10. Central Findings and Reflections

10.1. INTRODUCTION

This study was about husbands and wives' marriages in the Netherlands, about 30 years after the onset of the so-called 'second demographic transition'. More specifically, attention was paid to the determinants and mechanisms underlying spousal satisfaction with marriage. The reason for this emphasis needs to be sought in the changing nature and significance of marital relationships. As a result of various social transformations, contemporary marriage is not only released from traditional cementing frames, but also faced with increasing quality-related demands of its members. Hence, more than ever, the survival of a union strongly depends on the nature of the conjugal relationship itself.

However, the loss of a clear-cut normative recipe specifying the 'ought' with regard to spousal behavior in marriages, makes it harder for partners to make their relationships work today, the more so since the latter is no longer exclusively built up around the complementary roles of husbands and wives. Relationships have turned into a private enterprise in which spouses are forced to work out their marital scripts on their own. Because there is no longer a generally agreed external moral code, making explicit one's positions and needs are at the core of modern marital relationships. The conjugal bond therefore serves the (difficult) purpose of taken into account and satisfying both partners' emotional needs. As the demographic picture demonstrates, this emotional fulfillment as a primary basis for marriage in modern society is at the same time a serious risk and a major gain, leading some to allege that the family is in decline whereas others consider it as a new opportunity in developing equal partnership.

The present micro-sociological study endeavors to deepen our insight into the factors that play a part in this emotional fulfillment, i.e. spousal marital satisfaction. Because of this broad research agenda, we sought to select significant topics penetrating the everyday reality of *all* married husbands and wives with children. The selected topics cover four general areas: spousal socio-cultural and economic embeddedness, marital communication, gender and parenting. To investigate how these areas affect husbands

and wives' satisfaction with marriage, six major research questions are formulated. The *first* question deals with the valid and reliable measurement of our central object under study. Regarding the *second* question, an attempt is made to get a more profound grasp of the interrelationship between marital satisfaction and communication over time. The *third* research question addresses the extent to which spousal satisfaction is affected by women's economic position, and spouses' attitudes towards gender roles and family values. It is also examined whether women's economic resources are contingent upon these cultural orientations in influencing husbands and wives' satisfaction with marriage. The *fourth* question relates to spouses' gender role identity. More specifically, it is questioned how the incorporation of instrumental (masculine) and expressive (feminine) traits affects spousal marital experiences and how this effect is conditional upon the social position of the partners. The *fifth* question extends the previous research question by examining several gender-related characteristics in relation to marital satisfaction and marital communication. The *final* question assesses how the marital system hinges on parenting experiences. Both short-term and long-term associations were considered as well as the possibility that marital communication mediates the spillover effect of the parental system on the marital system.

To examine these questions, a Dutch longitudinal database of first married couples was used. At the first measurement point in 1990, 646 couples were eligible for inclusion in the study. All couples had children between 9 and 16 years old. Of this group, 386 couples participated a second time five years later. Hence, to some extent, our research deals with *marital survivors*. Considering the average marital duration of our research sample, i.e. 22 years at the second measurement point, the couples under study are likely to have weathered marital crises. This is not to say, however, that *only* the most satisfied couples are left because dissatisfied couples have their own reasons for remaining married. Nonetheless, it can be assumed that a considerable proportion of dissatisfied couples have already been filtered out of our sample. In this way, the results of the present study indicate which marital resources and processes play an important part in longer-term marriages, but they do not inform us about resources in other stages of the marital relationship or about the reasons why marriages

do not succeed. The reader needs to keep this qualification in mind when interpreting and reflecting on the research findings.

In the following section, the central findings of this study are reviewed and reconsidered. To structure this review, findings are subsumed under four general headings. Besides unifying the distinct results of the individual chapters into a general conclusion, our results are interpreted in light of the discussion presented in the first chapter. The third section delineates theoretical, methodological and future research implications. Some thoughts of consideration of possible interest for policy makers are outlined as well. To conclude, a few final remarks are discussed in the last section.

10.2. CENTRAL FINDINGS RECAPITULATED AND RECONSIDERED

Our review of the central findings is built up around four broad themes: (a) spousal communication, (b) parenting, (c) spouses' economic and cultural position and (d) gender. Because they are already described at length in the individual discussions, a selection of the most important results will be touched upon in this section. The aim is to go through the different studies once again and to recapitulate the key results in order to arrive at more general considerations on what our findings add up to in light of the initial discussion on marriage in a changed social landscape (cf. Chapter 1).

10.2.1. Communication

Marital satisfaction and communication are considered as two key elements in understanding present marital behavior. Because of the weakening of traditional prescriptions and external rules, the role of communication moves from the periphery to the very heart of partnership. Husbands and wives create their unique and intimate *nomos* world through a continuous and open dialogue with each other (Berger & Kellner, 1964). By lack of external and structural standards on what a 'good' marriage should look like, marital partners use this dialogue to develop a satisfying partnership by their own internal standards.

Because of the utmost importance of communication and marital satisfaction, Chapter 3 made a promising effort in developing a short, reliable and valid instrument to assess both concepts. Two dimensions of commu-

nication were distinguished. For the first dimension, items were included to evaluate the degree to which certain forms of negative communication are characteristic of the marital relationship (negative communication). In a way, this scale measures the 'quality' of marital communication as perceived by the partners of interest. Because the theoretical literature assumes that current marital relationships are (or should be) characterized by more openness, a second dimension included items measuring the openly sharing of personal experiences (open communication).

The strong interwovenness of marital satisfaction and communication has led some authors to suggest that they are both indicators of an underlying concept, 'marital quality'. However, replicating our results in independent samples and across time, our analysis demonstrates the conceptual uniqueness of marital satisfaction, open communication, and negative communication.

In a next step, the uniqueness of these concepts allowed investigating their interrelationship over a five years time interval. Despite the assumed central role of communication in developing satisfied partnerships, our results indicate that communication *does not* predict marital satisfaction. Instead, evidence was obtained for a reverse relationship with satisfied husbands being more inclined to share personal experiences with their partner. For women, no cross-lagged effects were demonstrated. Our sex-specific finding is striking in light of the widely held assumption that men are not as relationally attuned as women. In Chapter 1, it was elucidated that women are considered as the relational architects, being largely concerned with communication in and about their relationship. Hence, it would be expected that women's rather than men's communication behavior relates to their experiences of partnership. Our opposite conclusion that men's and not women's marital satisfaction predicts their open communication over time therefore needs to be sought in the importance of femininity in marriages. Compared to men, women score higher on open communication. Therefore, it looks as if men within successful marriages develop a communication style that their wives already tend to apply to a larger extent (Chapter 4).

With respect to negative communication, which primarily focuses on the communication *between* the partners, no long-term relationships with marital satisfaction were established. This finding indicates that negative

partner communication is more consistently associated with concurrent marital satisfaction than with subsequent or prior assessments within a five years time interval (Chapter 4). As such, satisfaction *reflects* negative marital communication (and vice versa), rather than that they *influence* each other.

Because negative communication measures interactions between partners, it was considered a potential mechanism through which the partner and the parental system are linked with each other. In Chapter 1, it was elaborated that both parental and marital roles are salient sources of identity and therefore closely tied up with each other. Drawing upon the VSA-model of Karney and Bradbury, it was hypothesized that experiences in the parental role are likely to spillover onto the marital experiences through the behaviors that husbands and wives exchange. Three indicators for parental experiences were considered, i.e. satisfaction with the parental role, feelings of restriction by the parental role and experiencing parenting as problematic and burdensome. Evidence was found for parental role restriction and parental stress to have negative effects on both spouses' marital satisfaction because these characteristics cause partners to communicate more negatively with each other (Chapter 9). Hence, despite the failure to establish a *long-term* association between negative communication and marital satisfaction (Chapter 4), it can be asserted that marital communication is of vital importance in understanding husbands and wives' satisfaction with marriage in the short-term. The marital dialogue represents a central process through which partners not only make their internal relational standards explicit, but also ventilate their parental experiences. In this way, raising children may considerably weigh on the spousal system, burdening parents' enactment of their marital role.

10.2.2. Parenting

From the discussion in Chapter 1 the parallels between partnership and parenting became clear since both are increasingly driven by emotional motives and needs, instead of economic ones. Husbands and wives both expect to draw emotional-affective satisfaction from their parental role. Children may give partnership an extra dimension and may serve as an important anchor point because parenthood cannot fail in the same way as can partnership. However, like maintaining partnership, parenting also

needs to meet stringent requirements, exerting pressure on individuals to favorably combine both parental, spousal and other tasks. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, children can therefore hindering individuals in their enactment of the marital role. Because of their close connection, the inter-relationship between the parental and spousal system was studied more profoundly in Chapter 9.

First, our findings show that wives experience more parental stress and role restriction but also seem to be more satisfied with the parental role than husbands. These sex-specific experiences are due to the central importance of motherhood in traditional images of femininity. Apparently, the high salience of the mother role simultaneously accounts for positive feelings but also for stress and strain. As the saying goes "no pleasure with-out pain". Indeed, the salience of the mother role may exert pressure on the accomplishment of the role and therefore on being 'responsible' for the problems and difficulties related to role performance. Because of the salience of the mother role, contemporary women also feel more restricted by their parental role than men. However, our study indicates that mothers' participation in the labor market can remedy this feeling of restriction. These findings are a good example of the negative side effects of role specialization as also voiced in the economic debate on the breadwinning role of men. Segregated sex roles may have positive effects because of the clear role delineation but at the same time cause men and women to be held *exclusively* responsible for the performance of their task.

Parental experiences are not only differentiated by sex but also according to the educational level of the parents. Less educated spouses report more positive parental experiences than higher educated partners. Thus, instead of benefiting from one's educational capital for performing the parental role, the opposite seems to be true. This effect might be due to children's higher opportunity cost for better educated spouses. Moreover, education is negatively related to familialism (cf. infra). In fact, the burden of parenting may be alleviated by holding a pro-family orientation, which is more likely to be true for lower educated spouses. Hence, adequately performing a role, or at least having a more positive perception of it, does not only relate to resources available to perform one's role but may also be linked to compatible orientations held towards the role. In this way, socio-

economic resources and cultural orientations can have contradictory effects on role performance and experiences.

More consistent, however, is the positive effect of spousal access to network support for alleviating the burdens of parenting. The beneficial effect of social support can be explained by the fact that one can rely on others to fulfill certain needs, lowering the expectations toward the partner. The beneficial effect of social support is sex-specific since access to network support has a stronger effect on women's than on men's feelings of parental role restriction and parental stress. This finding is not remarkable in light of the aforementioned conclusion that women also experience more stress and strain in their mother role and therefore can take more advantage of sources of support. Moreover, although the standard of motherhood may have become less imperative for an increasing number of women, the demand for ´psychologically´ responsible motherhood adds to contemporary women's feelings of insecurity (Brinkgreve, 1988). The availability of a social network can help to relieve these feelings.

Besides examining the differentiated parental experiences, we also investigated the impact of parenting on spousal marital experiences. Once more, the result is sex-specific. For husbands, experiences of parental stress are more closely tied up with their marital experiences than is true for wives, whereas for wives, experiences of parental role restriction (and not parental stress) are more strongly connected with marital experiences than those of their husbands. The partner effects that these aspects brought about as well, support the interwovenness between marriage and husbands' parental stress, and between marriage and wives' parental role restriction. Husbands' parental stress does not only affect their own perception of marital communication but also that of their wives. Similarly, wives' parental role restriction also impinges on their husbands' view of communication. In other words, the sex-specific spillover of parenting on marriage (i.e in terms of strength of association) precisely occurs for those parental domains with which the sexes are increasingly confronted as a consequence of changed sex role expectations. Indeed, women may feel ever more hindered by their parental role because other options became socially available in the life project of women. Reversely, because men are now socially allowed to take up parental roles, they are confronted with the problems

and difficulties associated with it. In this respect, contemporary marriages suffer from the broadening of men and women's (mental) horizon.

Despite the stronger association between wives' marital experiences and their parental role restriction, our long-term analysis indicates for both spouses that feelings of parental restriction are cause as well as consequence of marital satisfaction in the long term; they mutually influence each other. For the other parental aspects, no cross-lagged effects were established. Hence, it looks 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 than on the rewarding or problematic aspects, indicating that husbands and wives meet difficulties in combining a demanding task like parenting with other self-fulfilling activities.

10.2.3. Spouses' Labor Market Resources and Their Cultural Orientations

Women's increased labor market resources are often considered as the essence of current marital vulnerability (cf. Chapter 1). It is argued that their enhanced economic status makes them less dependent on the marital institution and gives them more bargaining power within marriage. This so-called *female independence hypothesis* received some support in the present study when considering wives' education. Both spouses appear to be less satisfied with marriage when wives are better educated (Chapter 5). From Chapter 9, it became clear that this finding might be due to the more negative parental experiences of higher educated mothers and the negative effects of women's education on marital communication. Rather than benefiting from wives' (better) communication skills, it seems that couples whose wives are higher educated communicate more negatively. This might support the bargaining argument. It can be speculated that an increased educational level of women may put marriage under stress because these women have more verbal skills to make their needs and desires, which are more likely to be non-traditional, explicit. This assertiveness may unbalance the traditional positions of men and women within marriage and therefore enhances the chance of conflict and negative communication.

This speculation might also explain the finding that husbands belonging to higher income families tend to report stronger declines in marital

satisfaction than those belonging to lower income families. Probably, the explanation must be sought in the social position of their wives since women in higher income families are higher educated than their female counterparts of lower income families. The stronger position of these wives (and the cultural and verbal characteristics associated with it) might be a threat for husbands' marital comfort.

When considering female employment instead of education, the female independence assumption was not strongly supported. Our study documents that women's labor market participation does not put husbands' marriage under pressure but rather affects women's. Considering the long-term analysis, our findings indicate that employed women do not experience more or less decrease in marital satisfaction than do non-employed women. Lower marital satisfaction, though, was reported by women who became unemployed between the first and second measurement point. The loss of work and hence the change in and adaptation to new roles rather than employment as such seem to affect women's satisfaction within the private sphere.

Nonetheless, an important finding of our cross-sectional analysis is that men can relieve the impact of women's outside employment on their wives' marital satisfaction by holding pro-family attitudes. The more husbands appraise traditional family values, the more positive wives' employment turns out to be for wives' satisfaction (Chapter 5). At first glance, the conclusion that husbands' endorsement of values such as "living for your family" and "having children", and not their egalitarian gender role orientation, provides a favorable context for women being satisfied when they are employed is remarkable. Instead of being irreconcilable, husbands' traditional family orientation is a gain for employed women. Other research suggests that this might be due to the higher motivation of these husbands to invest in and be committed to family life. Apparently, this commitment makes it easier for contemporary women to combine their family role with a role in the public sphere. To state it pithily, the more women withdraw from the private sphere, the more men need to enter this sphere for satisfying their wives. It looks as if the family role of the husband is also increasingly situated *within* the family than merely *outside* it. This contrasts with the situation of fifty years ago, about which Dumon (1977, p. 20)

diagnosed that, "Strangely enough, the family role of the man-father [as provider and breadwinner] is situated outside the family".

The fading of domains exclusively reserved for one of the sexes, goes hand in hand with a cultural relaxation on what men and women 'ought' to do. An increasing preference for shared and equal responsibilities between husbands and wives results in wide social acceptance of performing a-stereotypical tasks. Moreover, the stronger emphasis put on autonomy and freedom of individuals, results in a weaker orientation on traditional family values. These cultural processes also affect the internal marital reality of husbands and wives and hence their evaluation of it. A major finding of the present study is that we have a stronger case for these *cultural* than for economic variables to be important determinants for marital satisfaction. Particularly, spouses' endorsement of traditional family values positively contributes to their own satisfaction with marriage. This is probably true because 'family' is a salient part of these spouses' identity, encouraging the sacrifices one is willing to make to develop a satisfying partnership.

In this respect, our study also showed that husbands' marital satisfaction depends on their wives' appraisal of traditional family values. This finding is not remarkable since it is not question of role change here. However, it might indicate the uncertainty accompanying women's changing role and expectations. The privilege of men to have structural power in society, now also becomes available for women. Even when women are solely housewives, no one can deny these changed expectations and the waning dominance of women's role of *family* maker. The *availability* rather than the actual employment of women might more strongly affect spousal marital experiences (Ruggles, 1997). Apparently, in a social area of insecurity and relationship fragility, successful partnership requires a pro-family orientation.

However, this reasoning is not true when considering sex role expectations. Women's orientation on egalitarian sex roles does not make their husbands more or less happy with their marriage. In contrast, women report to be more satisfied when their husbands value equal roles for men and women. In essence, however, a progressive gender role attitude on part of the husband refers to a pro-family-orientation as well. These men have adapted themselves to changed social circumstances in which men and

women interact on equal terms and in which men may perform stereotypi-
cal female roles.

10.2.4. Gender

In reflecting upon the previous themes, gender manifests itself as a quintes-
sential part of married life. Unlike biological sex, gender is created and
recreated in interaction with others and as such is a social product (West &
Zimmerman, 1987). Men and women do not only reproduce but can also
transform gender through their behavior, attitudes and self-definitions
(Connell, 1985; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Particularly, because social
prescriptions of what it means to be 'man' or 'woman' have become less
restrictive, a whole plethora of gender expressions become available.
Women can now display typical masculine behavior by taking a paid job
and at the same time strongly incorporate female expressive qualities. In a
similar vein, men can define themselves in stereotypical masculine qualities
while also engaging in childrearing tasks. Hence, gender may operate in
different ways within marriage. One of the questions in this study was to
what degree and how gender, in the broad sense of the word, impinges on
the marital system. This effect could be twofold. For one, different gender
characteristics can be similarly related to specific marital aspects, and for
another, the same gender characteristics can differently affect different
marital aspects. The generation under study is particularly relevant in this
respect because they were socialized with a sex-segregated social model that
they questioned as adults later in life.

Drawing upon identity theory and the multifactorial theory of gender,
the interrelationships between different gender characteristics and different
marital characteristics were studied in Chapter 7 and 8. Three gender
aspects were distinguished: (a) gender role attitudes, (b) gender role identity,
i.e. incorporating stereotypical male and/or female qualities, and (c) gender
role behavior, i.e. performing household and childrearing tasks. According
to the multifactorial gender theory, these different gender aspects might be
differently related to marital outcomes whereas identity theory hypothesizes
that a female identity yields positive marital communication and therefore
possibly also higher marital satisfaction. The reverse is assumed as to male
identity.

Given the central importance of marital communication in understanding marital satisfaction, the relationship between gender and communication was firstly investigated. Considering gender role *identity* and gender role *attitudes*, our findings show that expressive spouses communicate less negatively and more openly, whereas egalitarian orientated wives and husbands communicate less negatively and the latter also more openly. Hence, adopting feminine orientated characteristics positively influences husbands and wives' communication behavior in marriage.

Considering gender role *behavior*, contrasting results were obtained. Wives taking the main responsibility of childrearing, communicate more negatively whereas husbands being responsible for childrearing communicate more openly. The former may fit the idea of women wanting no longer being the primary caretaker of children. For men, however, childrearing apparently creates possibilities to communicate more openly about their personal experiences. Taking these findings together, it can be asserted that, "being expressive", "having egalitarian sex role attitudes" and "taking care of children", are all part of husbands' view of being feminine because under these circumstances men display a more feminine communication style of openly sharing experiences. The latter is even more strongly pronounced for expressive husbands belonging to higher income groups. In this respect, "being expressive", "having egalitarian sex role attitudes" and "taking care of children", may signify new elements in the old image of masculinity as a way to adapt to new demands of partnership.

The assumption that gender operates differently within marriage also became clear when considering marital satisfaction. It was demonstrated that an important difference exists between the family *orientation* of women (cf. supra) and the family *role* of women. Whereas women's familialism (i.e. appraising traditional family values) positively affects both husbands and wives' marital satisfaction, it was found that having the main responsibility of *parenting* turns out negatively for women's experiences of partnership. This finding, along with the positive marital effects of husbands' parenting, might account for the fact that fathers are increasingly expected to take part in childrearing as well.

This norm, however, does not seem to exist as regards *housework*. The performance of domestic tasks by husbands has a negative influence on both spouses' evaluations of their marriage whereas wives' household labor

does not have a significant impact on marital satisfaction. Hence, it seems that caring and household labor have become dissociated, with the former being more socially approved (Dumon, 1997). Household labor appears to be de-emphasized by spouses as a potential source of satisfaction in marriage.

The significance of social valued behavior for spousal marital experiences is brought further to a head when discerning higher and lower social classes. The present study shows that the impact of the approval and disapproval of *childrearing,* respectively *household* tasks, is even more pronounced in distinct income classes. Wives in higher income levels are less positive about their marriage when doing the lion's share of household labor whereas husbands and wives evaluate their marriage more positively when being responsible for parental tasks. Higher income classes may be able to 'buy' behavior that is less valued (e.g. household labor). In contrast, displaying behavior that is highly valued and emotionally loaded entails more positive consequences (in terms of marital satisfaction). Apparently, by taking more *marital advantage* of performing childrearing labor, higher income groups distinguish themselves from lower social classes. This might be due to the different meanings attached to having children. The salience of raising children in higher social classes becomes clear in both the positive consequences it has for marital satisfaction in higher income groups and the negative parental experiences reported by higher educated spouses. These findings might indicate that in higher social classes, children are a more deliberate choice than they are in lower social groups. Children are part of the whole set of choices one is 'forced' to make but for which one is also held responsible.

It is striking to note that higher income couples accentuate traditional female behavior in the sphere of parent-child relations, whereas the reverse holds for stereotypical female identity traits. Indeed, evidence was obtained for spouses to be more satisfied when women endorse more stereotypical male and less stereotypical female traits. Overall, it seems that motherhood, probably because of its social value, represents behavior that reproduces traditional femininity within higher income groups whereas household labor as well as gender identity traits represent domains through which higher income women produce a new image of femininity, i.e. not performing household labor and incorporating qualities that are traditionally

associated with masculinity. Or an alternative reasoning may be true, i.e. child rearing might have increasingly become a sex-neutral task, not being specifically associated with femininity or masculinity, allowing men (and women) to respond to new (feminine) requirements.

In lower income groups, another picture can be drawn. By emotional disapproving (i.e. being marital dissatisfied) women who define themselves in stereotypical male traits, lower income husbands might define what is optimally masculine. Possibly, this attitude is also 'functional' for spousal satisfaction in the private sphere. It may allow lower income husbands to 'control' the sphere of partnership by preferring *not-masculine* women but rather women who are typified as stereotypically feminine.

Considering stereotypical feminine and masculine qualities in higher and lower social classes where the wife is employed, our findings show that wives' gender role identity is not a critical factor in understanding spousal marital satisfaction. In contrast, the focus is directed towards husbands' qualities. For being satisfied with one's marriage it appears that a strengthened economic position of women in higher social layers requires de-emphasizing husbands' stereotypical qualities whereas in lower social layers it demands an accentuation of these traits. In fact, 'masculine' men might be incompatible with women who display non-traditional female behavior, i.e. labor market participation.

However, it is remarkable that this incompatibility does not result from the smaller gap between husbands and wives' occupational status in higher social layers. Post-hoc analyses have shown that in spite of women's higher occupational status in higher social classes, the distance between both spouses' occupation is significantly larger in the higher than in the lower social strata. Hence, the economic power of higher-class husbands is relatively larger than that of their male counterparts in lower social classes. Perhaps, this gap might explain higher-class husbands' (unconscious) indulgence in the field of stereotypical identity traits. Indeed, subverting the male status position by less adhering to stereotypical male qualities is probably more far-reaching or threatening for lower-class men than for higher-class men. The latter may maintain a status difference by their relatively higher occupation. Although this assertion cannot be proved by means of this study, it is tempting to speculate.

This speculation notwithstanding, our study demonstrates that by far the most significant factor in spousal marital satisfaction in higher and lower social classes is husbands' incorporation of expressive qualities. Husbands who define themselves as "being kind", "not hiding emotions" and "expressing tender feelings", are more satisfied with marriage and so are their wives. This effect is probably due to the less negative and more open communication of these men. As indicated, the latter is of utmost importance in a social scenery characterized by less structural prescriptions. Accidents in communication may cause damage to the marriage and to its vital function of personal and emotional fulfillment (cf. Chapter 1). Our study shows that husbands' self-identification in terms of stereotypical female qualities positively fosters this behavior.

Overall, this gender discussion leads us to conclude that the onus is on the husband; the more so since our study shows that husbands' non-traditional sex role behavior and identifications are beneficial for higher-class marriages. Particularly, the belief that an essential role is reserved for men can be substantiated when considering the *principle of stratified diffusion,* stating that lower status groups have a tendency to imitate those above them (Cheal, 1991, p. 121). If it is true that important changes are likely to begin high up in the status hierarchy and gradually diffuse downwards, it can be expected that in the foreseeable future successful marriages will require more 'feminine' men and perhaps also more 'masculine' women.

10.3. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: STRENGTHS, UNRESOLVED ISSUES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The present study significantly contributes to the study of marital satisfaction. The reason is twofold. For one, determinants and processes underlying spousal marital satisfaction in the Netherlands are not well corroborated. For another, our study extends prior research by the specific issues that were addressed and/or by the techniques that were used. In this section, we summarize the major strengths but also the shortcomings of this study. This task involves three steps. First, we reflect upon the methodological aspects characterizing the present study. Second, recent theorizing on marital satisfaction is evaluated in light of our findings. Finally, we discuss significant unresolved issues. Through the whole section, it is

attempted to only deal with research caveats that go beyond those already made in the individual chapters of Part II.

10.3.1. Methodological Reflections

Two-Wave Design and Individual Trajectories. The use of a two-wave panel design in this study had major strengths. It allowed us to validate our central measures across time and to gain more insight in the short-term and long-term associations between marital satisfaction and relevant covariates. Moreover, by considering the same individuals for two periods in time, intra-individual changes in relation to marital satisfaction (change) were assessed. Nevertheless, the use of a two-wave panel design also has limitations. These have to do with the limited inferences that can be drawn about change in marriage. With two measurement points, the most complex line that can be fitted is a straight line (Rogossa, 1995). Hence, it can be assessed whether change has occurred but not whether the change is non-linear. At least three waves of data are required to better understand how and why marital satisfaction follows a particular pattern throughout the marital career. Doing so, the researcher also has the possibility to examine individual trajects throughout time (Bradbury, Fincham & Beach, 2000). In the present study, we reviewed marital processes with a fine-tooth comb, revealing differences in social class experiences and in husbands and wives' marital processes. Therefore, the evolution of a lower class wife's marital satisfaction may be very different from that of their male counterpart belonging to a higher social class. Especially in the light of an individualized 'self-made' life course, the use of traject-based models with multi-wave data is a promising research line for the future. The lesson that variables and strategies that make partners happy in the short term will not necessarily have the same impact in the long term, must researchers motivate to not only ask about what people makes happy, but also to deal with the issue of when and why (Holmes, 2000).

Dyadic Data and Partner Effects. A major advantage of this study is the availability of information from both husband and wife. Karney and Bradbury (1995) conclude, based on their meta-analysis that one out of three longitudinal studies on marital quality and stability fail to take sex

differences into account. Because this is often due to the fact that data are only gathered by one of the partners, studies also fail considering partner effects in their analyses. Therefore, the strength of using couple data, as in our study, is twofold. For one, the availability of these data allowed us to evaluate sex-specific marital experiences. For another, information of the partner could be used to explain the marital outcomes of the other partner. To deal with husbands and wives' dependency, we exploited the capacity of *structural equation modeling* to use the couple as a unit of analysis. Hence, husbands and wives' information could be simultaneously included in one analysis with the purpose of testing for significant differences (Kenny & Cook, 1999). Illustrative for the argument that the consideration of both husbands and wives is a requisite for fully capturing the differences and similarities in spouses' marital experiences is the cross-lagged analysis described in Chapter 4. Conducting this analysis for husbands and wives separately, our results showed that the cross-lagged effect from wives' marital satisfaction to negative communication is significant as well. However, by including husbands and wives' information in one model, the long-term association between marital satisfaction and negative communication is no longer significant. This example shows that only studying information of one of the partners yield a biased view of the interpersonal nature of marital relationships.

Quantitative versus Qualitative Designs. The chosen method determines what sort of picture will be taken of marriage: a close-up or a wide-angle picture. To draw a comprehensive picture, however, both are needed. Using solely a quantitative design, the underlying meanings attached to some phenomena escape our notice. Therefore, qualitative research might supplement our research findings and deepen our insights obtained from quantitative studies. For example, face-to-face interviews enable the researcher to fully explore what it means for Dutch husbands and wives to perform household and childrearing tasks. Husbands might consider the performance of household tasks as an expression of their caring, and thus 'emotional' work, whereas women do not perceive it that way. Women may rather desire emotional work as defined in feminine terms. Similarly, it can be questioned to what extent different members distinguish between the task-related aspects of childcare and the more emotional components asso-

ciated with it. And what are the mechanisms behind the sex-specific parental experiences? Can it be assumed that women feel restricted because they are 'expected' to prefer parenting above 'other' personal fulfillments whereas men feel restricted because they are used to disregard the extra responsibility of childrearing? These and other questions can be overcome by extending quantitative research designs with a close-up approach from qualitative research.

10.3.2. Theoretical Reflections

Throughout the chapters of Part II, several theoretical frames were considered useful candidates for investigating marital outcomes. Despite the use of distinct theoretical perspectives, the various topics addressed throughout this study could be thought within a more general model of marriage. One model qualified for capturing the diverse relationships that were examined, was the VSA-model of Karney and Bradbury (1995). As indicated, the VSA-model is a rather abstract model, identifying four substantial domains to understand the outcome of partner relationships: enduring vulnerabilities, stressful events, adaptive processes and marital quality. Although this model acknowledges the complexity and diversity of marriage as well as the processes by which marriages change, the findings of the present study recommend a further specification of this theoretical model.

First, the gender dimension is not explicitly addressed in the model. Nonetheless, our study has shown several differences between husbands and wives regarding enduring vulnerabilities (e.g. cultural orientations, gender role identity), stressful events (e.g. parental experiences) and adaptive processes (e.g. open communication).

Second, the concept of 'enduring vulnerabilities' is ambiguous. According to Karney and Bradbury (1995, p. 461) this concept refers to "stable demographic, historical, personality and experiential factors that individuals bring to marriage". These characteristics should 'set the stage' for marriage. As a consequence, the relevance of attitudes and characteristics acquired *during* the marital course is absent from the model. Above and beyond the premarital factors that spouses bring to marriage, they may also develop characteristics throughout the marital career. For example, spouses' social network may significantly affect the stressful events that the couple

encounters as well as the capacity to adapt to these events. Social support, however, is hard to think of as an enduring vulnerability. Hence, it seems that one important domain is missing in the VSA-model, i.e. *instable* personal characteristics. As became clear from our study, these characteristics, among which include social support or gender role attitudes, are also related to stressful life events and to spousal adaptive processes. However, in contrast to enduring vulnerabilities (e.g. family of origin experiences), these characteristics may alter during the marital course.

Third, the VSA-model shed insufficient light on moderating contexts. For example, the interrelatedness between husbands and wives' vulnerabilities and their adaptive processes may be contingent upon the specific social environments in which they act. This assertion was supported in the present study. Among others, it was demonstrated that husbands' and wives' gender role identity has a different impact on spousal marital satisfaction or communication within higher or lower social classes and according to the marital stage. With respect to the latter, it should be noted that the couples under study have already been married for some time. Therefore, the research problems addressed in this study might yield different results if examined among a sample of newlywed couples.

In sum, these findings indicate that the VSA-model may manifest itself differently within different social contexts. Therefore, attention needs to be paid to the specific conditions under which the relationships between specific vulnerabilities, stressful events, and adaptive processes hold. In this respect, the VSA-model might benefit from a social ecological thinking of marriage. The emphasis put by social ecology on the mutual interdependence between the marital partners as well as between the marital partners and the smaller and broader social environments in which they function, may bring the dynamically social nature of partnership into the VSA-model. I document this suggestion with two examples. First, the degree to which a spouse behaves negatively towards the other partner (adaptive processes) can be triggered by the social context. It might be more tolerated within middle classes than in lower social classes that women behave negatively towards their husbands, engendering different marital experiences and outcomes for the husbands and wives of interest. A second example relates to the aforementioned development of personal characteristics during marriage. Spouses may enter marriage with a particular orientation towards

gender roles. This orientation can be re-adjusted by one or both of the spouses, for example, after the birth of the first child. This re-adjustment may in its turn affect subsequent marital satisfaction. Hence, as indicated above, the VSA-model seems to lack a fifth domain, i.e. 'individual characteristics', which are unsteady in nature. These characteristics may affect both stressful events and adaptive processes.

These caveats on gender differences and the moderating nature of marital relationships also imply that there is not a *single* theory of marital satisfaction. Our research suggests at least specifications with respect to sex, marital stage, cultural orientation, and socioeconomic context. In this respect, it is worthwhile to investigate and compare more homogeneous groups in order to examine the validity of theoretical models.

10.3.3. Towards a New Research Agenda for Studying Marital Satisfaction

In the different studies of Part II several recommendations for future research were addressed. Moreover, the speculations made when interpreting our research findings in the second paragraph of this section, each feeds the research agenda. The attempt of this paragraph is to exceed the individual chapters with the intention of formulating some general and promising research lines for the future. Four directions are outlined below. These concern research on indirect effects, conditional effects, partner incongruence and social networks.

Indirect Effects. Our study indicates that the widely held assumption that socioeconomic *background* factors are weakly correlated with marital satisfaction might be due to the focus on direct effects. Therefore, future research needs to more fully explore which background factors are *directly* or *indirectly* related to marital satisfaction. Our study showed, on the one hand, that economic factors in terms of income and income satisfaction might play an important part in understanding *change* in marital satisfaction; and on the other hand that several background factors directly relate to spousal marital communication. It looks as if: (a) education might have both direct and indirect effects through communication on marital satisfaction, (b) life cycle variables (e.g. age and marital duration) might have indi-

rect effects through marital communication and (c) income and income satisfaction might rather affect marital satisfaction across time. Research that includes these different levels of background characteristics, communicational variables and marital satisfaction of both husbands and wives is scarce (see Kurdek, 1993). Therefore, it is recommended that future research further deciphers this complexity of direct and indirect effects between background factors and marital relationships.

This remark also holds with respect to *gender role identity*. The study reported in Chapter 6, using marital outcome variables other than marital satisfaction, supports the assumption that gender role identity has larger effects on marital communication than on marital satisfaction. Moreover, research needs to explore to what degree spouses' gender role identity affects marital satisfaction indirectly through spousal parental experiences. It can be speculated, for example, that husbands' expressiveness is beneficial for marriage because of its positive effects on parental experiences. In a similar vein, it can be examined whether the positive effect of women's 'masculine' qualities in higher social classes is due to the less negative parental experiences of these women. Perhaps, successful higher-class marriages increasingly require 'masculine' women because they are better able to cope with the difficult combination of raising children and participating in the labor market. Hence, the impact of gender role identity is probably greater than shown by research using a single indicator like marital satisfaction or studying direct effects only.

Conditional Effects. Although of significant importance to capture the complexity of marriage, moderating effects are rarely considered in previous research. Two directions seem promising. First, our study demonstrated that wives' satisfaction with the family income plays a part in understanding their subsequent marital satisfaction. This finding taps the issue of *relative deprivation* as accentuated in the theory of Easterlin (see Chapter 1). It is advisable to explore the causes of this effect. Thus far, we have no idea of the degree to which the effects of income satisfaction are limited to those who are confronted with 'objective' economic hardship or to those who do not face 'objective' economic hardship but have higher aspirations. And if the latter is true, why are women, more than men, sensitive to this relative deprivation? Therefore, it is recommendable to examine interaction

effects between *objective* and *subjective* indicators of economic circumstances in future research.

Second, it needs to be examined to what degree the effects of gender role identity and parental experiences are contingent upon *cultural* orientations such as gender role and family attitudes. The latter may provide a different context in which particular aspects are evaluated. For example, the questions arises whether our results on the spillover of parental on marital experiences depends on the more or less traditional orientation of the spouses towards gender roles and family values. Since these cultural orientations underwent major shifts during the past decades, the question as to what extent they steer personal experiences in distinct areas of the private sphere becomes important.

Partner Incongruence. An important unresolved issue in this study is the incongruity *between* and *within* spouses with respect to gender and other characteristics. It is sometimes argued that the lag between husbands and wives' *role behavior* and the more advanced *beliefs* they hold in this respect lies at the core of current marital problems. Because an important difference might exist between what people think and what people actually do, examining the effects of discrepancies between, for example, gender role identity, gender role behavior (domestic labor and labor market participation), and gender role attitudes *within* individuals may contribute to a more full understanding of how marital reality is experienced by the partners. In view of the interdependence of marital partners, not only the within-individual but also the *between*-individual incongruences are relevant to consider. This becomes also clear in the benchmark paper of Karney and Bradbury (1995). Applying meta-analytical techniques, the authors estimated the aggregate effect size for frequently studied variables in longitudinal research on marital satisfaction. Personality homogamy was established as one of the strongest predictors. Besides personality, literature has demonstrated that spousal homogamy with respect to other characteristics, such as religion or socioeconomic background, is also beneficial for the satisfaction experienced by the spouses (Heaton, 1984; Medling & McCarrey, 1981). However, little attempt is made to consider homogamy as a multidimensional phenomenon. Doing so, insight would be gained in the relative importance of different dimensions of structural and cultural stratification for spousal

marital satisfaction as well as in the different importance of homogamy dimensions within higher and lower social layers. Scrutinizing the effects of spousal congruence on structural, cultural and personality characteristics may contribute to our understanding of how 'similar' couples differently adapt to stressful events and everyday experiences than couples showing incongruent features.

Social Support. An important conclusion that can be drawn in the face of what some claim as a period of (negative) individualism is the importance of *social integration* in understanding satisfying marriages. Spouses who can fall back on network support have more positive parental experiences and perceive their marital communication and satisfaction as more positive as well. However, we have not analyzed the nature and mechanisms lying behind these positive effects. Several questions remain open. Has social support a direct effect or rather a buffering effect on marital satisfaction? Is the beneficial effect of social support merely due to the existence or to the number, frequency or intensity of the received social support? Does the emotional or rather the instrumental aspect of social support determine the beneficial effects on marriage? Besides, more attention needs to be paid to the social structures and processes that cause social support networks. For example, it must be investigated how the significance and usefulness of social support may vary across groups in different structural positions – for example men and women in lower and upper economic classes. Moreover, assuming that attitudes are formed through interaction, it can be questioned whether there is a link between diverse aspects of social support and cultural orientations in their effects on marital satisfaction? At least at a broader societal level, it can be speculated that the mechanisms through which large social transformations affect marital relationships might run through the social relations in whom marital life is embedded. Therefore, a much fuller understanding of these relations might be fruitful for capturing how major shifts in social life, as described in Chapter 1, affect the everyday life of husbands and wives.

10.3.4. Policy Thoughts

Although this study has not attempted to evaluate Dutch family policy or to derive policy implications, in this paragraph some tentative recommendations and general points of attention are made on the basis of our research findings. The ideas presented hereafter need to be seen as a potential breeding ground for policy initiatives rather than as concrete, delineated measures. The policy thoughts put forward concern (a) the spousal system and (its relation to) the parental system, (b) social diversity in private experiences and (c) the temporality of families.

Regarding the spousal system, our study points to the importance of stimulating husbands' taking over aspects of the stereotypical female role. It was found that men's expressiveness, open communication, and child rearing participation are important sources of spousal satisfaction with contemporary marriage. In this respect, the accentuation of the private female sphere and the public male sector as prevalent in 'modern' society, is questioned in developing a satisfying partnership in 'postmodern' society. Moreover, stimulating men fulfilling roles in the private sphere might overcome the problems faced by women in their role as primary caregiver. This became apparent in our research findings with regard to the parental system in specific. Because of a strong social orientation on women as primary caregivers, mothers feel more restricted and stressed by the parental role than fathers, indicating the negative side-effects of sex role specialization. Having a paid job, however, can alleviate women's feeling of parental role restriction. Hence, it seems that policy orientations on the public role of women and the private role of men need to go hand in hand.

However, stimulating and realizing this new orientation on sex roles is a difficult policy target because deep-rooted social images of womanhood and in particular manhood, lie at the core of this issue. It has to do with profound social expectations and habits ingrained with husbands and wives. Therefore, to realize such gender shifts, changes must take place both within the *structural* context (i.e. political and economic conditions), and within the prevailing *cultural* scripts.

As concerns the structural context, huge differences exist between husbands and wives' economic position in the Netherlands. For the couples studied in this research, this might be due to the higher educational levels

of husbands in comparison to their wives. Consequently, husbands' partici-
pating in unpaid caring labor is relatively expensive because they can earn
more by participating in paid labor. However, the different economic posi-
tions of Dutch husbands and wives could also result from the implicit
family policy pursued by the Dutch government during the eighties. The
availability of formal childcare and more flexible regulations of maternity
leave since the nineties, has contributed to more flexibly combining private
and public roles for women today. To also encourage fathers to take
parental leave, the Netherlands adopted a system of equal and not
transferable parent-specific allotments (Sigle-Rushton & Kenney, 2004).
Nonetheless, this strategy seems to be counterbalanced by employers'
attitudes (Duindam, 1993; European Commission, 1998). Fathers are afraid
to be labeled as uncommitted when asking for parental leave or fear to let
opportunities of promotion slip away. Therefore, the compatibility of the
worker and the parental role, which is increasingly made possible for
women, must also be (or remain) an explicit policy object that is directed
towards men[1]. Moreover, a structural steering of balancing public and
private responsibilities by means of family leave or flexible work hours, is in
tune with current transformations in partnership and might alleviate
dilemmas of care for wives and husbands. In this respect, Sigle-Rushton
and Kenney (2004) demonstrate that in the Netherlands, which is
dominated by the arrangement that women's economic role is secondary to
their caring activities, there has already been some shift in preferences and
priorities as to a more equitable distribution of working hours between men
and women.

It goes without saying that the imbalance between the private and the
public sphere is not only structural but also cultural in nature. Cultural
images of womanhood and manhood are probably even harder to deal with
than the just mentioned regulations in the structural context. As mentioned
in the first chapter, the ideology that attended the division between family
and workplace since the 19th century, reflects ideals of manhood and wom-

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[1] Despite the fact that the enhancement of men's caring responsibility was pushed
forward as the spearhead of the Dutch emancipation program in the nineties ("*Met
het oog op 1995*"), Niphuis-Nell (1997) concludes that few catalysts exist to
encourage men taking greater responsibility in unpaid labor.

anhood. Until today, men and women internalize that caring is a more feminine task and breadwinning is a more masculine task. However, this split and the symbolic meaning lying behind it, constrain the possibilities for care in marriage (Thompson, 1993). This becomes clear in research findings demonstrating that wives who earn more than their husbands tend to more household and childrearing tasks than their female counterparts earning less (Hochschild & Machung, 1983). Thus, a two-way traffic seems to be going on. On the one hand, husbands are not eager to take part in unpaid caring labor, the more so since this labor is not socially high valued, but on the other hand, it is not evident or easy for women to depart from their traditional role. Or to voice Thompson (1993, p. 560), "The symbolic distinction between women and men preserves the notion of separate spheres, justifies the sexual division of labor, and creates personal dilemmas for couples". Influencing these symbolic distinctions can only be realized through different channels such as public campaigns, education and media.

A side effect of socially allowing 'new' sex roles is the lack of clear models at the moment. The cultural flexibility (and even expectation) that fathers take part in child rearing and that mothers also fulfill public roles, has created new risks and vulnerabilities for the spousal system. The longitudinal intertwinement of parental role restriction and marital satisfaction may lend support to this argumentation. It seems that husbands and wives, facing difficulties in living up to an extended role repertoire covering both the public and the private sphere, are more vulnerable in their marital relationship. Moreover, our study demonstrates that the spillover of parenting on partnership is the strongest for those aspects that are not traditionally defined as belonging to one's sex and for which no clear expectations are inscribed in the social script. Specifically, partnership seems to suffer from both husbands' exposure to the pleasures and pain of parenting as from wives' extended role repertoire resulting in feelings of parental role restriction. Hence, men and women seem to lack established role models to cope with new cultural expectations. (Local) initiatives to assist fathers and mothers in their parental responsibilities may therefore help to establish 'new' models.

Besides the idea of providing a structural and cultural environment that supports private roles for men and public roles for women, policy should, secondly, recognizes the social diversity of marital experiences. Our study

clearly specifies the difficulty of treating men and women, and higher and lower social groups similarly in developing relationship-friendly policy measures. For example, instigating a more expressive self-definition on part of the husbands will yield more positive consequences for women's than for men's satisfaction. When considering different social layers, it appears that traditional notions of men as providers and women as homemakers are more likely to serve as a comparison referent of fairness in lower socioeconomic groups whereas higher social groups rather appraise a-stereotypical qualities and behavior. Hence, not every man or woman is waiting for a rethinking and reorganization of unpaid labor since stimulating an equal share in household labor is less valid for lower income spouses. Moreover, lower educated spouses experience parenting as less problematic, less restrictive and more satisfying than higher educated ones. Consequently, higher educated spouses are more likely to fall victim to a negative spillover of parenting on partnership. In this spillover, women are more affected by feelings of role restriction whereas men's marital relationship is more closely tied up to parenting stress. All in all, these research findings demonstrate that spousal resources for developing a satisfying partnership depend on the social categories to which they belong. These categories determine individuals' relational schemata and their specific experiences in the private sphere. Therefore, it is important that policy makers are directed towards the differences and specificities of their target groups, taking into account the social specificity of private experiences.

A third policy thought relates to the temporality of family experiences. Temporal aspects can refer to age-, period- and cohort-effects all clotting together in spousal experiences, but also to different marital stages (Becker, 1992; Kalmijn, 2002). As to age-, period- and cohort-effects, it was already mentioned that the spouses under study are part of the baby boom generation. This generation shares the common experience of being socialized with a traditional sex role model. However, the relational schemata adopted during childhood may not fit into the larger environment at the time individuals initiate and develop relationships themselves. The difficult exercise of adopting 'new' sex roles and living up to new partnership ideals may therefore be more pronounced in a generation that inherited an 'old' private story and therefore lacks appropriate behavior models. Our finding that older women have a more negative perception of the marital communica-

tion whereas older men do not might point towards a discrepancy between expectations and actual realizations in this specific female cohort.

As to marital stages, policy makers need to bear in mind that family roles and needs are dynamic as individuals move through their life and family career. Within a time period of five years, our longitudinal analysis indicates that the couples who go through a 'transition' of becoming more satisfied is a specific group characterized, among other things, by husbands' more open communication behavior, husbands' sex role egalitarianism, spouses' familial orientation and their experiences of less parental role restriction. This transition, however, needs to be interpreted within the specific family stage of these couples. Actually, the processes laid bare in this study operate in longer-term marriages but do not necessarily apply to newlywed couples. For example, our study indicates that husbands report lower parenting satisfaction as their children reach adolescence. To the degree their children are younger, fathers experience parenting as a more rewarding task. One of the elements playing a part in this experience might be the greater role of mothers as sources of support in this stage. Therefore, stimulating fathers' commitment in rearing their adolescent children might positively affect their parenting satisfaction and consequently their marital relationships. Thus, along with the longitudinal findings just mentioned above, it seems that affecting sex role standards can help longer-term couples to enhance their satisfaction with partnership. Research on newlywed couples might clarify the elements that are important in the earlier stages of the marital relationship. These temporal qualifications need to be taken into account when planning public initiatives such as the previously mentioned 'new man' campaigns. Acknowledging the rich diversity of families might be a difficult but focal policy point.

10.4. MARRIAGE IN MOTION: FINAL REFLECTION

Demographic figures indicate the waning quantitative significance of the marital institution. According to some authors, this paradoxically reflects the increased emotional importance of marital relationships. At the micro-level this qualitative importance becomes manifest in individuals' satisfaction with partnership. Gaining insight in forces contributing to

husbands and wives' satisfaction with marriage was the central aim of the present study. Overall, three social movements came to the fore, reflecting the *time-specific* character of marital experiences.

First, segregated sex-role specialization as prevalent in the fifties, has negative rather than positive effects on spousal emotional life. Women's outside employment, be it primarily part-time in the Dutch case, does not seem to put marriage under pressure and make women feel less restricted in their parental role. Moreover, household labor is de-emphasized as a significant source of marital satisfaction.

Second, several findings lend support to the importance of pro-family orientations in maintaining rewarding partnership. Spouses' appraisal of traditional family values provides a cultural context benefiting spousal marital satisfaction, the more so when wives are employed.

Third, and related to the previous trend, is the overwhelming importance of 'feminine' husbands. Husbands incorporating stereotypical feminine qualities into their self-image take more part in childrearing tasks, communicate more openly, and hold more egalitarian attitudes towards sex roles. The former is essential given the fact that wives take the burden of parenting and experience more role restriction and parenting stress than men. The latter two, open communication behavior and egalitarian role attitudes are important because they represent both significant elements in new interpretations of (equal) partnership.

Hence, marital relationships are in motion and husbands and wives are permanently "doing marriage". The three movements described above, reflect a changing society where both men and women find themselves in circumstances, at which mid-century men and women, would have looked at suspiciously. Indeed, a successful marriage now seems to increasingly require a renouncement of traditional images of maleness and femaleness. We are standing, however, at the crossroad of 'old customs' and 'new ideals'. Hence, it can be expected that the picture drawn in the present study is a product of time and generation. Specifically, it is a time in which the generation under study holds other ideals and behaves differently than the ideals and behaviors with which it was raised, burdening husbands and wives with role ambivalences. Particularly, the finding of the close intertwinement of marital satisfaction and parental role restriction indicates the difficulty of combining new roles with deep-seated habits as well as the

discrepancy between new roles and structural facilities making them possible. Hence, it looks as if marital vulnerability has not (only) to do with spouses decreased investment in relationships, as voiced in popular discourse, but with new (relational) ideals and attitudes not being in pace with structural opportunities.

Some authors define this situation as a kind of cultural lag (Jamieson, 1999; Vannoy, 1991). This lag also refers to the social boundaries limiting the choices individuals can make (see Chapter 1). Our study made clear that not everyone is losing sleep over these new ideals. Sharp social dividing lines exist between spouses, being still strongly orientated on traditional sex-specific images and those following new social avenues. Hence, the choices individuals recognize and make, the behavior that they display and the way they experience all this is inscribed in the social script of our society. It was shown that education continues to be an important element of social division within the private sphere. Therefore, theories (over-) emphasizing individuals' agency and their search for personal satisfaction might lose sight of the still important collective contexts in which the individual biography takes shape. Marital relationships are not pure but socially infected. Hence, examining gender and the diverse social contexts in which men and women develop their marriages, remains a fascinating research domain for the near future.

Research on the correlates and processes underlying partners' marital satisfaction is not only an important end in itself, but becomes particularly relevant from the perspective of the social advantages of established marriages. According to Latten (2003), relationship formation and maintenance has increasingly become an important factor in individual welfare. In fact, economic and other cumulative gains associated with staying married throughout the life course, has turned marriage into a status symbol disclosing new mechanism of inequality. In this respect, one can raise the question to what degree these intimate transformations in partnership will further result in class distinctions with stable and satisfied marriages being the pivotal issue at stake.