C). The key idea is that a direct proportional association exists between the seriousness of the stress event and the crisis that it brings about.

women to develop successful careers and may require greater adjustments to loss of freedom and autonomy (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). Rogers and White (1998) and Umberson (1989), in contrast, found no associations between income and education of the parents on the one hand, and the demandingness or quality of the parent-child relationship on the other hand.

Another important source of individuals' well functioning in social roles is *social support* (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Support in terms of social integration or embeddedness in a social network may provide a sense of stability and recognition of self-worth, helping individuals to avoid negative experiences. The availability of social support through means of feedback or active help may preclude individuals to appraise situations as stressful and demanding, alleviating the impact of potential stressful events (de Brock, 1994). Moreover, there are indications that women benefit more from social support than men because they generally dispose of more social support (Widmer, 2004).

Third, role stress can also be influenced by the *spillover or incompatibility of multiple roles*. The demands associated with the occupancy of multiple roles can elicit stress, which may undermine individuals' well-being (O'Neill & Greenberger, 1994). Traditionally, multiple roles have been considered as harmful because of the risk on competition and conflict (Goode, 1960). Today, there is growing recognition that multiple roles may be beneficial for one's self-esteem (Thoits, 1983). Although it is tempting to suppose that employed women in particular may benefit from this positive effect, research findings are inconclusive and even conflicting. Several researchers found only weak support for a specific link between parental experiences and women's employment (Guelzow, Bird, & Koball, 1991; Rogers & White, 1998; Scott & Alwin, 1989; Umberson, 1989). Scott and Alwin (1989), however, show that women enjoy less benefit than men from the roles of parent and worker. The latter effect should be due to the generally less intrinsically and financially rewarding jobs that women occupy as well as to the higher potential role conflict experienced by women. In contrast, Kessler and McRae (1982), and for the Netherlands also Vermulst and Gerris (1996) demonstrate that wives' employment enhances women's psychological and parental well-being.

In addition to the different factors related to parental strain it must be emphasized that parenting is also a gendered task. Consistent support is provided for the idea that parental experiences are *sex-specific*. In comparison to men, women experience both more strain and more reward from the parental role (Lavee & Sharlin, 1996; Scott & Alwin, 1989; Rogers & White, 1998). Because women's parental role is more burdensome, they may be exposed to a higher risk on psychological stress and therefore to more role strain (Scott & Alwin, 1989; Umberson, 1989). Paradoxically, women also report higher levels of parental role salience than men. This is particularly true for non-employed wives who do not have the extra identity of provider or worker. In this respect, it is also interesting to note that a sex-specific association is demonstrated regarding parental satisfaction and marital satisfaction. Rogers and White (1998) show that marital satisfaction is more strongly related to fathers' parenting satisfaction than to mothers'. This finding is consistent with previous work of Belsky et al. (1991), demonstrating for men a closer association between the marital and the parental system than for women.

*The effect of stressful events on marital quality through adaptive processes (Path B)*

Meta-analyses demonstrate meaningful spillover between the parental and the marital system (Erel & Burman, 1995). Feeling satisfied in one role is likely to spill over into satisfaction with other roles (Rogers & White, 1998). This idea is consistent with the well-established findings that parental satisfaction and marital satisfaction are strongly associated and that internal sources of (parental) stress negatively affect the marital relationship (Amato & Booth, 1996; Guelzow et al, 1991; Lavee, McCubbin, & Olson, 1987; Lavee & Sharlin, 1996; Rogers & White, 1998).

According to the VSA- model of Karney & Bradbury (1995), the spillover of the parental on the marital role is not a direct effect but runs through the behaviors that spouses exchange. It may be assumed that, when spouses experience strain in their parental role, their marital interaction in general and their marital communication in particular might be less relaxed and more prone for critical comments or blaming one another. Since we expect in our non-clinical sample not an extreme level of conflict but rather a normal range of social exchanges between spouses, marital communication, and negative marital communication in particular, might

be preferred as a variable representing marital interaction. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that parenting satisfaction lessens negative communication whereas parenting stress enhances this behavior (Wise, 2003).

*The effect of vulnerabilities on marital quality through adaptive processes (Path C)*

Karney and Bradbury's model hypothesizes that vulnerabilities not only affect stressful events but also might influence marital satisfaction by means of the behavior that spouses exchange. It may be assumed that spouses with fewer role demands and more resources at their disposal, better perform their marital roles and hence, display less negative communication. The majority of literature, however, primarily attends to the effect of resources on marital satisfaction rather than on marital communication. Although findings cannot be completely used interchangeably, we presume that, for lack of specific findings, resources having a positive effect on marital satisfaction, also positively affect marital communication and vice versa.

With respect to *role demands*, there are no consistent findings to assume that the number and the age of children are inversely related to marital satisfaction. In accordance with the reasoning for parenting experiences, it could be assumed that the larger the *number* of children aged under 18, the more spouses are put under pressure and thus the more likely marital communication will be negative (Lavee & Sharlin, 1996; Umberson, 1989). Empirical support for this link, however, is weak. Abbott and Brody (1985), addressing wives' marital adjustment, found that mothers with two children reported lower marital satisfaction than childless mothers, whereas Stevens, Kiger, and Riley (2001) found no evidence for a direct association between number of children and marital satisfaction. As to *age* of the children, research lends support for increasing marital disagreements when adolescents are present (see Johnson et al., 1986). Like the presence of young children, adolescents demand that husbands and wives engage in a continuous dialogue regarding child-rearing practices, leading to higher levels of conflict and more negative evaluations of marital communication (Anderson et al., 1983).

Regarding the relationship between personal *resources* and marital outcomes it can be assumed that education and income have a positive effect on a person's capacity to perform marital roles. Particularly, spouses'

level of education has been linked directly to the quality of their marital interactions (Griffin, 1993). Others refute this argumentation by stating that spouses with greater education also have higher marital expectations and, therefore, a greater chance on marital disagreements and negative perceptions of their marital communication (see Rogers & Amato, 1997). However, the effect of education might be sex-specific with higher educated women having a negative effect on marriage but higher educated men yielding positive effects because of their more egalitarian role attitudes (Amato & Booth, 1995). Considering age, fewer disagreements might be expected when spouses are older. On the one hand, these partners might have 'learned' to interact with each other in a satisfying way; on the other hand, compared to younger spouses, older partners might have experienced less disagreements during their childhood and now transmit this role model in their own relationship (Hatch & Bulcroft, 2004). Vannoy-Hiller and Philliber (1989), however, found opposite effects for husbands and wives when considering the association between age and marital satisfaction. Older husbands have a more favorable perception of their marriage whereas older wives appear to be less happy. The reason must be sought in contemporary role transitions. Probably, the fit between women's relationship expectations and experiences may more closely match for younger than for older women. Older men, in contrast, are expected to have higher quality marriages because they should less depend on establishing their identity as men when becoming older, therefore being more able to develop emotional relationships (Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989).

Besides socio-economic and life cycle variables, social support might also alleviate negative marital communication. Bryant & Conger (1999) demonstrate that social network support is not only important in the formation of a relationship but also remains beneficial for spousal marital satisfaction in long-lasting relationships. By channeling some problems to the network, spouses can relieve the burden on the other partner and hence contribute to a more positive interaction between the partners.

The effect of role *spillover* in terms of women's employment on the marital relationship is a controversial issue. Considering marital satisfaction, some studies failed to demonstrate a relationship (Glenn & Weaver, 1978) whereas others obtained evidence that wives' labor market participation reduces husbands' but not their own marital satisfaction (Booth, Johnson,

White, & Edwards, 1984; Greenstein, 1990; Kessler & McRae, 1982). Using panel data, Rogers (1999) found no support for the idea that changes in wives' income are related with changes in marital discord. Nonetheless, it can be expected that couples in which the wife is employed, experience more disagreements arising from their increased earning power and from role strain between family life and paid work (Hatch & Bulcroft, 2004).

*The effect of adaptive processes on marital quality (path D)*

The effect of marital communication on marital satisfaction is widely demonstrated. In the last decade, attention tends to shift towards explaining this link. Bradbury and Fincham (see Karney & Bradbury, 1995), for example, hypothesize that spousal appraisal of their interaction affects how they approach subsequent interactions. Consequently, the subjective interpretation of marital interaction is a pivotal factor in explaining the association between behavioral exchange and marital satisfaction. More specifically, it is found that having a negative perception of the marital communication in terms of "getting angry" or "interrupting each other" negatively affects spouses' marital experiences (Buunk & Nijskens, 1980; Gottman, 1991; 1993; 1994; Kerkstra, 1985). Therefore, we hypothesize an inverse association between one's perception of negative communication and one's marital satisfaction.

*Husband-Wife dynamics*

The family is a dynamic system of interacting individuals, mutually affecting each other in behavior and experiences. Therefore, mothers' experiences in the parent-child or the husband-wife system cannot be detached from those of their partners and vice versa. To fully capture this dynamic, both husbands and wives need to be included in one model, taking into account the parenting and marital experiences of the partner when examining the other partner. However, the majority of research on parenting only examined one of the spouses and rarely addressed this issue in a combined sample. An exception is the study of Lavee and Sharlin (1996) in an Israeli national representative sample of first marriages, indicating that marital partners affect one another in a circular way as regards parenting and marital experiences. However, to what degree particular aspects of parenting exert a stronger influence on husbands or on wives' marital experiences



remain unaddressed in this study as well. Our research endeavors to examine this specific aspect for first marriages in the Netherlands.

### **9.3. LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PARENTING AND MARITAL SATISFACTION**

As indicated before, experiences in the parental sphere are likely to spill over in the marital sphere. In the model described in the previous section it is attempted to predict marital satisfaction using parental variables and marital communication as a mediating mechanism.

However, the causal nature of this spillover is less clear. Although there is ample evidence for spillover effects of the parental into the marital system (supra) and of the marital system into the parental system (Amato, 1996; Wallerstein, & Blakeslee, 1989), over-time associations between aspects of parenting and the marital system are scarcely explored. Although those studies do not prove causal relationships, it seems a reasonable suggestion to assume that changes in the marital relationships are a consequence or at least occur concurrently with changes in parenting (Mc Lanaham & Adams, 1987; Rogers & White, 1998).

Among other things, the impact of children on their parents may depend on the specific stage of the family life cycle. In particular, the stage in which children enter adolescence is accompanied by new demands, which might have a substantial impact on the marital system (Lavee, McCubbin, & Olson, 1987). Failure to meet the demands of developmental transitions might bring along a temporary or even structural disequilibrium. The higher salience of the parental role in this phase might result in parental satisfaction exerting a stronger influence on marital satisfaction than the other way around. A panel study of Rogers and White (1998), however, demonstrate that the reciprocal paths between parental satisfaction and marital satisfaction are both significant and equally strong. This finding was supported for both men and women. Because of the lack of attention paid to this issue, it remains to be seen whether this conclusion holds true in other samples and /or when other indicators of parenting are used.

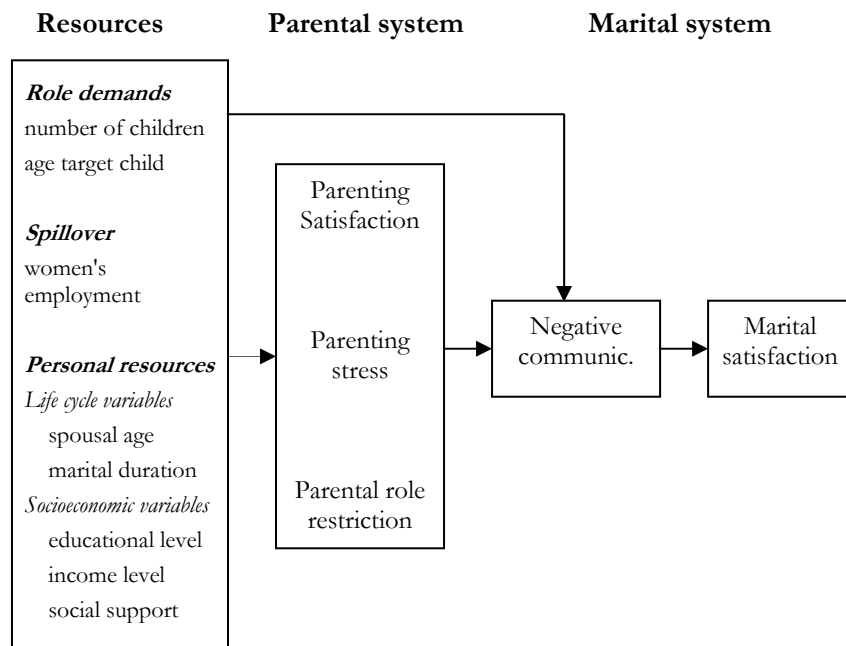
#### **9.4. PRESENT STUDY**

This study builds upon previous research in several aspects. First, our study uses multifaceted assessments of parenting by including parental satisfaction, parenting stress and parental role restriction in one model. Second, this study goes beyond previous research in exploring whether negative communication mediates the effect of parenting aspects on marital satisfaction. Third, by examining over-time associations between parenting and marital satisfaction, our study may indicate whether marital satisfaction predicts parenting or whether the reverse is true. Fourth, simultaneous including mothers and fathers belonging to one dyad in the same analysis, allows us to assess the relative influence and sex-specificity of the distinct effects.

The major hypotheses to be tested in this study are addressed in the conceptual model given in Figure 9.2. As previous research has indicated, parenting aspects may be sex-specific. It is anticipated that women experience more role strain and parenting stress than men (*Hypothesis 1*) but also that they are more satisfied with the parental role than men (*Hypothesis 2*).

With respect to the determinants of parenting experiences in terms of *role demands*, our hypotheses are tentative because research only demonstrates weak support. It is firstly hypothesized that the more children are present, the lower one's satisfaction is with the parenting role and the higher one's parenting stress and perceived parental role restriction (*Hypothesis 3*). Because of the inconclusive findings, no specific hypotheses will be formulated with respect to the association between age of the children and parenting experiences, nor regarding role demands and negative communication.

**Figure 9.2**  
**Proposed Direct and Indirect Effects Between Resources, Parenting and Marital Satisfaction**



Regarding *socio-economic* resources as predictors of parenting, it is anticipated that higher educated husbands and wives report more negative parental experiences (*Hypothesis 4*). The same reasoning can be applied to marital outcomes with the qualification that higher educated husbands may have a more positive effect on marriage (*Hypothesis 5*) and higher educated women having a more negative effect (*Hypothesis 6*). Income is not expected to be a strong differentiating factor

Furthermore, we hypothesize that the more social support experienced by the individual, the more positive one's parental experiences are (*Hypothesis 7*) and the more positive spousal evaluation of marriage (*Hypothesis 8*).

As regards *life cycle* variables, it is anticipated that spouses report more parenting satisfaction and less parenting stress to the degree they are older

(*Hypothesis 9*). No specific hypothesis will be formulated as to the effect of age on role restriction. However, we expect a positive association between age and marital outcomes for husbands (*Hypotheses 10*), but a negative association between these variables for wives (*Hypothesis 11*).

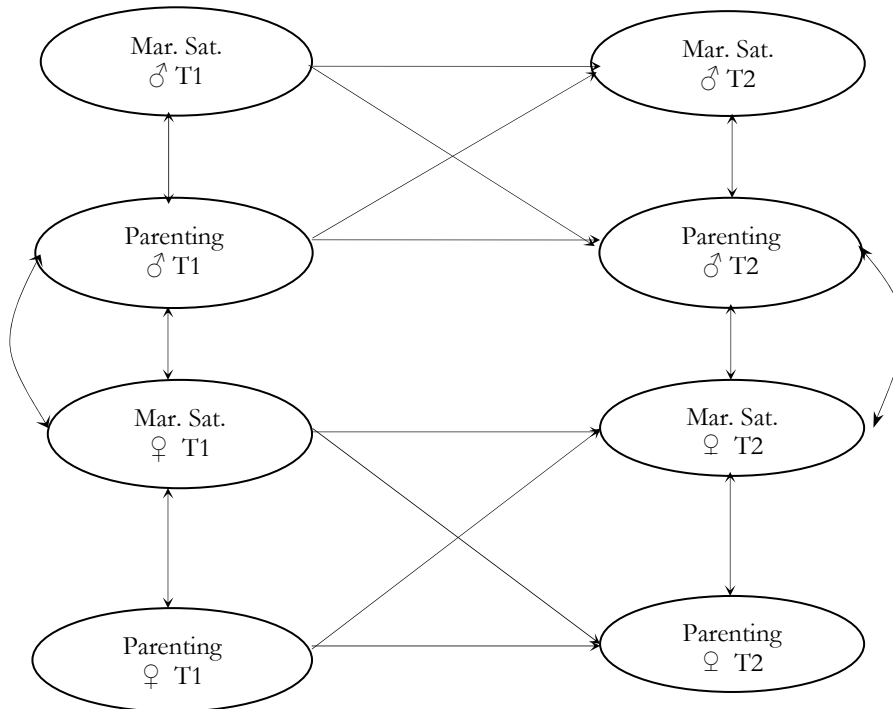
Because of a lack of empirical support no specific hypothesis will be formulated for marital duration and parenting. However, it is anticipated that marital duration is negatively associated with marital outcomes, particularly for wives (*Hypothesis 12*).

With respect to women's employment, we expect that women's participation in the labor market is associated with more positive parenting experiences (*Hypothesis 13*). It is not clear however, how women's employment may impinge on marital experiences and therefore no specific hypothesis will be formulated.

Building on the premises of the vulnerability-stress-adaptability model, we expect that the stress and strain associated with parenting negatively affect marital satisfaction through the higher negative communication displayed by the spouses (*Hypothesis 14*).

In the second part of the study, we attempt to elucidate the reciprocal relationship between the marital and the parental system. Using a cross-lagged model it is examined to what degree marital satisfaction affects parental experiences and conversely to what degree parenting influences marital satisfaction. Although two measurement points are not sufficient to clarify the causal nature of the relationship, this analysis may yet clarify whether the influence between the parental and marital system operates in two directions or in only one direction and whether differences are found between mothers and fathers. The cross-lagged relationships are addressed in Figure 9.3. The curved arrows denote the correlations between all husbands and wives' variables. Based on the findings of Rogers and White (1998) we expect a positive effect of marital satisfaction on parental satisfaction but also conversely a positive effect of approximately the same magnitude of parenting satisfaction on marital satisfaction (*Hypothesis 15*). Because no research is directed towards this specific issue, no hypotheses will be formulated with respect to parenting stress and parental role restriction.

**Figure 9.3**  
**Conceptual Model for Long-Term Association Between Parenting and Marital Satisfaction**



## 9.5. METHOD

### 9.5.1. Sample

The research sample consists of married men and women participating in the longitudinal research project "Child-rearing and Family in the Netherlands" (Gerris et al., 1992; 1993; 1998). Families were recruited using a multi-stage sampling method. In the first stage, a sample was taken of all Dutch municipalities distinguished by regional zone and degree of urbanization. In the second stage, a sample of children was taken in the selected

municipalities. These children were selected in such a way that in each city as many boys as girls and as many children aged 9 to 12 as children aged 13 to 16 were chosen. These children as well as their parents were included in the research group. In 1990, this procedure resulted in a sample of 1829 families. The response ratio was 43 % ( $N = 788$ ). More technical details on the database can be found in Chapter 3 and in Gerris et al. (1992; 1993; 1998). The data were gathered by means of structured interviews and questionnaires, completed by both the child and the parents.

Because previous studies speculate that the marital relationship may differ in first and higher order marriages (Booth & Edwards, 1992) and in order to establish a homogeneous research group, only first marriages in which both men and women have a Dutch nationality were selected. Therefore, higher order marriages and one-parent households were removed from the sample. This selection resulted in a research group of 646 couples with children. Couples had been married for about 17 years. Husbands were 42.5 years and wives were 40.0 years on average. Men reported higher levels of education than did women ( $\chi^2(7)=328.65, p < .001$ ). About one quarter of the male sample has a university degree, whereas for women this figure is approximately one out of eight. For husbands, 6% reported to have a lower school degree whereas for women this is 13%. Sex differences also exist with regard to employment activities. Whereas only 5% of the men are unemployed, this holds for about one out of two women. Our sample includes children across the age range of 9 -16 years old.

To test the cross-lagged models indicated above, we made use of the data of both the first and the second measurement wave. First-marriage couples that also remained married between the two measurement points ( $N = 386$ ) were included in the cross-lagged analysis. Because of missing values on the variables of interest, the final sample for the cross-lagged analysis consisted of 288 couples. Using logistic regression it was examined to what degree this reduced number of observations deviate from the initial 646 couples at Time 1 as well as from the 386 couples participating at both Time 1 and Time 2. The logistic regression model included the control variables (year of marriage, spousal age, spousal educational level, number of children, year of birth of the child, family income) as well as the parenting aspects of both husbands and wives measured at Time 1. Comparing

the 288 couples with the 358 couples that not remained in the study, it appears that the model was not significant with  $\chi^2(14) = 8.04, p = 0.88$ . The same conclusion can be drawn with respect to the characteristics of the 288 couples used in the cross-lagged analysis and the 98 couples who were dropped from the study because of non-response. This model was not significant with  $\chi^2(14) = 18.02, p = 0.21$ . Both comparisons indicate that the couples used in the cross-lagged analysis do not differentiate with respect to demographic and parenting characteristics from the *initial* couples and from the *both waves* couples.

### **9.5.2. Measures**

*Education* was measured in response to the question "What is your highest educational level?" Nine levels were considered ranging from 1 = "elementary school" to 9 = "university education".

*Income position* is indicated by the net family income, measured in Dutch guilders. One guilder is approximately 0.45 Euro. Seven income groups were distinguished: 1 = "1100-1600", 2 = "1600-1800", 3 = "1800-2100", 4 = "2100-2500", 5 = "2500-3250", 6 = "3250-4500" and 7 = "more than 4500".

*Age of the parents* is indicated by year of birth. Similarly, *marital duration* is measured by year of marriage.

*Age of the child* is indicated by year of birth of the child. As became clear from the description of the sample, information is only gathered from one child, referred to as the target child. The mean age of the target child is 12.8 years ( $SD = 2.20$ ). In one out of two families the target child included in the study is the oldest child whereas in another 37% of the families the child is second in rank. In most studies, however, the age of the youngest child is included in the analysis. This method could not be used in this study and has also its limitations because it is not known, for example, whether adolescent children are present in the family.

*Number of children* is a newly created variable, based on two questions. "How many brothers has N?" and "How many sisters has N?" with N being the target child.

*Women's employment* is dichotomized with 0 = not employed and 1 = employed. Because the Dutch labor participation of women is characterized

by a very large proportion of part-time employment, no difference is made between full-time and part-time employment.

*Social support* measures the degree to which the spouse reports to receive or to have access to social support for personal problems he/she experiences both in the personal domain and in the parenting and family domain. The scale consists of eight 7-point Likert items ranging from 1 = "not at all applicable" to 7 = "very applicable" (e.g., "When I have problems, there are only few people who will help me"). Alpha is .77 for men and .75 for women.

The *Parenting Stress* scale is a 3-items scale (7-point Likert items) with alpha .77 for fathers and .81 for mothers. It refers to the degree to which the parent reports to experience child-rearing as a burden and as problematic (e.g., "raising my child(ren) frequently causes problems").

The *Parental Role Restriction* scale consists of 5 items measuring the degree to which the parent feels restrictions for their personal life from the parenting role. Alpha is .67 (fathers) and .69 (mothers). Response categories range from 1 = "not at all applicable" to 7 = "very applicable" (e.g., "Raising my children prevents me from doing things which are important to myself").

*Parental satisfaction* is measured by eleven 7-point Likert items, indicating the degree to which the parent values the upbringing of children as a task that gives satisfaction and new possibilities in life. (e.g., "Raising children is a rewarding task"). Alpha is .79 for women and .82 for men.

The *Negative communication scale* indicates to what degree certain forms of negative communication are characteristic of the marital relationship (e.g., "My partner often blames me when we are quarreling" or "My partner and I interrupt each other a lot when we are talking together"). The main focus of this scale is on the perception of one's partner's behavior. The scale consists of 7-point Likert items, ranging from 1 = "not at all applicable" to 7 = "very applicable". A higher score on the scale indicates more negative communication. For women the alpha reliability coefficient is .76, for men alpha is .81.

*Marital satisfaction* is measured by a scale consisting of 7 items (Gerris et al., 1992; 1993; 1998). Another study on this sample established the uniqueness and stability of concept of marital satisfaction as well as negative communication (Chapter 4). For formulating the items, satisfac-



tion with the relationship and/or the partner was used as the guiding principle (e.g., "Generally, I'm dissatisfied with the relationship with my partner" or "If I could choose again, I would choose the same partner"). The scale consists of seven 7-point Likert items, ranging from 1 = "not at all applicable" to 7 = "very applicable". For women the alpha reliability coefficient is .85; for men this coefficient is .80.

## **9.6. RESULTS**

### *Descriptive analysis*

In a first step, we examined the correlations between the exogeneous and endogeneous variables included in our study. As can be seen in Table 9.1, husbands' parenting characteristics are less strongly associated with role demands and life cycle variables than are wives' parenting experiences. Husbands only report to feel more restricted by their parental role when they have to take care of more children ( $r = .14, p < .001$ ). This association holds for women as well ( $r = .12, p < .001$ ). Besides, correlations show that older women experience more restrictions than their younger counterparts ( $r = -.11, p < .01$ ). Additionally, it is found that wives evaluate parenting as more problematic when married for a shorter duration ( $r = .09, p < .05$ ).

The correlational analysis demonstrates that socioeconomic characteristics are more strongly related to parenting experiences than life cycle variables or children's characteristics. It seems that the higher the income level of the couple ( $r = -.32, p < .001$ ) or the higher men are educated ( $r = -.25, p < .001$ ), the less satisfied they are with childrearing. The latter is also true when their wives are employed ( $r = -.10, p < .05$ ). For women too, it appears that the higher the income level ( $r = -.19, p < .001$ ), or the higher they are educated ( $r = -.27, p < .001$ ), the less satisfied they are with parenting. Higher educated women also feel more restricted by their parental role ( $r = .11, p < .01$ ). Whether women are employed or not does not seem to be meaningfully related to women's experiences with childrearing. The availability of network support, though, positively relates to mothers' as well as fathers' parenting in terms of feeling less restricted by the parental role ( $r = -.30, p < .001$  respectively  $r = -.26, p < .001$ ), and the experience of parenting as less burdensome. ( $r = -.18, p < .001$  respectively  $r = -.16, p < .001$ ).

Considering the interrelations between parenting and marital characteristics, the results show that men report less negative communication and higher marital satisfaction to the extent that they experience less parental restriction ( $r = .28, p < .001$ ;  $r = -.26, p < .001$ ), less parenting stress ( $r = .29, p < .001, r = -.22, p < .001$ ), and are more satisfied with parenting ( $r = -.11, p < .01$ ;  $r = -.22, p < .001$ ). Except for parenting satisfaction, which is unrelated to wives' assessment of negative communication, the same inferences can be drawn for women.

Considering the correlations between the parental characteristics under study, it appears that for both wives and husbands parenting satisfaction is negatively associated with parenting stress ( $r = -.10, p < .01$  respectively  $r = -.09, p < .05$ ), but unrelated to the restrictions experienced by parenting. Stronger associations, however, exist between the latter and parenting stress. The more parents feel restricted by their parental role, the more they experience parenting also as problematic ( $r = .38, p < .001$  for men;  $r = .26, p < .001$  for women).

Using paired T-tests the difference between husbands and wives' scores on the parenting and marital variables was examined. With respect to the latter no significant differences were found between spousal marital satisfaction ( $t = 0.20, p = .94$ ) and negative communication ( $t = 0.74, p = .46$ ). As Hypothesis 1 and 2 suggest, women are more satisfied with parenting than are men ( $t = -3.76, p = .002$ ) but they also report to be more restricted by this role ( $t = -8.58, p < .0001$ ) and to experience parenting as more burdensome and problematic ( $t = -2.99, p < .003$ ).

**Table 9.1**  
**Correlation Matrix of Life Cycle Variables, Socioeconomic Variables, Parenting and Marital Experiences,**  
**Women [above diagonal], Men [below diagonal]**

|                       | 1           | 2             | 3           | 4           | 5             | 6           | 7             | 8           | 9             | 10            | 11            | 12            | 13            | M    | SD   |
|-----------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------|------|
| 1 Year marriage       | <u>1.00</u> | .69***        | -.13***     | .54***      | .04           | -.04        | .05           | .05         | -.07          | -.06          | .09*          | -.10*         | .07           | 72.6 | 3.37 |
| 2 Year birth          | .63***      | <u>.75***</u> | -.14***     | .43***      | -.15***       | -.13**      | .02           | .07         | .03           | -.11**        | .05           | -.09*         | .12**         | 49.9 | 4.17 |
| 3 Number children     | -.13***     | -.15***       | <u>1.00</u> | .01         | -.02          | .03         | .01           | -.14***     | .01           | .12***        | -.03          | -.10*         | .04           | 2.48 | 1.04 |
| 4 Year birth child    | .54***      | .41***        | .01         | <u>1.00</u> | .11**         | .01         | .04           | -.00        | -.05          | .03           | .03           | -.02          | .04           | 77.2 | 2.20 |
| 5 Education           | -.01        | -.11**        | .06         | .08*        | <u>.56***</u> | .40***      | .08*          | .20***      | -.27***       | .11**         | -.06          | -.00          | -.07*         | 3.13 | 1.63 |
| 6 Income              | -.04        | -.06          | .03         | .01         | .57***        | <u>1.00</u> | .13***        | .27***      | -.19***       | .01           | -.05          | -.07          | .01           | 6.28 | 1.34 |
| 7 Social support      | .07         | .14***        | -.04        | .06         | .06           | .12**       | <u>.37***</u> | .07         | .01           | -.30***       | -.18***       | -.22***       | .21***        | 5.08 | 1.09 |
| 8 Employment          | .05         | .04           | -.14***     | -.00        | .07           | .27***      | .03           | <u>1.00</u> | -.04          | -.08          | .01           | -.01          | .00           | 0.47 | 0.50 |
| 9 Par. Satisf         | .01         | .05           | .03         | .05         | -.32***       | -.25***     | .04           | -.10*       | <u>.32***</u> | -.02          | -.10**        | -.03          | .14***        | 4.77 | 0.92 |
| 10 Par. role restric. | -.01        | -.04          | .14***      | .03         | .05           | .05         | -.26***       | .03         | -.03          | <u>.26***</u> | .26***        | .28***        | -.27***       | 3.06 | 1.03 |
| 11 Par. Stress        | .07         | .01           | .04         | .05         | -.07          | -.07        | -.16***       | .03         | -.09*         | .38***        | <u>.39***</u> | .22***        | -.17***       | 2.88 | 1.38 |
| 12 Negat. com.        | -.01        | -.01          | -.04        | -.00        | .08           | .01         | -.22***       | .04         | -.11**        | .28***        | .29***        | <u>.47***</u> | -.55***       | 2.73 | 1.07 |
| 13 Mar. satisf.       | .05         | .02           | .01         | .03         | -.14***       | -.07        | .18***        | -.04        | .22***        | -.26***       | -.22***       | -.55***       | <u>.47***</u> | 6.05 | 1.06 |
| M                     | 72.6        | 47.5          | 2.48        | 77.2        | 3.76          | 6.28        | 4.81          | 0.47        | 4.60          | 2.64          | 2.70          | 2.75          | 6.08          |      |      |
| SD                    | 3.37        | 4.88          | 1.04        | 2.20        | 2.04          | 1.34        | 1.09          | 0.50        | 0.97          | 0.95          | 1.28          | 1.10          | 0.95          |      |      |

\* p < .05 \*\* p < .01 \*\*\* p < .001

Note: At the diagonal the correlations between husbands and wives' variables are presented

*Path analysis*

Using LISREL 8.5 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996), we tested the structural model including the variables of both husbands and wives. An important underlying issue of structural equation modeling is that of statistical power. In our study we were faced with the problem that the sample size was too small for the parameters to be estimated (Mueller, 1996). Because of the high number of parameters to be estimated relatively to the number of observations, we could not include all manifest items of the latent constructs in our structural model. To maintain an acceptable subject-to-variable ratio we applied the technique of item parceling. Instead of using the original items as indicators for latent variables, parcels are used. The latter represent combinations of items underlying a latent variable. For each construct, two parcels were computed as the mean score of a subset of items. For marital satisfaction, a parcel of four items and one of three items was made; for negative communication two parcels of each three items were retained, for parenting satisfaction a parcel of six items and one of five was defined, social support was measured by two parcels of each four items, parental role restriction is represented by a parcel of three items and a parcel of two items, and finally for parenting stress a parcel of two items and a parcel consisting of the one remaining item was constructed. Theoretically, all parcels range from 1 to 7.

Applying the technique of item parceling, it is a necessary condition that the scales are unidimensional. For social support, unidimensionality was demonstrated in Gerris et al. (1992; 1993). Because the validity and reliability of the communication and satisfaction scales was established in Chapter 4, it is also considered sound to use item parceling for these scales. As to the parental variables, the unidimensionality was already demonstrated in Gerris et al. (1992; 1993; 1998) as well. However, because these scales are also used in the cross-lagged analysis, confirmatory factor analysis (LISREL 8.50) was used to demonstrate the reliability and stability of the three parental constructs and their indicators (parcels) for the couples who participated both times at the research project. Table 9.2 presents the standardized factor loadings and alpha coefficients for the latent constructs for both sexes at Time 1 as well as Time 2.

For the evaluation of this factor model (and the other models used below), two fit indices were considered: (1) the root mean square error of

approximation (RMSEA), and (2) the comparative fit index (CFI). Models with a RMSEA value lower than .05 and a CFI value over .95 (or at least .90) are deemed acceptable (Mueller, 1996). The model with  $df = 209$  showed a  $\chi^2$ -value of 357.38 with a RMSEA of .051 and  $CFI = .93$ , indicating an acceptable fit. In the next step, the measurement invariance of the three concepts across time and across sex was tested with the aim to compare latent variables across time and between husbands and wives. For the marital satisfaction scales, measurement invariance was already established in a previous analysis (Chapter 4). To verify whether the parcels of the different parenting scales also show measurement invariance, factor loadings (lambda's) between the manifest parcels and their latent construct at Time 1 were equated with the corresponding loadings at Time 2. Moreover, husbands and wives' parcels were also equated. This constrained model yielded a  $\chi^2$ -value of 368.96 ( $df = 218$ ) with  $RMSEA = .050$  and  $CFI = .93$ . The increase in  $\chi^2$  was 11.58 ( $df = 9$ ) with  $p = .234$  showing that the model with equal factor loadings on equivalent concepts leads to a non-significant increase of  $\chi^2$ . Therefore, it can be concluded that the three concepts of parenting are invariant across time and across sex.

**Table 9.2**  
**Lambda's of the Measurement Model With 24 Manifest Variables**  
**and 12 Latent Factors, According to Sex and Year**

| Factor and indicators     | Time 1         |                | Time 2         |                |
|---------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                           | $\lambda$      | $\lambda$      | $\lambda$      | $\lambda$      |
|                           | Men            | Women          | Men            | Women          |
| Parenting satisfaction    | $\alpha = .82$ | .75            | $\alpha = .76$ | $\alpha = .75$ |
| psat1                     | .90            | .90            | .88            | .95            |
| psat2                     | .77            | .67            | .69            | .67            |
| Parenting stress          | $\alpha = .75$ | $\alpha = .77$ | $\alpha = .78$ | $\alpha = .78$ |
| pst1                      | .82            | .89            | .84            | .83            |
| pst2                      | .69            | .67            | .73            | .78            |
| Parental role restriction | $\alpha = .62$ | $\alpha = .63$ | $\alpha = .61$ | $\alpha = .63$ |
| prr1                      | .75            | .77            | .65            | .70            |
| prr2                      | .51            | .63            | .60            | .65            |

*Note:* Standardized coefficients

At this stage, support was provided for using parcels in the path model. To test the path model as visualized in Figure 9.2, the set of exogenous variables as well as the set of endogenous variables were allowed to correlate. The baseline model shows a good fit with  $\chi^2(328) = 487.99$ , a RMSEA value of .028 and a CFI-value of .98. In a second step, non-significant gamma path coefficients (effect of exogenous on endogenous variables) and correlations were fixed to zero. The fit of this model is  $\chi^2(416) = 559.78$ , indicating that the increase in chi-square value did not worsen our model. To examine significant differences between husbands and wives, gamma and beta coefficients were constrained to equality if not significantly increasing the  $\chi^2$ -value of the model. The final constrained model showed an excellent fit with  $\chi^2(426) = 558.27$ , a RMSEA value of .023 and a CFI-value of .98. Modification indices, however, showed that the  $\chi^2$ -value of our model could be significantly reduced by defining a relation between parental satisfaction and marital satisfaction. This model yielded a  $\chi^2(424) = 536.83$  with a RMSEA value of .021 and a CFI-value of .98. The squared multiple correlation for husbands' marital satisfaction was .49 and for wives' satisfaction .40.

*Effect of resources on parenting variables*

Table 9.3 presents the standardized effects between the exogeneous and the endogeneous variables in our model. With respect to the hypotheses regarding role demands, our results show that both mothers and fathers feel more restricted by their parental role to the degree that they have more children. Besides role restriction, fathers also experience more parental stress when having more children. No meaningful associations, however, were found between the number of children and spousal parenting satisfaction. Hence, the third hypothesis is true with respect to parental role restriction and fathers' childrearing stress but not to parenting satisfaction.

Additionally, our results demonstrate that fathers are more satisfied with parenting when the target child is younger. As our study only includes children aged between 9 and 16 years, this finding implies that men become less satisfied with their parental role when their children reach adolescence. This finding did not hold for women.

When considering socioeconomic resources available to spouses, our analysis lends support to hypothesis 4, assuming that education is negatively

related to parental experiences. It was indeed found that the higher the educational level of the parents, the lower their satisfaction with parenting and the more they feel restricted by the parental role. The association between education and parenting is sex-specific since men's education is more strongly linked with their parenting satisfaction whereas women's education is more closely tied up to feelings of role restriction. In addition it was found that wives who are married with higher educated husbands also report more negative parenting experiences.

Our results support the seventh hypothesis, stating that the degree to which a spouse reports to receive or to have access to social support positively affects his/her experiences of raising children. Spouses not only experience parenting as less problematic and burdensome (parenting stress) but also as less restricting when having social support. This association was found to be stronger for women than for men.

Parental variables were not significantly associated with couples' income level or spousal age, refuting Hypothesis 9. Marital duration, in contrast, was negatively related to spousal parenting stress. The longer couples are married the less parenting appears to be a burdensome and problematic task.

With respect to the spillover effect of roles (hypothesis 13), our results show that wives feel less restricted by their parental role when they have a paid job. Neither husbands nor wives report more parenting stress or parental satisfaction when women participate at the labor market. Hence, hypothesis 13, stating that women's employment yields positive parental experiences, is supported for one specific aspect, i.e. parental role restriction.

#### *Effect of resources on marital variables*

Before evaluating the link between the parental and the marital system, we consider marital variables in relation to the above-described resources and role demands. In accordance with the VSA-model, it was anticipated that role demands, role spillover and personal resources indirectly affect marital satisfaction through (negative) communication. Six effects were found significant in this respect.

**Table 9.3**  
**Standardized Effects of Independent Variables on Parenting Experiences and Negative Communication**

| Path  | $\beta$ | t-value <sup>(a)</sup> |
|---|---------|------------------------|
| Year of marriage → Parenting stress, H            | .07     | 2.12                   |
| Year of marriage → Parenting stress, W            | .07     | 2.12                   |
| Number of children → Parenting stress, H          | .08     | 1.93                   |
| Education, H → Parenting stress, H                | -.07    | -1.75                  |
| Education, H → Parenting stress, W                | -.07    | -1.75                  |
| Social support, W → Parenting stress, W           | -.21    | -4.18                  |
| Social support, H → Parenting stress, H           | -.19    | -3.73                  |
| Year birth child → Parenting satisfaction, H      | .10     | 2.37                   |
| Education, H → Parenting satisfaction, H          | -.30    | -6.04                  |
| Education, H → Parenting satisfaction, W          | -.16    | -2.94                  |
| Education, W → Parenting satisfaction, W          | -.21    | -3.89                  |
| Number of children → Parental role restriction, H | .19     | 4.94                   |
| Number of children → Parental role restriction, W | .15     | 4.94                   |
| Wife's employment → Parental role restriction, W  | -.12    | -2.89                  |
| Education, H → Parental role restriction, H       | .11     | 2.71                   |
| Education, H → Parental role restriction, W       | .09     | 2.71                   |
| Education, W → Parental role restriction, W       | .16     | 3.70                   |
| Social support, H → Parental role restriction, H  | -.30    | -5.24                  |
| Social support, W → Parental role restriction, W  | -.39    | -7.56                  |
| Year of marriage → Negative communication, W      | -.17    | -3.50                  |
| Number of children → Negative communication, W    | -.13    | -3.33                  |
| Number of children → Negative communication, H    | -.13    | -3.33                  |
| Year birth, H → Negative communication, H         | .13     | 2.35                   |
| Year birth, W → Negative communication, H         | -.14    | -2.41                  |
| Year birth, C → Negative communication, W         | .09     | 2.00                   |
| Education, H → Negative communication, W          | -.13    | -3.09                  |
| Education, W → Negative communication, W          | .13     | 3.03                   |
| Education, W → Negative communication, H          | .13     | 3.03                   |
| Social support, W → Negative communication, W     | -.15    | -2.86                  |
| Social support, H → Negative communication, H     | -.20    | -4.05                  |

<sup>(a)</sup> t = 2.58 (p < .01); t = 1.96 (p < .05); t = 1.64 (p < .10)



First, our results show that women have a less negative perception of marital communication when married for a shorter duration, supporting Hypothesis 12. This finding does not hold for men.

Second, husbands' perception of marital communication depends on the age of the spouses. To the degree that wives are younger and husbands are older, men have a less negative perception of the marital communication. Hence, our study provides evidence for hypothesis 10 and 11.

Third, perceiving the marital communication as negative is inversely related to the number of children. Both husbands and wives have a less negative perception of the marital communication when more children are present.

Fourth, women also perceive the marital communication as more negative when their children are younger. Because the included children are between 9 and 16 years old, this finding implies that women have a more negative perception of the marital communication when having pre-adolescent children than having adolescent children.

Fifth, women perceive *less* negative communication when their husbands are higher educated whereas both partners perceive *more* negative communication when wives are higher educated. These findings support the fifth and sixth hypothesis, stating that husbands and wives' education have reverse effects on marital experiences.

Sixth, the receipt of or access to social support is associated with less negative communication, lending support for the eighth hypothesis. This finding holds for both husbands and wives but the effect is stronger for men.

#### *The effect of parental experiences on marital experiences*

Table 9.4 shows the standardized effects between variables of the parental and the marital system. The result for each aspect of parenting is discussed below.

It appears that *parenting stress* positively affects spousal perceptions of negative marital communication. Comparing these effects for husbands and wives, our findings demonstrate that the effect of parenting stress on negative communication is stronger for men than for women. In addition, husbands' parenting stress also affects their wives' perception of negative communication.

**Table 9.4**  
**Standardized Effects of Parenting on Marital Variables**

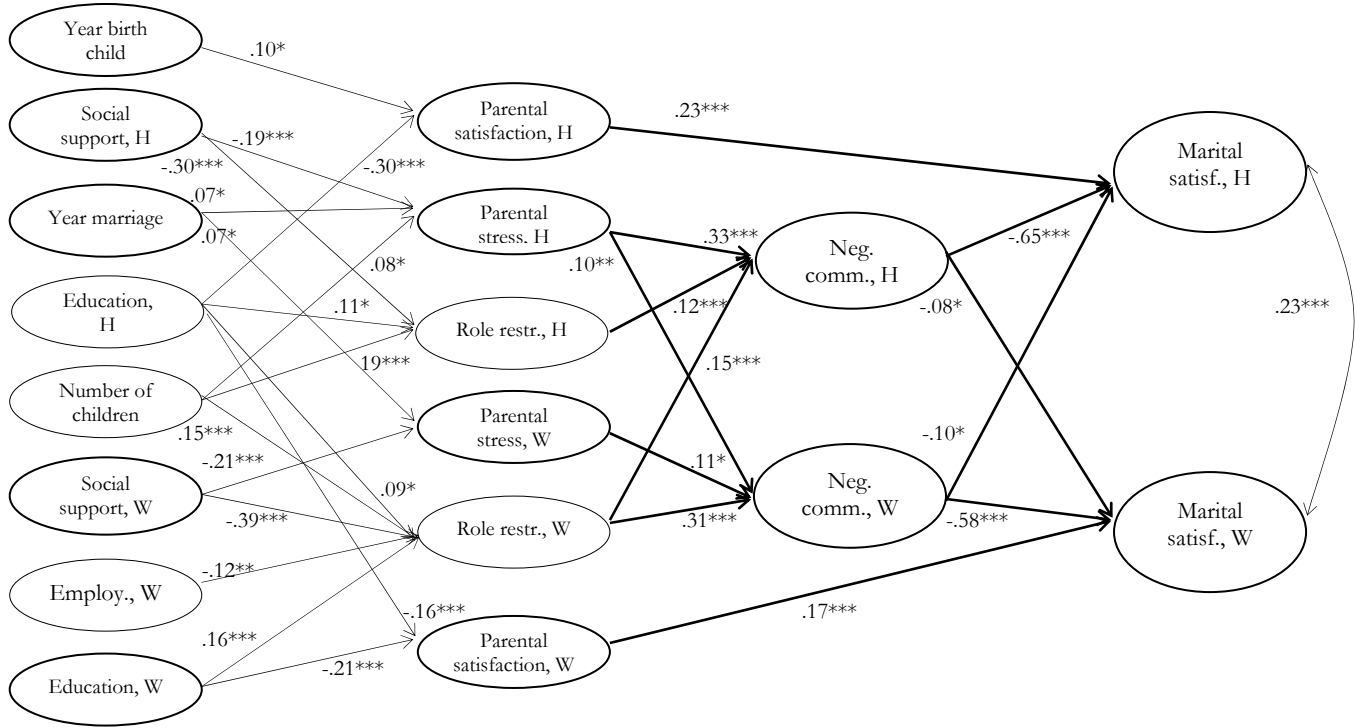
| Path   | $\beta$ | t-value <sup>(a)</sup> |
|--|---------|------------------------|
| Parenting stress, H → Negative communication, H          | .33     | 4.97                   |
| Parenting stress, H → Negative communication, W          | .10     | 3.01                   |
| Parenting stress, W → Negative communication, W          | .11     | 3.01                   |
| Parenting satisfaction, H → Marital Satisfaction, H      | .23     | 4.26                   |
| Parenting satisfaction, W → Marital Satisfaction, W      | .17     | 3.28                   |
| Parental role restriction, H → Negative communication, H | .12     | 3.60                   |
| Parental role restriction, W → Negative communication, W | .31     | 4.45                   |
| Parental role restriction, W → Negative communication, H | .15     | 3.60                   |
| Negative communication, H → Marital Satisfaction, H      | -.65    | -14.52                 |
| Negative communication, H → Marital Satisfaction, W      | -.08    | -2.38                  |
| Negative communication, W → Marital Satisfaction, H      | -.10    | -2.38                  |
| Negative communication, W → Marital Satisfaction, W      | -.58    | -14.52                 |

<sup>(a)</sup> t = 3.29 (p < .001), t = 2.58 (p < .01); t = 1.96 (p < .05); t = 1.64 (p < .10)

Reverse conclusions on sex-specificity can be drawn when considering *parental role restriction*. The negative effect of parental restriction on marital communication is stronger for women than for men. Additionally, our results show that wives' restriction by the parental role also negatively affects their husbands' communication perception.

Through their effect on negative communication, both parenting stress and parental role restriction indirectly affect spousal marital satisfaction. Note that spouses' negative communication does not only affect their own marital satisfaction but that of their partner as well.

**Figure 9.4**  
**Path Diagram of Couples' Resources, Parenting and Marital outcomes**



In contrast to the results for parenting stress and parental role restriction, it appears that the spillover of *parenting satisfaction* to marital satisfaction does not run through spousal negative communication. In this study, parental satisfaction has a direct effect on marital satisfaction. The more parents value the upbringing of children as a task that gives satisfaction and new possibilities in life, the more they are satisfied with their marital relationship. This association is sex-specific as the effect of parental satisfaction on marital satisfaction is stronger for men than for women.

Hence, our findings support Hypothesis 14, stating that parental role restriction and parenting stress are associated with the communication behavior displayed by the spouses. The hypothesis does not hold with respect to parental satisfaction. In Figure 9.4 the distinct paths described above are visualized. For reasons of comprehensibility the effect of resources on negative communication were excluded from the presentation. For the sake of brevity, only the significant paths are presented.

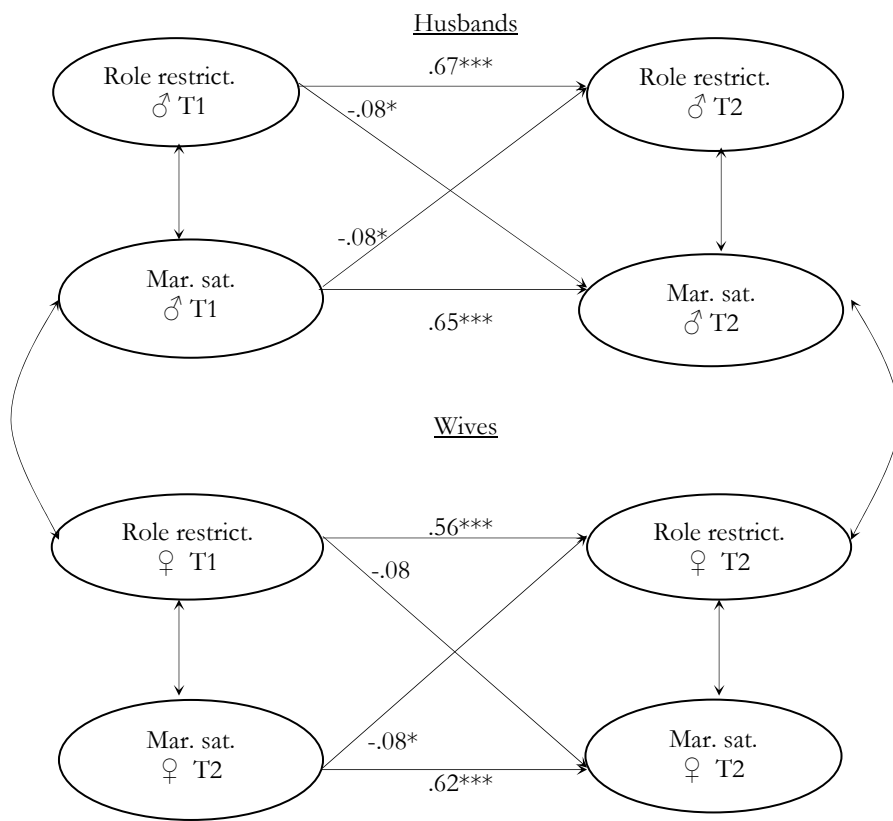
#### *Cross-lagged analysis*

Couples that remain married between the two measurement points (N=386) were included in the cross-lagged analyses. Using LISREL 8.5 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996) it is firstly assumed that marital satisfaction at Time 1 predicts marital satisfaction at Time 2 and similarly that parenting characteristics at Time 1 predict parenting characteristics at Time 2. Secondly, we test the assumption that parenting characteristics at Time 1 predict marital satisfaction at Time 2. A similar reasoning is held with respect to the effect of marital satisfaction at Time 1 on parental characteristics at Time 2. Controlling for the variables at Time 1, these reciprocal paths indicate the extent to which changes in one domain are related to changes in the other domain. Cross-lagged analyses are conducted jointly for husbands and wives. For the purpose of this study, variables at Time 1 were only allowed to affect one's own variables at Time 2 and not those of the partner.

The variables in this analysis are latent constructs measured by manifest scale items. Similarly to the short-term analysis, parcels are used to indicate the latent constructs in the cross-lagged analyses. The reason for using parcels in the long-term analysis is mainly due to the reduction in observations that participated twice. The covariance matrix of these parcels

and seven control variables<sup>14</sup> was used as input matrix for the cross-lagged analysis.

**Figure 9.5**  
**Cross-lagged Model for Parental Role Restriction and Marital Satisfaction**



*Note:* The curved arrows denote the correlations between husbands' and wives' variables, which are not presented here for reasons of concision. Standardized parameter estimates.

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

<sup>14</sup> Control variables include spousal age, age of the child, educational level of both spouses, year of marriage and the number of children.

Three separate cross-lagged models were tested, each including one of the three parenting aspects. Seven variables were included as exogenous variables in the cross-lagged analyses: marital duration, number of children, age of the target child, age of both spouses as well as their educational level. Non-significant gamma paths were constrained to zero. The involved factor loadings (lambda's) were constrained to equality across time and sex. Due to the time span of five years we did not expect error terms to be correlated over time. The endogenous variables of husband and wives were allowed to correlate at Time 1 as well as at Time 2.

Testing the cross-lagged model with parenting satisfaction as depicted in Figure 9.3, our analysis yields a  $\chi^2$ -value of 300.56 with  $df = 198$ , RMSEA = .040 and CFI = .97, which fits very well. As expected, the results indicate that marital satisfaction as well as parenting satisfaction is stable across the two waves. However, neither for women, nor for men, cross-lagged effects were found significant. Omitting the cross-lagged relationships, the  $\chi^2$ -value is 302.35 with  $df = 202$ , RMSEA = .039 and CFI = .97. The  $\chi^2$  difference equals 1.79 with  $df = 4$  and  $p = .774$  indicating that the cross-lagged effects have a non-significant contribution in the cross-lagged model. Hence, hypothesis 15 is not supported in our sample.

Considering parenting stress, the cross-lagged model showed  $\chi^2$ -value of 292.69 with  $df = 200$ , RMSEA = .038 and CFI = .97, which indicates a good fit. Our findings demonstrate that marital satisfaction at Time 1 predicts marital satisfaction at Time 2. The same holds for parenting stress. Again, the cross-lagged effects did not appear to be significant. A model without the cross-lagged effects yielded a  $\chi^2$ -value of 296.38 with  $df = 204$ , RMSEA = .038 and CFI = .97. The increase in  $\chi^2$  is 3.69 with  $df = 4$  and  $p = .449$  and thus not significant. As in the previous model, the cross-lagged relationships do not significantly contribute to a model already including the change in marital satisfaction and in parenting stress between Time 1 and Time 2.

Testing the cross-lagged model with marital satisfaction and parental role restriction, our baseline model showed a good fit with  $\chi^2(197) = 257.30$  and an RMSEA value of .031 and a CFI of .98. Both marital satisfaction and parental role restriction are stable across time. Additionally, our results demonstrate that the effect from marital satisfaction at Time 1 to parental

role restriction at Time 2 is significant for women but failed to reach significance for men. To examine whether the cross-lagged relationship between marital satisfaction at Time 1 and parental role restriction at Time 2 is different for men and women and significantly different from the opposite relationship, a second model was tested. In this model, the path between marital satisfaction at Time 1 and parental role restriction at Time 2 as well as the path between parental role restriction at Time 1 and marital satisfaction at Time 2 is constrained to be equal between husbands and wives. This constrained model yields a  $\chi^2(200) = 262.84$  with RMSEA = .031 and CFI = .98. The  $\chi^2$  difference equals 5.54 with  $df = 3$  and  $p = .136$  indicating that this equality constraint apparently not worsened our model. Considering the cross-lagged effects, our results show that both cross-lagged effects are significant at the .05 level for both men and women. The higher a spouses' marital satisfaction at Time 1, the lower he or she feel restricted by the parental role at Time 2. Conversely, the higher parental role restriction reported at Time 1, the lower one's satisfaction with marriage at Time 2. Because of the equality constraints, the negative effect of marital satisfaction on parental role restriction is equally strong as the opposite effect. Hence, we found no support for the assumption that parental role restriction is primarily a product rather than a cause of marital satisfaction. Moreover, our results suggest that changes in both concepts mutually influence each other in similar ways for men and women. The results are presented in Figure 9.5.

## **9.7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Drawing upon the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model of marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), this study presented an integrated husband-wife model to explain how couples' parenting experiences are related to their marital experiences. The former were indicated by means of (1) spousal satisfaction with the parenting role, (2) feelings of restriction by the parental role and (3) the experience of parenting as problematic and burdensome, referred to as parenting stress. Because of the dynamic character of family life, we additionally performed cross-lagged analyses to capture the circular nature of parenting and spousal relationships.

To systematize our discussion, we first comment upon our findings with respect to the short-term relationships between the parenting and the marital system. Following on this, we consider the sex-specific character of parenting and the alleviating effect of resources on parenting and marital experiences. Each set of resources is separately addressed in relation to parental and marital variables. Finally, we discuss the interrelationship between parenting and marital satisfaction over time. To conclude, some limitations and strengths of our study are denoted.

*Short-term relationships between parenting and the marital system*

Referring to our first major question, evidence was obtained for a spillover effect of parental experiences on marital experiences. However, the way through which this effect comes about depends on the parental aspect under study.

We found support for negative communication being a mediating mechanism between parenting stress and marital satisfaction as well as between role restriction and marital satisfaction. It was shown that, on the one hand, spouses' perception of negative communication significantly relates to both spouses' marital satisfaction and, on the other hand, role restriction as well as parenting stress enhances this perception of negative communication behavior. Hence, our results demonstrate that spouses' feelings of parental role restriction as well as their parenting stress have a negative effect on both spouses' marital satisfaction because under these circumstances partners perceive their mutual communication as more negatively.

It should be noticed that the association between parental stress and negative communication is stronger for men than for women whereas the relationship between parental role restriction and negative communication is stronger for women than for men. These findings thus indicate that the restrictions experienced in the parental role have a larger impact on women's marital experiences than on men's. Reversely, the perception of childrearing as burdensome and problematic is more closely tied up with husbands' than with their wives' marital experiences..

Both sex-specific results offer additional insight in the two partner effects that were obtained in this respect. Indeed, it was found that the indirect effects of parenting stress and parental role restriction not only run



through one's own perception of communication but also through the perception of the other partner. Wives' negative communication depends on their husbands' parental stress whereas husbands' negative communication depends on their wives' parental role restriction. Thus, both partner effects occur precisely with respect to those parental aspects, already being stronger associated with the communication perception of one of the partners involved. As aforementioned, it appears that in comparison to the other partner, husbands' parental stress and wives' parental role restriction are stronger related to their perception of negative communication. The finding that these already stronger effects also additionally influence the other partner indicates the strong impact of that specific aspect on the marital system.

Further, our results show that parenting satisfaction is directly related to spousal marital satisfaction and not indirectly through negative communication. Moreover, this effect is stronger for men than for women. Hence, for all the parental aspects under study, sex-specific findings were established. Taken these findings together, it appears that the spillover of parenting on partnership is the strongest for those aspects that are not traditionally defined as belonging to one's sex. For women, motherhood was traditionally assumed to be "natural" and high in priority. Therefore, it might be speculated that they were less likely to feel hindered by their parental role in both their personal development and in the maintenance of partnership. However, these expectations have changed and parenting might now interfere with personal fulfillment and developing high-quality partnership, explaining the stronger association between marital satisfaction and parental role restriction for women (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). The reverse holds for men. Expectations about men's participation in child-rearing have risen. In this respect, men are more likely to be exposed to the advantages and disadvantages associated with parenting. However, because mother role expectations are more strongly inscribed in the social script than the father role, men are more susceptible to the side effects of this 'new' role. Therefore, the pain (i.e., parental stress) and pleasures (i.e., parental satisfaction) of parenting rather than feelings of role restriction have a stronger impact on husbands' marital experiences. To state it pithily, 'new' roles of men and women for which no strong guidelines are yet available, expose each sex to new risks and vulnerabilities, coloring the intimate

bound between husbands and wives. Another possible explanation, fitting the above line of reasoning, is that women are better able to draw boundaries between their different roles *within* the family, but not as to roles *outside* the family.

Assuming that the assumptions of our theoretical model are feasible, the direct spillover effect of parenting satisfaction to marital satisfaction suggests that other adaptive mechanisms, not considered in this study, play a substantial part in the association between the parental and the marital system. Moreover, besides negative communication, other mechanisms may also account for the spillover of parental stress and role restriction on marital satisfaction. This theme needs to be further investigated in the future.

*Sex-specificity of parental experiences*

As expected, our results indicate that women experience more parenting stress and feel more restricted by the parental role than men. Nevertheless, they also report to be more satisfied with parenting than their husbands. These findings are in line with previous research and can be understood in terms of the different role experiences of men and women (Scott & Alwin, 1989). The high salience of the parental role for women may simultaneously account for their stronger appraisal of parenting (parenting satisfaction) and for the larger burden and sacrifices experienced in this respect. However, our results contrast with Stryker's (1980) identity theory, suggesting that role salience makes the performance of a role less problematic. Insofar as a role is considered to be central to an individual's identity, the demands associated with it will be discounted or at least evaluated in a more positive light (O'Neill & Greenberger, 1994). Two qualifications need to be made in this respect. First, this reasoning can be easily reversed when considering our findings. Likewise, it may be speculated that the stress and strain experienced by women in their parental role may lead them to conclude that this specific role *must* be very important to them (Scott & Alwin, 1989). Second, our study deals with a particular generation that was socialized with a segregated sex role model but who developed their own marital relationships in a social climate, increasingly questioning traditional role expectations and opening up women's role repertoire. Moreover, negotiation between this generation and their children has become more difficult

because these children enjoy material and immaterial possibilities that their parents, i.e. our generation of interest, are not acquainted with. Hence, women are confronted with several role expectations. On the one hand, women still take the burden of childrearing, which has become less obvious because of a lack of dominant models; on the other hand, women are faced with new opportunities and roles, competing with their mother role. Therefore, the mothers of this generation are particularly confronted with 'old models', explaining their parenting pleasure, and 'new realities' explaining their parenting pain.

*The effects of role demands and role spillover on parental and marital experiences*

Distinguishing three aspects of parenting, (1) parental satisfaction, (2) parenting stress and (3) parental role restriction, our study demonstrates that role demands and role spillover are weakly correlated with the distinctive aspects of parenting.

Men report lower parental satisfaction when children become older. Hence, the pre-adolescence phase of their children is more rewarding for fathers than the adolescence phase, probably because of the increasing autonomy demanded by adolescents. Moreover, research indicates that mothers are more important sources of support and more responsive to the desires of adolescents than are fathers, explaining why parenting give men less satisfaction in this specific stage (Vandemeulebroecke, et al., 2000). For women, role demands and the spillover of roles rather relate to their perception of the parental task as restrictive. It was found that employed wives feel less restricted by their parental role than non-employed wives. Hence, instead of role overload, it seems that women's possibility to perform multiple roles results in less parental role restriction. This might hold in particular for Dutch women who typically do not participate at the labor market when having children, or if they do, only work part-time.

The number of children yields mixed results for the parent-child and the husband-wife system. Our study shows that the more children are present in the family, the more both women and men feel hindered in the arrangement of their personal life, and hence the more negative their marital experiences. However, this effect on marriage is counterbalanced by the finding that the number of children is negatively related to husbands' and wives' negative communication, and thus positively affecting their

marital experiences. It might be speculated that it is indeed more difficult for men and women to combine parenting with other desired activities to the extent that more children are present. However, at the same time marital partners might be 'forced' or have 'learned' to communicate in a more positive way in order to sustain the family system when handling the different problems and difficulties that children bring along. Future research needs to investigate this finding.

For mothers, it appears that not only the number of children but also the age of the target child predicts their perception of negative communication. It was found that women have a more negative perception of the marital communication when children are younger (min. 9 years old). In line of the aforementioned reasoning, it might be that in the phase of adolescence, mothers can alleviate the pressure, which the increased autonomy demand of their adolescents might have on the marital system, by becoming confidence-persons for their children. This finding also awaits further study.

*The effect of spousal life course variables on parental and marital experiences*

In contrast to previous findings, spousal age was not related to more positive experiences of parenting (Umberson, 1989). This might be due to the limited age range in our study. Our findings show, however, that the marital stage is more determining. The longer couples are married, the less parental stress is reported. Because this effect is controlled for the ages of the spouses, it points to the beneficial effect of the spousal bond. Sharing a marital reality together for a longer period in time may arm parents against experiencing parenting as being too stressful.

However, the duration of marriage seems to have an opposite effect on the marital system itself: wives perceive more negative communication the longer the couple is married. This finding supports the idea that marital quality declines gradually throughout the marital career and that women in specific tend to report lower marital quality. However, it might contrast with the earlier finding that women report less negative communication the older children are. It is abundantly clear that further investigation on time-period-cohort effects is required to elucidate these results.

This recommendation is further supported by the finding that husbands' negative perception of the marital communication depends on

the age of the marital partners and not on the duration of being married. The effects however take the opposite direction. Husbands evaluate their marital communication more negatively to the extent that they are younger and their wives are older. This result lends support to the reasoning of Vannoy-Hiller and Philliber (1989) assuming that the discrepancy between expectations and relational experiences is larger for older women, whereas older men are more able to develop emotional relationships because in that life stage they less strongly depend on establishing their masculine identity. As emphasized before, future research needs to unravel the time, cohort and period effects that play a part in the explanation of these findings.

*The effect of education and network support on parental and marital experiences*

The educational and network resources available to a couple are vital in understanding parental and marital experiences. With respect to spousal educational level, it was found that husbands' education in particular was related to both spouses' parental experiences. The finding that lower-educated spouses have more positive experiences of parenthood in terms of parenting satisfaction and parental role restriction contrasts the commonly held idea that the more socio-economic resources available, the more adequate one's role performance is. An explanation for this finding needs to be sought in the higher opportunity costs of children for higher educated spouses as well as in the cultural orientation of higher educated people. Parenting might be a less far-reaching endeavor for lower class spouses because of their specific attitudes: higher educated spouses endorse less traditional family values than lower educated spouses. A post hoc analysis on our data indeed demonstrates for both husbands and wives, a positive association between one's appraisal of traditional family values on the one hand, and parenting experiences in terms of the three aspects of interest on the other hand. The less familial orientation of higher educated parents makes the parental role less salient and hence more problematic.

However, with respect to the performance of marital roles, different results are obtained when considering spousal educational level. We found that wives assess the marital communication less negatively when their husbands are higher educated. This might be due to the fact that these husbands are equipped with better communication skills than lower educated men and endorse more egalitarian sex role attitudes. The opposite

result, however, holds with respect to women's education. The higher women are educated, the more negative both spouses evaluate their communication. This finding may reflect the lower contentment of higher educated women with partnership. Because higher education is associated with less traditionalism and a more emancipatory orientation, it may become more difficult for higher educated women to maintain satisfying marriages (Amato & Booth, 1995).

Besides spousal educational level, an important resource for parental and marital functioning is the availability of social support. Our results support the hypothesis that husbands and wives who have access to network support for personal problems, experience parenting as less problematic and less restrictive for their personal life. Some argue that this might be due to fact that 'integrated' individuals rely less heavily on their spouse for the fulfillment of a variety of needs (Booth, Edwards, & Johnson, 1991). Because some needs are already met by other social contacts, the expectations one has for the other partner may diminish. In addition, others assert that embeddedness may generate a confident feeling that one can count on the support of other people (Granovetter, 1985).

However, the strength of the associations between social support and parental experiences is sex-specific. The availability of network support appears to be more strongly associated to women's parental role restriction and childrearing stress than to men's. A plausible line of explanation could be that women enjoy more social support than men and therefore might also take more advantage of it. This reasoning, though, does not hold with respect to marital experiences because it seems that with respect to the latter, men profit more from social support than women. Again, this might be due to contemporary expectations on husbands' family involvement. Today, men are expected to invest more in both partnership and parenthood. This investment is not obvious because men cannot rely on a dominant social script or pre-given model. However, as to parenthood they still can count on their female partners in case of problems and difficulties because the latter are still have the final responsibility. Things are different with respect to partnership since men have to take the responsibility themselves in this respect. Therefore, more than is the case for women, who are socialized to be 'relational gatekeepers', men can benefit from 'social others' in the development of partnership. In this respect, our study

specifies the findings of van Yperen (1990) on social comparison and relationship satisfaction in the Netherlands. The author claims that women, as a result of their relational orientation, talk more about their relationships with others but are also more insecure in this respect because relational problems are made explicit. Our results suggest that women's 'insecurity' may be rather situated in the parenting domain whereas men's relate to the marital relationship.

All in all, the significant and persistent role of social networks throughout marriage was demonstrated for both husbands and wives. A similar conclusion was reached by Bryant & Conger (1999) showing that social support predicted a positive change in both husbands' and wives' marital experiences in long-term marriages. Our study corroborates this work and additionally identifies parenting as a mediating dynamic through which social support contributes to marital well-being.

*Long-term interrelationship between parenting and marital satisfaction*

Using cross-lagged analysis, a significant contribution of our study is the exploration of the long-term antecedent-consequence issue between the marital and the parental system in established marriages. Our exploration of three aspects of parenting, (a) parenting stress, (b) parenting satisfaction and (c) parental role restriction resulted in only significant cross-lagged effects between parental role restriction and marital satisfaction. This means that in established marriages, role restriction and marital satisfaction are both antecedent and consequence within a five years time interval. It might be interpreted that in established marriages, role restriction and marital satisfaction have become intertwined so strongly over time, that both are associated in a bi-directional way; or maybe even in a circular way. Given the conclusion that no cross-lagged effects for parenting stress and parenting satisfaction are found, parental role restriction might be one of the most relevant aspects of the parental system having a serious impact on the marital system over time. Therefore, parental role restriction seems to be the most important candidate for future explorations of long-term interrelationships. The long-term finding of no significant effects between parenting stress and parental satisfaction, and marital satisfaction is in contrast with the short-term findings of significant associations between those variables. As to parental stress, this finding might be due to compen-

sating effects. Some marital partners may suffer from parenting difficulties and problems whereas others may become strengthened by this situation in the long-term, offsetting the negative effects. The cross-sectional finding that marital duration was negatively associated with parenting stress supports the latter speculation.

The lack of cross-lagged effects between parenting and marital is in contrast with the work of Rogers and Whyte (1998). Using a four-years time span, these authors found significant cross-lagged effects between marital and parental satisfaction. The reason why this finding was not replicated may be due the longer period between the two measurement points or to the broader range in ages of the included respondents in the American study.

Therefore, it needs to be further investigated whether it holds that the rewarding aspects of parenting (parental satisfaction) or the problems induced by it (parenting stress), remain unimportant in the long-term evaluation of marital satisfaction within established marriages. Based on our study, however, it seems as if the mutual influence between the marital and the parental system over time hinges more strongly on the restrictive nature of the parental task, hindering individuals in their personal development.

#### *Limitations and recommendations*

Some caveats of our study should be noted. First, the spillover of multiple roles is measured in a very limited way, i.e. by means of women's employment. Other indicators such as the division of household and parenting labor between husbands and wives, indicating who takes the burden of family care, may be useful indicators too. Nonetheless, it can be argued that instead of measures of role spillover, a measure of role commitment may yield alternative and interesting results. Indeed, the sacrifices one is willing to make for performing different roles may deepening our insight in how role spillover, but also role demands, relate to parenting and hence to partnership.

Second, we need to learn more about communication as a mediating mechanism. As we used a limited conceptualization of spousal communication, it remains unclear which specific aspects are harmful and which interaction behavior can buffer the harmful effects of stress and strains on partnership. Moreover, other mechanisms are conceivable which may be



responsible for the effect of parental experiences on marital satisfaction. For example, it is possible that the degree of cohesion brought about by parenting, is central in understanding the interrelationship between parenthood and partnership.

Thirdly, and related to the previous remark, it should be emphasized that social support was considered as a resource variable contributing to parental and spousal well-being. However, social support can also buffer stressful events by providing a solution to problems or by alleviating the importance of a problem. In this way, network support may reduce or eliminate the impact of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). This speculation must be investigated in future research.

Fourth, it is recommended to examine whether the sex-specific effects of the restrictive and stressful nature of the parental role might depend on spouses' family ideology. The "interactive effects of ideology" (Greenstein, 1996) may be especially important in understanding why some women (and men) experience more role restriction and stress than others.

#### *Conclusion and implications*

Our study yields some unique findings. First, the assumption that the marital system is an antecedent for parenting should be replaced by a bi-directional relationship. Neither parenting nor marital satisfaction should be dealt with only as an outcome variable. Second, and related to the previous remark, it may be that spousal communication, which we defined as a mediator between the parental and the marital systems, might also mediate the effect of the marital to the parental system. Third, besides our support of the widely held assumption that parenting is a gender-specific experience, our research design allowed to distinguish between gender-specific and gender-a-specific associations. Fourth, it was found that the associations between parenting characteristics and marital characteristics are stronger for men when considering parenting satisfaction and parenting stress. However, when taken parental role restriction into account the association between the parental and the marital system is stronger for women.

The findings presented here also have implications for couple intervention. Helping parents to function better in their parenting responsibilities may be an important avenue to improve marital relationships. As we

also demonstrated that successful parenting provides a source for satisfying marriages by decreasing spousal perception of the marital communication as negative, interventions focused on improving couples' communication styles or the attributions associated with it, may also be an effective strategy.