

**STABILITY AND CHANGE IN THE GENDER IDENTITIES OF  
NEWLY MARRIED COUPLES\***

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the present paper we use identity theory as a multilevel control system to investigate stability and change in identities. According to identity theory, change occurs when self-relevant perceptions become and remain inconsistent with the identity standard. Symbolic interaction theory suggests that change also may occur through the process of taking the role of the other; This process may facilitate the incorporation of aspects of role partner's identities into one's own identity. We investigate these ideas by studying the gender identities of newly first-married couples over a three-year period. The birth of a child results in a new source of self-perceptions that continuously disturb prior gender relevant perceptions. We hypothesize that the parents' gender identities will change in the direction of the disturbance: Men will become more masculine and women more feminine. Insofar as husbands and wives each take the role of the other, we hypothesize that their gender identity standards will change in the spouses' direction: Men will become more feminine and women will become more masculine. Both of these hypotheses are supported, and we discuss the implications of these results for identity theory.

The symbolic interaction framework contains two sometimes competing views of identity. In one view, identities are fluid and are composed anew in each situation; in the other identities are stable across situations. Both of these views have a somewhat oversimplified straw-man character.<sup>1</sup> There is no reason why both conceptions cannot be part of a more general model that allows both stability and change in identities. Many researchers (Demo 1992; Markus and Kunda 1986; Markus and Wurf 1987; Turner 1968) have attempted to present models that distinguish between some *aspects* of the self which are generally stable over time and others which vary with the situation. Identity theory suggests an alternative by conceptualizing identities as processes that can be both stable and changeable according to circumstances. In this paper we describe and test this alternative view of stability and change, and suggest additional mechanisms of change that can be spelled out in identity theory.

## **Identity Theory**

According to identity theory, an identity is a set of meanings applied to the self in a social role or situation, defining what it means to be who one is in that role or situation (Burke and Tully 1977). This set of meanings functions as a standard or reference value in an *identity process* control system (Burke 1991b). The identity standard is itself the output of a higher-level control system. The hierarchical organization of the identity control system is illustrated in Figure 1 for two identities interacting in a situation.

(Figure 1 about here)

In the lower-level loop, the output (a difference between the standard and the perceptions) manifests itself in the situation as meaningful behavior. The output of the higher-level loop (also a function of the difference between perceptions and the standard at the higher level) is the standard for the lower-level loop. In this way it is clear how the identity standard at the lower level

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<sup>1</sup> Demo (1992) refers to the first of these as a *processual model* and the second as a *structural model*.

can change. Change of the lower-level standard--that is, changes in the meaning of who one is in the role or situation--result from attempting to reduce discrepancies at the higher level. The standard at the higher level may be regarded as a more global set of meanings applying to the self. The particular role identity (perhaps along with others) is embedded in this more global set of meanings. Only one higher-level standard is depicted in the diagram; several, however, may be operative at once (Burke 1997), each working to modify the lower-level standard. Similarly, the standard for the higher-level control system is not necessarily taken as fixed, but may be the output of even higher-level control systems.

At the lower level, the identity system works by modifying the output (behavior) to the situation in attempts to control the input (perceptions of self-relevant meanings) so that the input will match the identity standard coming from the higher level. Thus, when self-relevant meanings are disturbed by events in the situation, behavior acts to alter the situation and the self-relevant meanings contained therein so that perceptions of those meanings match meanings contained in the identity standard; this standard defines the self-in-role. As a result of altering the situation that is perceived by all individuals in the situation, perceptions are altered for all identities involved in the interaction; each identity works to match perceptions with standards. Thus, when two or more persons are interacting, the behavior of each may disturb the identity-relevant perceptions of others; therefore, continuous compensatory behavior (self-verification) is required on the part of all involved in the interaction. Self-verification occurs through this process of matching self-relevant perceptions with the identity standard (Swann and Reed 1981).

To summarize, the model proposed by identity theory is a process model. It is a dynamic and continuously operating system, which responds to changes in the environment (produced by actions of self and others) that disturb current perceptions. In addition, the behavior that results (the output) is not only a function of the identity standard (as an automaton) or a stimulus (perceptions) from the situation (as in a stimulus-response model). The identity model is different from

most behaviorist models in that behavior is the result of the *relationship between perceptions and the internal identity standard*.<sup>2</sup> The behavior is *purposeful* in that it seeks to change these perceptions so that they match identity standards, and so that self-meanings are verified. For example, if a woman's identity standard as a female is set to a high level of "femininity," her behavior will not necessarily reflect this degree of femininity. It may reflect more or less, depending on her self-perception in the given situation. If she sees herself as acting more feminine than her identity standard, she will act less feminine in that situation to compensate. If she sees herself as acting less feminine than her identity standard, she will act in a more feminine manner in the situation, thereby bringing her self-relevant perceptions back into line with the identity standard.

Thus, from an identity theory perspective, behavioral responses to such disturbances represent what others have called the situational aspects of the self (Turner 1968), or that part of the individual which changes from situation to situation. When behavior changes across situations, it is an indication that the individual is attempting to alter the situation to achieve a match between perceptual input and his or her identity standard. Although it may appear that the self is changing in response to the situation, the only change is the behavioral response to mismatches between identity standards and perceptual input from the situation. The identity meanings remain intact (or change very little) across situations. The individual's ability to bring perceptions into line with identity standards through changes only in behavior is an important source of stability for identity standards. Thus, although behavior changes in response changes in situation, we anticipate that individual's identities will be relatively stable over time.

## **Changes**

In the above discussion we concentrated on the stabilizing aspects of the identity process (self-verification), but the model also suggests ways in which change will occur. When an iden-

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<sup>2</sup> Strict behaviorists (e.g., Skinner 1974) admit of no relevant internal states and regard behavior as a direct func-

tity standard does not match perceptual input, changes in the standard will occur as the result of persistent, long-term disruptions of self-relevant perceptions due to altered social circumstances. Burke (1991b, 1997) has suggested that according to identity theory, when actions cannot counter disturbances to self-perceptions, the identity process is *reorganized*. This reorganization adjusts the standard so that identity standards and perception are congruent again.

This process of adjusting the standard toward the perception does not “kick in” only at certain points in time, such as the case of a discrepancy. The process is ongoing, but the adjustment is slower than the adjustment of perceptions. That is, the higher control system operates on a slower time scale than the lower control system. To accomplish the adjustment, the higher-level control system changes its output, the identity standard in question, so as to control its perceptions to keep them in line with its standard. One higher-level control system monitors (perceives) the average discrepancy between perceptions and the identity standard, adjusting its output as needed to keep the perceived average discrepancy at zero. Thus, when the identity perceptions consistently are mismatched to the standard, the continuous action of the higher-level control system slowly adjusts the identity standard to a level that reduces mismatches.

Simulations presented in Figure 2 show the initial adjustments of perceptions (input) to changes in meanings in the social situation which result in mismatches with the identity standard. Because behavior (output) does not change the meanings in the situation, the higher-level system adjusts its output (the standard) to reduce the mismatch. This results in a new level (meaning) for the standard. The figure indicates the nature of this adjustment of the standard over several time cycles after the change in situational meanings.<sup>3</sup> The change is not instantaneous; the new standard requires several cycles to settle down to the level that best adjusts the system to the new

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tion of the stimuli (reinforcements or punishments) perceived by the person or organism.

<sup>3</sup> This simulation was conducted in an Excel spreadsheet and is available from the first author.

environment. During this adjustment time, the standard sometimes may be too low or at other times too high.

(Figure 2)

Persistent mismatches between the identity standard and the perceptions that lead to this type of identity change are likely under certain circumstances, such as during role transitions, when the self experiences a rapid change in social conditions (Elder and O’Rand 1995; Wells and Stryker 1988). In such situations, individuals are in the process of adapting and negotiating self-relevant meanings attached to newly adopted or modified roles.<sup>4</sup> Because the adoption of a new role involves a reorganization of an individual’s social environment (and hence perceptions of self-relevant meanings), it clearly has implications for the self (Burke 1991b, 1996; Demo 1992; Wells and Stryker 1988). This would be especially true for the adoption of roles with attached meanings that are relevant to existing identities. For example, a male who takes on the role of counselor or therapist, which possesses the meanings of being “sensitive,” may find that these meanings have implications for the gender identity of being masculine for the its associated meanings of being “tough.”

Furthermore, when the role is difficult to exit, simply removing oneself from the situation to achieve congruence is not an option. Such roles are thus more likely than other roles to create a situation in which existing identity standards are persistently incongruent with (the new) perceptual input of self-relevant meanings. In such situations, these existing identity standards should change in directions that are consistent with the new perceptual input.

Symbolic interactionism also recognizes a second mechanism through which an identity can change: the process of role taking. This is a cognitive process that involves taking the others’ perspective into account when acting (Mead 1934). In role taking, one imaginatively adopts an-

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<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Swann and Reed (1981) have made it clear that people select roles and situations so as to maximize the amount of self-verification that is obtained in the new situations. Caspi and Herbener (1990) make a

other's role and devises a role performance for the self on the basis of that imagination (Stryker 1962; Turner 1962). In this sense, role taking can be viewed as the process of modifying one's own role identity standard to take into account the "understood" role identity standards of one's role partner. It is part of the same adaptive reorganization process whereby the higher-level control system adjusts the identity standard to reduce the discrepancy between perceptions and the identity standard. When one's own role identity standard is modified to incorporate aspects of a role partner's standard, conflict between interactants can be minimized or avoided, and self-verification can be enhanced.

In conflict between two control systems, each control system tries to control the same perceived quantity to two different levels (Powers 1973). For example, imagine a person with an identity standard that includes a certain amount of thriftiness, especially in household expenses. He or she tries to keep the household thermostat set at 65 degrees. This person may live with another person whose identity standard includes a certain amount of self-comfort, especially with respect to keeping the home at a "comfortable" 70 degrees. When each of these persons changes the setting of the thermostat to control his or her own self-relevant perceptions, the other person's self-relevant perceptions of household temperatures are disturbed. Each will experience persistent discrepancies between perceptions and identity standards. If each takes the role of the other and adapts the other's identity standard (in a compromise) to some extent, so that each controls the setting of the thermostat to the same level, the conflict is avoided. In this way, role taking, by modifying one's own identity standard to be more like that of one's role partner, should reduce conflict, and enhance self-verification.

Role taking facilitates the development of smooth social relationships. Role takers have a less abrasive social style in interaction (Davis 1983; Stets 1993, 1995), and role taking has a positive influence on satisfaction in relationships (Davis and Oathout 1987; Franzoi, Davis, and Young

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similar argument with respect to assortative mating, or the selection of a spouse that is similar to oneself in nature and



1985). This process provides a second mechanism, in addition to the higher-level control system that minimizes the average discrepancy between perceptions and identity standard. The standard for the higher-level control system includes keeping interpersonal conflicts to a minimum, especially with respect to important relationships such as those in a family or at work. Under this assumption, role taking can be viewed as a process that facilitates this high-level goal. When interpersonal conflicts of the sort discussed above exist in normal interaction with role partners, role taking can reduce those conflicts by modifying the role identities involved to make the corresponding identity standards more alike. Thus we anticipate that the greater the degree of role taking by individuals, the more their identities should change to become similar to those of their role partners.

In sum, identity theory provides an alternative way of addressing process and stability in the self-concept. Identity theory proposes that identities are relatively stable constructs, changing only as the circumstances around the individual change in ways that cannot be countered. Situational variation in behavior is viewed as a response to incongruencies between identity standards and perceptual input from the environment. Such behavior provides an important stabilizing effect for identity standards. This does not mean, however, that identities never change. Two related mechanisms leading to identity change have been discussed here; both of these focus on the effects of persistent mismatches between standards and perceptual input.

### **The Present Study**

In the present research we examine stability and change in the gender identity of newly married couples over a three-year period. Gender identity refers to the degree to which an individual sees himself or herself as masculine or feminine on the basis of meanings associated with being a man or a woman in society (Burke 1991a). It can be regarded as a “master identity” (Stets and

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temperament.

Burke 1996) or as a set of meanings that applies to the self across situations, rather than a set of meanings attached to a particular situation.

Because gender roles in society are dichotomous, the meanings of masculinity and femininity necessarily contrast with one another. Gender identities, then, are based on perceived similarities and differences between the male and the female role in society (Burke 1991a). This view of the contrastive meanings of gender follows from the contrastive nature of meanings generally (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1957). In addition, research shows that most individuals think of gender identity as a bipolar construct; that is, being masculine is “not being feminine” (Storms 1979).<sup>5</sup>

Thus we investigate stability and change in gender identity as it is influenced by the degree to which each takes the role of the other, and by the birth of a child, which adds the role of parent to each partner’s repertoire. The birth of a child, in our culture, represents a major role transition for both men and women (Claussen 1986). Parenthood confers manhood upon men and womanhood upon women (Antonucci and Mikus 1988; Belsky and Kelly 1994), and has been shown to confer more traditional gender role orientations upon parents (Entwisle and Doering 1981; Rossi 1984). Therefore, this transition represents an important shift in gender identity-relevant meanings in the household.

*Hypothesis 1:* the birth of a child will shift men’s gender identity standards in the masculine direction and women’s gender identity standards in the feminine direction.

Newly married couples are ideal subjects for the study of identity change because they are required to adjust to each other and to the new situation. In such a situation, new husbands and wives are very likely to disturb each other’s control systems, creating identity conflicts of the type discussed. Most people’s desire to keep interpersonal conflicts to a minimum leads to

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<sup>5</sup> Not all scholars agree that it is appropriate to conceptualize gender identity as a bipolar construct (see Spence and Sawin 1985 for a discussion of this debate).

*Hypothesis 2:* the greater the role taking for husbands and for wives, the more husbands' gender identities will become feminine and the more the wives' gender identities will become masculine.

## **METHODS**

### **Sample**

The sample was drawn from marriage registration records in 1991 and 1992 in two medium-sized communities in Washington State. Of the 1,295 couples in the marriage registry during this period, 574 met the criteria for involvement in the project. Both persons were over age 18, it was the first marriage for each, and no children were living in the home.

The primary purpose of the study was to investigate marital dynamics during the first few years of marriage. We sent the 574 couples a letter describing the study. We informed them that after initial information was collected (between two weeks and three months into their marriage), we would contact them each year for two additional years to gather additional data. Each periodic data collection involved a 90-minute face-to-face interview, four one-week daily diaries kept by respondents at four 10-week intervals, and a 15-minute videotaping of couples' conversations about areas of disagreement. The data for the present analysis are based on information from the interviews in all three years.

Of the 574 eligible couples, 338 (59%) agreed to participate in the study. Of these 338 couples, 25 later withdrew for personal reasons (for example, time constraints or relocation) or administrative reasons (for example, difficulty in contacting them and securing their participation). Thus 313 couples (or 626 individuals) were left in the first year of the study. There was a 14.6

percent attrition from Year 1 to Year 2 and an additional 9.5 percent attrition from Year 2 to Year 3.<sup>6</sup>

The 313 couples of the first year do not differ significantly in important ways from all couples married for the first time. Nationally, for example, the mean ages of women and men marrying for the first time are 24 and 26 respectively (Vital Statistics 1987); These do not differ significantly from ages in the present sample. Nationally, two years of college is the mean level of education for both men and women marrying for the first time (Vital Statistics 1987); the mean educational level for our respondents was “some college.” Washington State has a slightly higher proportion of whites (89 percent, in contrast to 84 percent nationally), an underrepresentation of blacks (3 percent in contrast to 13 percent nationally), and an overrepresentation of Asians and Hispanics (9 percent in contrast to 4 percent nationwide) (World Almanac 1992). Nationally, first married are 85 percent white and 13 percent minority (Vital Statistics 1987). Our sample has 89 percent white, 3 percent black, and 9 percent other minorities, reflecting the racial distribution in Washington State.

The attrition in Years 2 and 3 is weighted somewhat toward the lower SEI levels. The mean SEI score (Stevens and Cho 1985) for those who stayed in the sample through the third year is 37.16; the mean score for those who dropped out is 34.23 ( $t = 1.95, p < .10$ ).

### **The Measurement of Gender Identity**

We measured gender identity using the Burke-Tully method, in which we identified the meanings that people associate with masculinity or femininity, and then used those meanings as they relate to the self to form a scale of gender identity. As pointed out by Burke and Tully (1977), this method uses the meanings held by the people in the sample rather than meanings derived from some other source such as the researcher or another population. Discriminant function

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<sup>6</sup> These figures do not include the 13 couples who were separated or divorced after year 1 or the 16 couples who

analysis is employed for selecting those adjectives that discriminate most clearly between the meanings of being male and being female. The selected adjectives are then applied to the respondents' self-descriptions, weighted, and summed to form a gender identity scale.

The items used in this study are taken from the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) (Spence and Helmreich 1978), a set of adjective pairs widely used to capture the meanings of masculinity and femininity. Because the couples in this study were followed over a three-year period the PAQ was administered at three points at yearly intervals. To measure gender identity in the same way at each of the three time points, we ran the discriminant function after pooling the three years of data for all respondents. In this way, we selected a single set of items that discriminated male and female meanings over the three-year period to be included in the gender identity scale.

We identified 15 items that significantly distinguished masculinity from femininity among these respondents; these items are listed in Table 1. The items are scored in a relative fashion: Differences between men and women are the important consideration. For example, both men and women may be "very kind"; women, however, were rated significantly closer to the "very kind" end of the scale than were men. As stated above, we then applied, these most discriminating adjectives to the respondents' self-descriptions, weighted them (by the discriminant function), and summed them to measure gender identity. A high score reflects masculinity; a low score reflects femininity. The omega reliability of the scale is .80 (Heise and Bohrnstedt 1970).

(Table 1)

To validate the measure over time, we included sex and the 15 items in a measurement model that was evaluated over the three time periods. To assess measurement invariance over time, we assessed this measurement model twice using LISREL (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1993): once with the assumption that the measurement coefficients and the measurement errors were the same at

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were separated or divorced after year 2. Separated or divorced couples were no longer in the sampling frame.

all three points, and once without this restrictive assumption. The goodness-of-fit chi-square and degrees of freedom for each of the models then can be compared to test the assumption of measurement invariance. The results of this test (chi-square = 39.64, df = 30, p= .11) showed no significant difference, indicating no reason to assume that the coefficients and error terms differ across the three years. Thus we conclude that the underlying meanings of gender identity have not changed over the three years for these respondents, and that they can be measured in an identical fashion at all three points in time using the estimates from the pooled data. Changes in individuals' gender identities that might occur over the three years are not due to changes in the underlying meanings of masculinity/femininity.

### **The Measurement of Role taking**

The role-taking scale consists of five items measuring the degree to which each person is able to take his or her spouse's perspective (Davis 1983). The items, used in Stets and Burke (1994), showed only a single factor and had an omega reliability of .78. Items from the scale include "I understand my spouse's feelings quite well" and "I have difficulty seeing my spouse's viewpoint in an argument." The responses to the items were coded 0 to 4 (0 "never," 4 "very often"); we created the scale by summing the items (reversing items as necessary). A high score represents a high degree of role taking.

### **Analysis Procedures**

In the first stage of the analysis we investigate stability and change in the gender identity of all individuals in the sample. In the second stage, using the couple as the unit of analysis, we take into account the reciprocal nature of interactive processes. In this analysis we can model the stability and the change of the wife's and husband's gender identity as parallel and interdependent processes.

## RESULTS

### Initial Questions about Stability and Change

Our first set of models examines the gender identity of individuals over a three-year period. Each of the models is based on the general model shown in Figure 3 and is estimated with LISREL; the results are reported in Table 2. We begin with a simple baseline model ( $M_1$ , in which the betas and error covariances of Figure 3 are assumed to be zero). This model assumes that gender identity is based primarily on the individual's sex, and that stability over time is the result of each person's belonging to the same sex over time.<sup>7</sup> This would be equivalent to the straw-man constructionist model, which suggests that gender identity is constructed anew in each situation (or at each time point, in the present analysis).

(Figure 3)

(Table 2)

The results of the analysis for Model  $M_1$  show that while the effects of sex on gender identity are quite strong (standardized coefficients are .68), the model does not fit the data (chi-square = 420.68,  $df = 5$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ). The gender scores show more consistency than this baseline model can explain. In Model  $M_2$  we keep the baseline constructionist model but add paths between the measures of gender identity from each year to the next, representing the stability of gender identity over time.<sup>8</sup> These paths are labeled  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$  in Figure 3. This change in the model results in a significant improvement in fit (chi-square = 325.21,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ). The stability coefficients (the betas) for gender identity from one year to the next are strong (standardized coefficients are .51), and the effects of sex on gender identity are reduced from their previous level to .44, sig-

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<sup>7</sup> That is, much of the overall variability in gender identity is the result of relatively constant sex differences over time. We added constraints to make the effects of sex on gender identity equivalent from year to year.

<sup>8</sup> Constraints have been added to make the stability effects the same from one year to the next.

nificantly less than the stability effects (chi-square = 50.83,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ). The model, however, still does not fit the observed data (chi-square = 95.47,  $df = 4$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ).

In Model  $M_3$  we drop the constructionist argument of constant sex effects, and allow the effect of sex on gender identity in Year 1 to be different from its effect in subsequent years. This suggests that gender identity initially is built around sex differences; once constructed, however, it takes on a life of its own, and the effects of sex in subsequent years are less important. Thus Model  $M_3$  is similar to Model  $M_2$ , but the constraints on the effects of sex have been modified such that  $\gamma_2 = \gamma_3$ . Both are different from  $\gamma_1$ . Again, this change results in a significant improvement in the fit of the model (chi-square = 84.48,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ). The initial effect of sex on gender identity is similar to its effect in Model  $M_1$  (now .68, which includes all of the indirect effects through gender identity in previous years); the remaining effects of sex on gender identity in Years 2 and 3 decline to .24. The stability effects of gender identity increase to .64, but the model still does not quite fit the observed data (chi-square = 10.99,  $df = 3$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ).

The final model ( $M_4$ ) adds a path ( $\beta_3$ ) from Year 1 gender identity to Year 3 gender identity. This lagged effect suggests that some changes in one's gender identity standard from one year to another may be partially "canceled" or "corrected" in the next period. This final model fits the observed data quite well (chi-square = 5.76,  $df = 2$ ,  $p \geq .06$ , GFI = .99, AGFI = .96). In this model the initial effect of sex on gender identity is quite strong -- .68 -- but falls to a relatively weak level -- about .24 -- in subsequent years. This finding indicates that gender status (sex) never completely relinquishes its role in (re)forming gender identity. The temporal consistency or stability effects of gender identity from one year to the next remain strong at .61. Thus, once gender identity has been formed, it tends to remain quite stable over the years, although the large error terms indicate clearly that factors not in the model cause changes to the individuals' gender identities. It also appears that initial changes are partially compensated in the next year.



To understand more clearly the “lagged effect” in the model in the context of an identity control system, we return to the simulations of change that we modeled in a two-level, hierarchical control system and showed in Figure 2. We see that the change in an identity standard is not a smooth transition from one level to another. Rather, the change initially overcorrects and then settles down, through a series of fluctuations, around the new level. The initial change is partially compensated. Without a complete time series on each of the individuals in the sample, we cannot see this phenomenon in the gender identity data, but we observe a negative correlation between the change in gender identity from Year 1 to Year 2 and the change from Year 2 to Year 3. The second change compensates for about half of the initial change. In our subsequent analyses, we test the two mechanisms consistent with identity theory that may cause changes in one’s gender identity over time.

### **CHANGES IN GENDER IDENTITY**

To examine the effects of the birth of a child and of role taking on changes in gender identity, we used the couple as a unit of analysis. The model included the husband’s gender identity and role taking, the wife’s gender identity and role taking at three points in time, and dummy variables indicating the birth of a child between Years 1 and 2, and between Years 2 and 3. This model ( $M_5$ ) as displayed in Figure 4, is symmetric for husbands and for wives. It illustrates the degree to which role taking and gender identity, one year later, affect one another, both within the individual and between spouses. In addition, the model shows the impact of the birth of a child on both husbands’ and wives’ gender identity and role taking. The model contains equality constraints; thus the effects for husbands and for wives are set equal, as are effects from Year 1 to Year 2 and from Year 2 to Year 3.

(Figure 4)

### **Change as a Function of Role taking**

The results of the analysis are presented in Table 3. First, the model fits the data very well (chi-square = 57.09,  $df = 53$ ,  $p = .32$ ). Examining only the within-sex variability of gender identity, we see that the stability coefficient is about .71, with no significant difference between husbands and wives (chi-square = 1.10,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .29$ ). Similarly, the stability coefficient for role taking is .80; again we find no difference between husbands and wives (chi-square = .00,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .99$ ). With respect to the effects of one's own role taking on one's gender identity, the standardized effect is .05 for wives and -.05 for husbands ( $p < .05$  for each). This finding shows that greater role taking accompanies shifts in one's gender identity in the direction of the spouse's gender identity. Thus, as hypothesized, husbands become more feminine and wives become more masculine because each has taken the role of the other during the past year.

(Table 3)

We find no significant cross-spouse effects. The effects of a person's gender identity on the spouse's gender identity or role taking are not significant, nor are the effects of a person's role taking.

### **Change as a Function of Incongruity**

In keeping with our hypothesis, the results of the analysis, as displayed in Table 3, show that having a child has significant effects on the parents' gender identity. Husbands become more masculine, while wives become more feminine. Each responds with the same magnitude of effect (chi-square = .003,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .98$ ). We also find that having a child significantly decreases both husbands' and wives' role taking in the first year of their marriage, but apparently has little or no effect after the first year.

## DISCUSSION

In this paper we have discussed identity theory as an alternative way of viewing stability and change of identity in people's self-conceptions. In identity theory, individuals are understood as having identities that are processes; these identities can manifest either stability or change, depending on the circumstances. Identity standards are stable, built-up patterns or processes within individuals, which persist through time and across situations.

### Stability

Although the internal standards can and do change over time as the result of certain hypothesized processes, identity theory generally expects identity standards to remain fairly stable over time and across situations. This stability occurs because people create and maintain interaction settings, or what Swann and his associates call "opportunity structures" (Swann and Hill 1982; Swann and Reed 1981), in which identities are supported and self-verification occurs.

According to the temporal analyses of gender identity conducted above, a number of stabilizing factors help to maintain the consistency of gender identity over time. Self-verification processes yield a very high inherent temporal stability; the expected stability coefficients for one month are about .97. Over a year, these coefficients translate to the observed level of .71, an indication that change occurs over that longer period.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the model shows the same significant lagged effect from Year 1 to Year 3 as appeared in the earlier model. As before, this effect is interpreted as reflecting the result of a change process that moves the standard too far initially; thus it must compensate, readjust over time, and settle into its new level.

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<sup>9</sup> Some identities may be more consistent over time than others. For example, as Wells and Stryker (1988) point out, identities associated with master statuses (such as gender) should be more stable over time as long as the social circumstances surrounding that identity do not change.

Finally, although gender identity is not completely (re)constructed anew in each period, sex continues to exert a direct effect over the years. This means that gender identity remains anchored to culturally determined sex differences. The changes that do occur cannot cause gender identity to depart too far from the initial sex differences in gender identity because these sex differences continue to express themselves. Thus the small amount of reconstruction of gender identity (around sex differences) helps to preserve culturally important sex differences and to counteract changes that might bring men's and women's gender identities too close together (as through role taking) or drive them too far apart (as through the birth of a child). This mechanism also explains how individuals' gender identities may adapt over time to changing cultural definitions of the meanings of *male* and *female*.

## **Change**

Gender identity is highly stable but is subject to change as the result of social psychological processes. We examined two processes in this research. The first is a process of change that occurs in one's identity standard as the result of taking the role of another -- in this case one's spouse -- in an effort to reduce conflict and to lessen continued discrepancies between perception and standard (a goal in a higher-level control system). The second is a more intrusive, more disruptive change caused by an altered social situation containing persistent and dissident changes in self-perceptions. In this case, the changes were caused by the birth of a child. Both of these processes influence both spouses' gender identities.

Role taking facilitated the incorporation of aspects of the spouse into the self; that is, it brought each spouse' gender identity closer to that of the other. Men became more feminine; women became more masculine. The birth of a child, however, made gender identities more disparate: Men became more masculine, and women more feminine. Because the transition to parenthood tends to accentuate an individual's sense of womanhood/manhood, identity standards

changed so as to become consistent with these “gendered” meanings attached to the role of parent. If role taking is an important process in understanding the development of “opportunity structures” (Swann and Hill 1982; Swann and Reed 1981), it is possible that those couples who waited until the second year to have a child were able to better establish such structures of identity support. This would help “cushion” the effects of parenthood on one’s gender identity.

Although these two processes operate independently of one another, in the sense that one occurs even while the other is controlled, a relationship exists between the birth of a child and the degree of role taking. Couples who had a child in the first year of marriage decreased their role taking significantly, but this effect did not occur among couples who waited until the second year to have a child. It would appear that the presence of a child in the first year focused the couple’s attention on the child, and not on each other, insofar as role taking diminished. Thus the birth of a child in the first year increases the sex typing of the parents’ gender identities not only directly but also indirectly, through its effects on role taking. Among parents who came to know each other during the first year, before the birth of a child, the degree of role taking was not affected by the birth of a child in the second year. The direct effect of the child on gender identity was still present, but the indirect effect through role taking was not. Thus the overall impact of the birth of a child after the first year is slightly smaller than in the first year.

Finally, the coefficients for the husband and the wife were constrained to be equal when estimated. Because the models fit the data very well, it can be assumed that identity change and stability processes are the same for both spouses. More specifically, the birth of a child has an equal impact on husbands’ and wives’ gender identities. The effect of role taking is likewise equal, as is the stability of gender identity for husbands and for wives.

In conclusion, the research reported here is consistent with an identity theory approach to stability and change of the self-concept. Our results support the idea that the self is relatively stable; it is maintained by continuous self-verification and, for gender identity, by a small amount of

reconstruction around culturally relevant sex differences. This effect helps to maintain culturally important group differences between the sexes. Identity standards change as the result of disruption of the self-verification process, either by some external event that prevents self-verification (Burke 1991b, 1996) or by a process in which each of two or more identities disturbs the other(s) as each attempts to verify itself. The higher-level control system attempts to avoid disruption of the identity process and adjusts the identity standard directly or through role taking; as a result, the identity is verified more easily in the situation and fits better with an interaction partner's role identity partner (Turner 1962).

Although both processes result in altered identities, the first is a somewhat involuntary adaptation to the inability to alter initially disturbed self-relevant perceptions in a situation (and perhaps to an accompanying inability to leave the situation). The second process, in contrast, is the result of a motivated desire, wherein elements of the identity standard are changed, and then self-relevant perceptions are brought into line with the new standard. The first process should be related to stress much more strongly than the second, more voluntary process, as hypothesized by Burke (1991b, 1996); the second process should be related more strongly to marital adjustment. Unfortunately the data in the present study do not allow us to determine how greatly the gender identities, altered by these processes, actually reduce stress or increase marital adjustment. That question must be left for future research.

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Table 1. Gender Identity Items and Weights

Item	Discriminant Weight
1. Very aggressive—Not at all aggressive	.042
2. Very independent—Not at all independent	.029
3. Not at all excitable in a major crisis—Very excitable in a major crisis	.045
4. Very active—Very passive	.044
5. Very rough—Very gentle	.029
6. Not at all helpful to others—Very helpful to others	.055
7. Very competitive—Not at all competitive	.113
8. Not at all kind—Very kind	.061
9. Feelings no easily hurt—Feelings easily hurt	.034
10. Not at all aware of the feelings of others—Very aware of the feelings of others	.062
11. Never gives up easily—Gives up easily	.030
12. Never cry—Cries very easily	.157
13. Feel very superior—Feel very inferior	.047
14. Very cold in relations with others—Very warm in relations with others	.045
15. Very little need for security—Very strong need for security	.033
Reliability (omega)	.80

Table 2. Estimated Standardized Coefficients for Stability Models

Coefficients	Models			
	M <sub>1</sub>	M <sub>2</sub>	M <sub>3</sub>	M <sub>4</sub>
$\gamma_1$	0.68 <sup>1</sup>	0.44	0.68	0.68
$\gamma_2$	0.68	0.42	0.24	0.24
$\gamma_3$	0.68	0.39	0.24	0.23
$\beta_1$	— <sup>2</sup>	0.51	0.64	0.61
$\beta_2$	—	0.51	0.64	0.61
$\beta_3$	—	—	—	0.08
$\epsilon_1$ var.	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.06
$\epsilon_2$ var.	0.06	0.03	0.03	0.03
$\epsilon_3$ var.	0.06	0.03	0.03	0.03
$\epsilon_{12}$	—	—	—	—
$\epsilon_{23}$	—	—	—	—
$\epsilon_{13}$	—	—	—	—
Model Fit $\chi^2$	420.68	95.47	10.99	5.79
Model Fit df	7	5	4	3
p ≤	0.001	0.001	0.03	0.12
N	386	386	386	386

<sup>1</sup> All non-zero coefficients:  $p \leq .05$

<sup>2</sup> All — constrained by the model to be zero.

Table 3. Standardized Regression Coefficients for Gender Identity, Role-Taking and the Birth of a Baby Over Time (Model M<sub>5</sub>)

Source	Outcome			
	Husbands (year t+1)		Wives (year t+1)	
	Gender Identity	Role-Taking	Gender Identity	Role-Taking
Baby (year t)	.048	-.127 <sup>1</sup>	-.048	-.127 <sup>1</sup>
Husband (year t)				
Gender Identity	.710 <sup>2</sup>	.000 <sup>3</sup>	.000	.000
Role-Taking	-.046	.801	.000	.000
Wife (year t)				
Gender Identity	.000	.000	.710	.000
Role-Taking	.000	.000	.046	.801
Husband (year t-1)				
Gender Identity	.100	— <sup>4</sup>	—	—
Role-Taking	—	—	—	—
Wife (year t-1)				
Gender Identity	—	—	.100	—
Role-Taking	—	—	—	—
Model Fit: $\chi^2_{53} = 57.09, p \leq .33, N = 194.$				

<sup>1</sup> Effects only for year one to two. Effects for year two to three are not significant.

<sup>2</sup> All non-zero coefficients:  $p \leq .05$

<sup>3</sup> All zero coefficients: not significant

<sup>4</sup> All — constrained by the model to be zero.

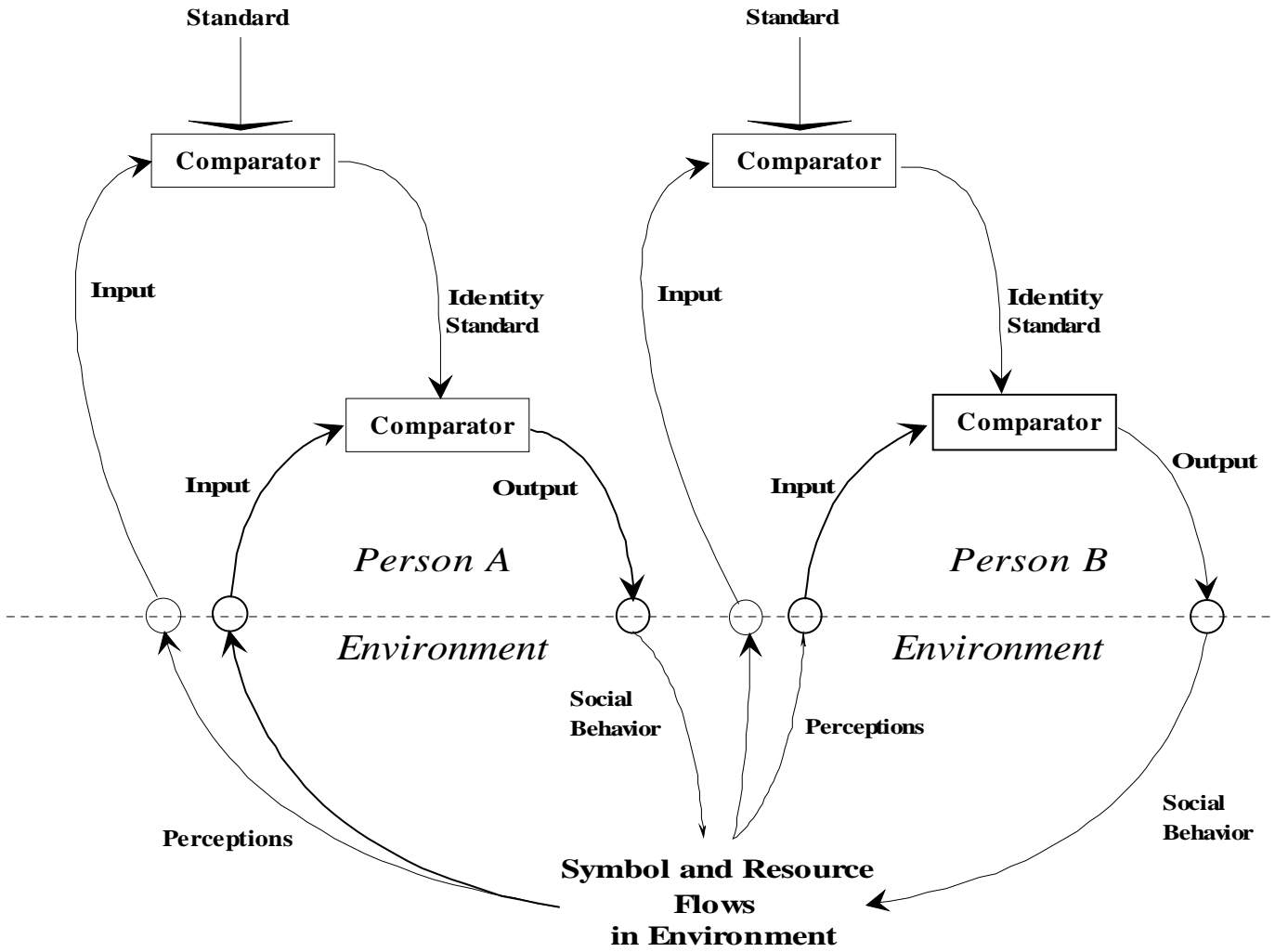


Figure 1. Identity Models for Two Interacting Persons

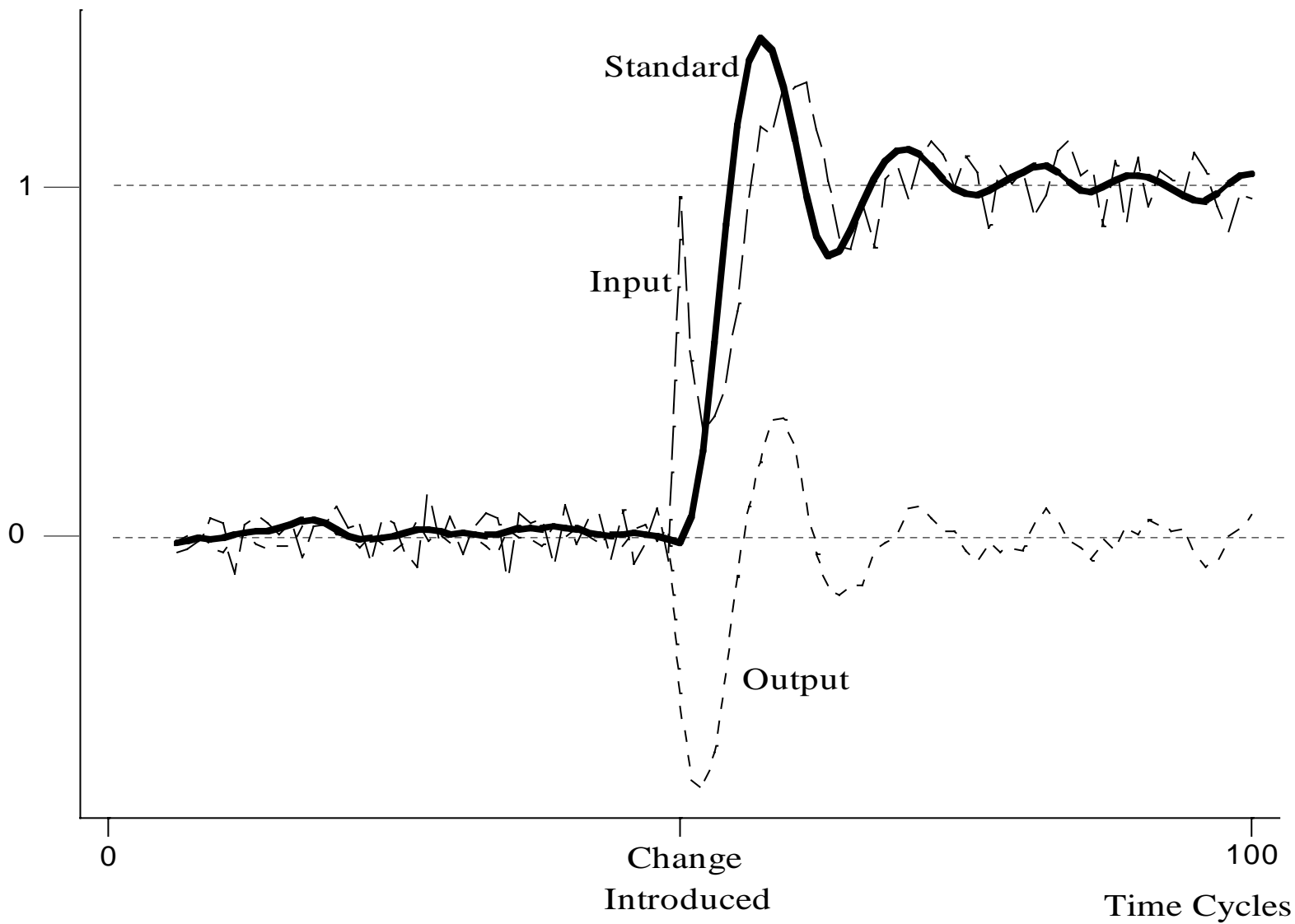


Figure 2. Identity Input, Output, and Standard Before and After Change in Environmental Stimulus

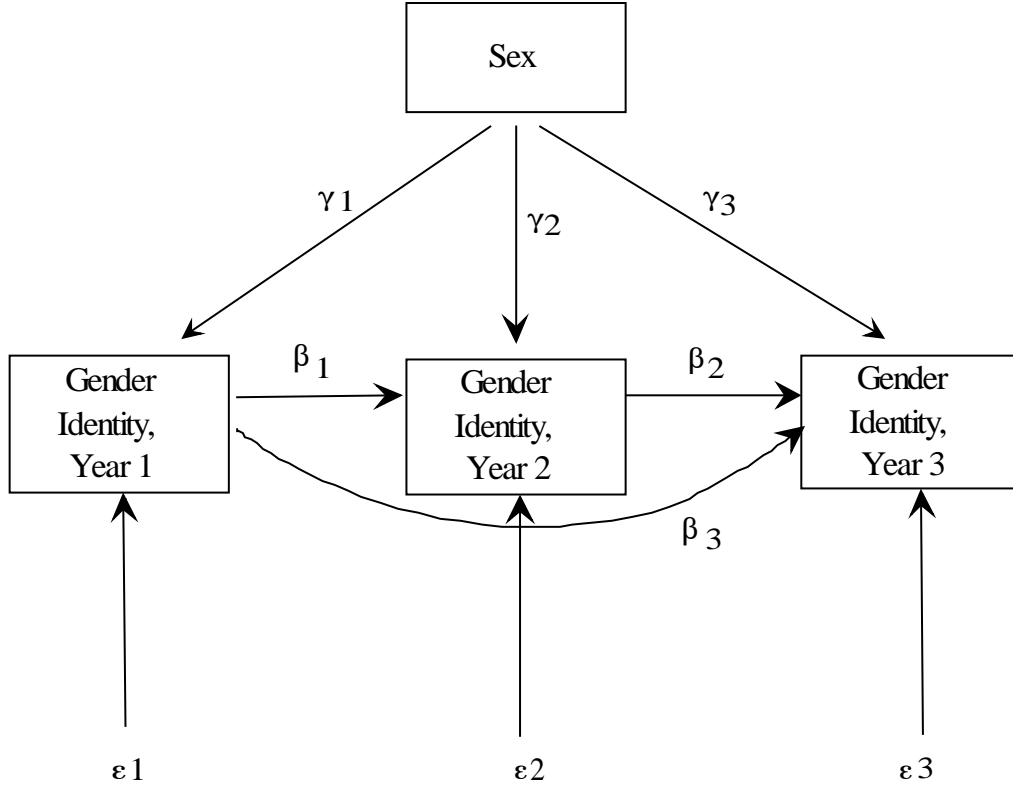


Figure 3. Stability Model



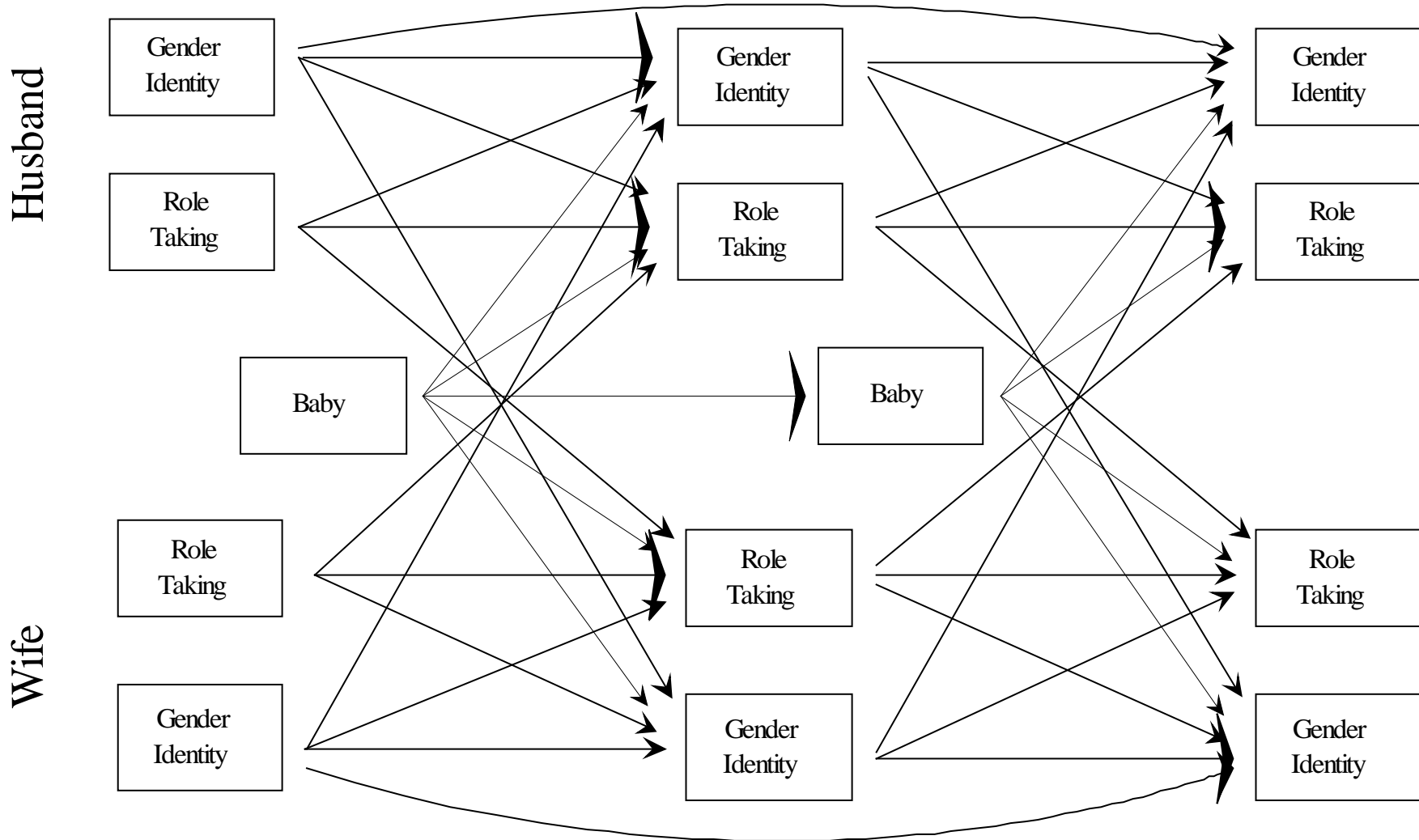


Figure 4. How Role Taking and the Birth of a Child Affect Gender Identity for Married Couples