Partner relationships at the dawn of the 21st century: The case of the Netherlands

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Abstract
As in many western countries, partnership formation has changed profoundly and rapidly in The Netherlands. In the past few decades marriage has lost its role as a sine qua non not only for partnership formation but also for parenthood. Divorce has become widespread and has been supplemented by the break-up of unmarried unions. Unmarried cohabitation has developed from a rare phenomenon into the almost general way of entering a co-residential partnership, and has become a long-term living arrangement for many. Registered partnerships and gay marriage have been introduced. Childbirth among unmarried couples is no longer rare but quite common and two-mother families are now part of the spectrum. Some women choose to have children without having a partner and adoption by singles has been legislated. Societal discussion has shifted to such themes as the financial risks of unmarried people breaking up their relationships. In this paper, we describe and interpret the main trends in the formation and dissolution of partnerships in the Netherlands between the 1960s or 1970s and 2010. Furthermore, we address the question what future trends can be foreseen, and to what extent changes in the Netherlands could indicate parallel changes in other countries. We argue the socio-demographic changes can be seen as part of a broader process of socio-economic and cultural transformation that incorporates many aspects of daily life and of which the informalization of partnerships and families forms an important characteristic. We conclude that, in the Netherlands and probably also in other countries, the Second Demographic Transition has by no means reached its end but continues in new, unprecedented ways.

1. Introduction

In many western countries, partnership formation and dissolution have changed profoundly in the past few decades, as has fertility. Many scholars now consider it useful to refer to these changes as being part of the Second Demographic Transition, even though the idea that the Demographic Transition had been succeeded by a second one was controversial when it was first introduced by Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa (1986, in Dutch; see also Van de Kaa, 1987, 1994; Lesthaeghe, 1995).

When asked what the main changes are in demographic behavior characterizing the Second Demographic Transition, most demographers would probably mention a decrease in fertility, postponement of marriage and parenthood, partial replacement of marriage by unmarried cohabitation, and an increase in separation and divorce. The beginning of these changes was discernible from the mid-1960s in some countries, mainly in Northwestern Europe. By now they have spread all over Europe and North America, albeit at a different pace in different countries

and regions. They can be related to, among other things, ideational change (among which secularization and individualization), changes in the structure of the economy, and the emergence of new contraceptive techniques (Van de Kaa, 1994).

Twenty-five years have passed since the Second Demographic Transition has first been proposed as a term for a set of changes in demographic behavior, and almost 50 since the changes began to take shape. We think it is time to review the latest trends in demographic behavior, asking ourselves: Which new forms of demographic behavior are emerging? To what extent do these new forms of behavior signal a new phase in the Second Demographic Transition – for example the end of it, a continuation, or a change in direction? And how can the new forms of behavior be interpreted in connection with broader societal change?

Our review is limited to changes in partner relationships. We use the term partner relationships for all intimate relationships between two partners (of the opposite or the same sex), regardless of whether they co-reside. The term partnership is used for co-residential partner relationships. When we discuss fertility, we only do so in relation to its connection with partner relationships. The case we discuss is the Netherlands, a country that has often been early in showing new demographic trends. For example, it was early in postponement of motherhood and it was the first country in the world to introduce gay marriage. This is not to say the Netherlands has been a forerunner in all respects – in fact Coleman and Garssen (2002) argued it was in the European mainstream for most demographic phenomena around the year 2000. Remarkably, though, some of Coleman and Garssen's observations were no longer true by 2010. Extra-marital fertility, for example, was low when they wrote their article but has risen substantially since then.

We proceed as follows. We first provide an overview of recent trends in marriage, unmarried cohabitation, separation and divorce, and 'living apart together' (partner relationships without co-residence). Most of our empirical material was derived from the population registers housed by Statistics Netherlands; this is the case if no other source is mentioned. Some other material was derived from the Netherlands Fertility and Family surveys 2003 and 2008. Following this review, we provide an interpretation of how the changes in partner relationships fit into a wider context of societal changes, using social and economic perspectives. We conclude by giving our view on the extent to which the recent trends point to a continuation of the Second Demographic Transition, and on the likelihood that, at least in the Netherlands, the Second Demographic Transition will soon come to an end. Although the findings are not meant to describe changes on a European comparative level, the results could also give some clues for other western countries.

2. Marriage lost its function of first step before family life

2.1 Decreasing tendency to get married

In the Netherlands in the 1950s and 1960s, marriage functioned as the major way of making the transition to adulthood. Marriage was the dominant route of leaving the parental home and a necessary condition both for starting living as a couple and for having children. Also in the 1970s the majority of youngsters married directly from the parental home. In 1970 124,000 couples exchanged their wedding vows in the Netherlands. 58% of the young men that left their parental home did so to start living with a partner, mostly accompanied by a marriage. Since that peak year, the annual number of marriages has declined by a third in 2010 (figure 1). At the beginning of the 21st century, among young men only 43% left home to start living with a partner and

mostly without a marriage (Statistics Netherlands, 2009a). So, nowadays leaving the parental home for marriage has become rare: for the majority of young people, marriage has lost its function as a marker of the transition from the parental home to adult life. Living alone or cohabiting unmarried have largely replaced marriage as the first living arrangement after leaving home. Those who still marry directly from the parental home are usually of immigrant descent and/or belong to an orthodox religious group. While the total annual number of marriages has decreased markedly, a growing share of all marriages were second marriages. The probability of ever entering into a marriage has decreased for men from 90 percent for older generations to around 65 percent for the generation born around 1970. For women, the equivalent percentages are 95 and 70.

>>>> Figure 1. Number of marriages in the Netherlands, 1960-2010

The long term trend of a decreasing tendency to get married as a first step in adult life has been accompanied by an ongoing rise of the average age of first marriage. This average has risen for men from 25 in 1970 to 33 in 2009, and from 23 to 30 for women. Together with the Scandinavian countries and some West-European countries, the Netherlands rank high in average age of first marriage in Europe. Ages at first marriage are up to five years lower in some of the East European countries (Eurostat, 2008).

>>>>Figure 2. Women's age at first marriage, the Netherlands, 1980-2009

Until the end of the 1990s the increase in average at marriage predominantly occurred by a shift towards 25-29-year old women marrying for the first time, see figure 2. By the year 2000 a shift towards women marrying in their thirties was going on, whereas since 2005 the proportion of first time brides being older than 40 has been rising. By 2010 one in 10 first-time brides was older than 40 (Latten & De Graaf, 2011). This holds true for one in seven first-time grooms. The figures up to 2010 do not indicate an end to this postponement tendency.

As a consequence of the decreasing tendency to get married and the postponement of marriage to later stages in life, marked declines are visible in the share of married people among the younger age groups. Whereas between 1970 and 2010 the share of marrieds among the 20-69 year olds decreased from 77 % to 55%, among those in their twenties it decreased from 55 percent to 13 percent. In sum, it has become unusual to be married for those under 30. For those in their thirties, the decline was from 88 percent to 49 percent. For those in their forties and fifties the decline was less strong. Among those over 60 there has been no decline thus far (figure 3). This difference between age categories indicates a cohort effect in changing patterns of marriage. Because nearly everyone of the older generations married at a young age, any reductions in the share of unmarried among the older generations are owing to divorce and widowhood.

>>>> Figure 3. Share of marrieds by age-categories in the Netherlands, 1970 and 2010

2.2 Introduction of same-sex marriages fueled the number of marriages by 2 percent

On the first of April 2001, the Netherlands was the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. A number of countries have followed since then: for example Belgium, Spain, Canada, South Africa, Norway, Sweden, Portugal, Iceland and Argentina. In the United States, by the summer of 2011 same-sex marriage was legal in Washington, D.C. and various states: Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire and New York. In Mexico it has been legalized in Mexico City.

In the Netherlands the extra potential of same-sex marriages gave some impetus to the annual number of marriages. Between April 2001 and the first of January 2011, 15,000 gay and lesbian couples have tied the knot in the Netherlands. The cumulative number of marriages between two women (7,522) was slightly higher than that between two men (7,291). Overlooking the period 2001-2010 the extra marriages added two percent to all marriages contracted. This extra number of marriages by far did not offset the long-term decline in total numbers of annual marriages.

One explanation of the modest contribution to the total of marriages must be found in a lower propensity of same-sex co-residential couples to get married. In 2010 according to Statistics Netherlands 20 percent of an estimated 57,000 co-residential same-sex couples were married (De Graaf, 2011a). It can be assumed that the lower likelihood of same-sex couples of marrying is associated with a smaller probability to start a family. Still, one in five same-sex couples have children, albeit mostly female couples. When male couples have a family, the children have been adopted or are own children from a previous opposite-sex relationship.

During the first decade of existence of same-sex marriages, the acceptance of homosexuality in general showed an ongoing increase. In 2006 15% of the Dutch population expressed negative views on homosexuality, whereas in 2008 this had fallen to 9% (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2010). The population in the Netherlands has one of the most tolerant attitudes in Europe for homosexuals. In 2010 only a minority of one in five opposed child adoption by gay couples. Similarly, only a minority of slightly more than one in ten favoured abolishing gay marriage. The attitudes among Dutch are in sharp contrast with the attitudes in Eastern European countries, where acceptance of gay marriages ranges between 10 and 20% (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2011). Less educated people and religious people – native as well as migrants - are however less tolerant towards homosexuality.

2.3 New marital status of registered partnership increasingly popular

In 1998 the registered partnership was introduced as a new type of formalization for a relationship. Same-sex marriage had not yet been legalized by that time. The registered partnership functioned as a forerunner for gay marriage. It was introduced to accommodate those who could not get married or did not want to do so, but who wanted a civil registration with more or less the same status as being married. In the first three years after the introduction, many same-sex couples used this opportunity to have their relationship officially registered. After the introduction of civil marriage for same sex partners in 2001, those couples who already had a registered partnership had the option to transform it into a marriage. The partnership registration however was maintained as an extra type of marital status, for same-sex and opposite-sex couples equally. Moreover, in order to offer equal rights to all types of couples, the legislator introduced the possibility to transform an existing marriage into a registered partnership. This caused an unexpected use. Until early 2009 quite some married couples who wanted to divorce had their marriage transformed into a registered partnership first, in order to arrange a divorce without the

requirement of appointing a lawyer. This route functioned as a 'flash divorce' (see also Section 5). However since March 2009 the legislator has abolished this route.

Despite the abolishment of the flash divorce, the annual numbers of new registered partnerships are still on the rise. An increasing share of two-sex couples opt for partnership registration. In 2010 a total of nearly 10 thousand new registered partnerships were counted versus only some more than 2 thousand in 2001 (De Graaf, 2011b). This implies that by 2010 more than one in seven couples who had their relationships legally sanctioned opted for a registered partnership rather than marriage. The total annual number of gay couples that opt for a registered partnership has remained stable at an annual level of 400-600.

Even though registered partnerships are getting increasingly popular among two-sex couples, they are still more common among same-sex couples. In 2010 around one in 10 couples of the estimated 57 thousand same-sex co-residential couples had registered partnerships, whereas two in 10 were married. The remaining same-sex couples were cohabiting unmarried. In sum, one can discern an assimilation process in which two-sex and same-sex couples increasingly use similar legal arrangements for their partnerships.

Registered partnerships are chosen particularly frequently by older couples. Nearly one in three women who entered into a registered partnership in 2009 were aged over forty, whereas only one in five women who got married were in this age category. If a registered partnership should mainly be seen as an alternative to marriage, this could indicate a reluctance of previously married people to re-marry. If it should mainly be seen as an alternative to unmarried cohabitation, it could indicate a greater need for formal arrangements among older people, for example because they are more likely to own a home or other assets.

3. Unmarried cohabitation has become common

3.1 Trends in unmarried cohabitation

Among those who were in their twenties in the 1970s, unmarried cohabitation was rare. Only one in every ten 20-24 year olds who got married had ever cohabited before (Van Hoorn, 2001). Cohabitation emerged in that decade among a select category of highly educated, progressive and non-religious young people. In the next decades it slowly spread to the majority of those who started their first partnerships. In the 1990s three-quarters of 20-24 year olds who got married had cohabited with their marriage partner. By 2000, nine out of ten 25-29 year old brides had cohabited before marriage.

While the chance of marriage has decreased, nearly everyone experiences living with a partner at some point during the life course. According to the Netherlands Fertility and Family Survey, in 2008 only around seven percent of men and far fewer women of the generation born in 1945-1954 had never lived with a partner (Statistics Netherlands 2009a). The combination of these facts implies that a sizeable majority of the population is either engaged in long-term unmarried cohabitation, or cohabits only for a short time, until either breaking up their unmarried relationship or transforming it into a marriage.

This trend is also translated into increasing numbers of unmarried cohabiting couples. Compared to 1995, by 2010 the number of unmarried couples had risen by more than 60 percent from 518 thousand to 836 thousand, whereas the number of married couples had remained stable at 3.4 million. This implies that the share of unmarried couples increased from 13 to 20 percent in 15 years time. By 2010, the share of unmarried couples had reached 66 percent among 25-29 year

olds, and 45 percent among 30-34 year olds. Up to 2010 the rise in the share of unmarried partnerships among those aged 50 and over has been modest; more generally, this share differs strongly by age (Figure 4).

>>>>Figure 4. Married couples (including registered partnerships) in the Netherlands, 2010

3.2 Cohabitation: temporary phase for some, long-term choice for others

By 2010 cohabitation appears to have different functions for different people and in different stages in the life course. It can be an interim living arrangement as a prelude to marriage, a replacement for a first marriage or a replacement for a second marriage after a first. Both last cases are long-term choices. Findings from the 2008 Fertility and Family of Statistics Netherlands suggest that slightly less than half of all actual cohabiters aged 62 or younger see cohabitation as an interim living arrangement: around half of them expect to marry one day. This seems to indicate that the interim function of cohabitation is no longer dominant.

The expectations of cohabiting respondents differ strongly by age (Figure 5). Of the 18 to 24 year old cohabiting men and women, 81 percent intend to get married at some point in the future. So, among the majority of younger cohabiting couples, cohabitation still seems to function as a transitory situation. Among cohabiters aged forty or over, however, only a minority expect to get married. Among many older unmarried couples at least one of the partners is divorced. Some could have children from a first marriage and do not want to marry anew for that reason, others are widowed and perhaps do not want to be disloyal to their deceased partner. This category could be qualified as "after-marriage cohabiters", in contrast to the before-marriage cohabiters and the permanent cohabiters (Antokolskaia et al., 2011). To a certain extent the lessened interest in marriage in later life also has to do with a selection effect: the minority of persons who did not choose to marry earlier in life and who still do not do so at older ages get more weight among older cohabiting couples.

>>>> Figure 5. Intentions to marry among cohabiting couples, the Netherlands 2008

Irrespective of age or stage in the life course, of those who expect to continue cohabiting around three quarters think that marriage would not add anything to their partnership. Other, less frequent answers to the question why cohabiters in the Fertility and Family Survey would not want to marry - such as 'partner does not want to get married,' 'we do not want to make that sort of commitment' and 'we are opposed to marriage on principle' - all fit into the same pattern of a low value attached to marriage.

3.3 Cohabitation contracts

Unmarried cohabitation does not necessarily imply the absence of any type of legal commitment between the partners. Many current public and private law regulations require some form of legal arrangement of a relationship in order for couples to qualify for certain benefits or to settle joint ownership of a home or other assets. Therefore, a growing share of cohabiting couples has a cohabitation contract drawn up by a notary. Essential for such a contract is that it is a private agreement between two individuals only. This is different from registered partnership which, just

like marriage, implies a civil status as a partner and includes statutory rights and obligations. A cohabitation contract instead does not always cover the whole spectrum of rights and obligations, for example when it comes to alimony. This is guaranteed only when parties have chosen to record it in their contract (Antokolskaia et al., 2011).

According to the Netherlands Fertility and Family Surveys, the total share of cohabiters with a cohabitation contract rose from 61 percent to 72 percent in only 5 years time between 2003 and 2008 (De Graaf, 2010). The percentage of cohabiters with a cohabitation contract or with an intention to get a contract is greater with increasing age (Figure 6).

>>>> figure 6. Cohabitation contracts among cohabiting couples by age, the Netherlands, 2008

4. Majority of first children now born outside marriage

When several decades ago marriage was the only commonly accepted setting for a couple to live together, the same was true for parenthood. Births outside marriage were rare, unwanted and stigmatised. In 1960, only one in 30 firstborn children was born out of wedlock. These were usually babies of young, single women, often teenagers, who got pregnant unintendedly. Children of unmarried mothers usually were given up for adoption. New, effective contraceptive techniques made unwanted pregnancies among teenagers decrease. According to De Graaf and Sprangers (1999) the sharp drop in teenage fertility between the early 1970s and the turn of the century must be seen in connection with the improved availability of contraceptives and legalised abortion. From the 1980s onwards, however, the number of births out of wedlock began to rise again and this rise accelerated in the mid-1990s (see Figure 7). Nowadays the phenomemon is no longer closely connected with teenage pregnancies or unintendend pregnancies.

>>>>Figure 7. Percentage children born to unmarried mothers in the Netherlands, 1960-2010

Children nowadays are born out of wedlock mostly to couples who intentionally choose to start a family without being married. A growing number of unmarried couples no longer see the start of their parenthood as a necessary or sufficient reason to get married. By 2010 more than half of all firstborn children were born out of wedlock. So in fact by that time marriage had lost its long time dominant function as *conditio sine qua non* for parenthood, just like it had earlier for living as a couple.

The changes become visible in a reversal of the chronological order of the average age of first marriage and of first parenthood in 2004. Around 1970 first mothers were on average 24.3 years old, whereas women's average age of first marriage was one and a half years younger at 22.7. By 2009 the averages were 29.4 for first motherhood and 30.3 for women's first marriage. For men, average first fatherhood also precedes first marriage. Moreover, an increasing share of parents with a second or third child also remains unmarried. From nearly zero in the early 1970s, the share of second children with unmarried parents rose steadily to 17% in 2000 and accelerated to reach 34% in 2010.

Owing to the decreasing tendency to formalize parenthood as well as relationships, in a number of cases, the father of a newborn could be unknown to local birth registrars or administrations in general. In most cases this lack of administrative knowledge is undone later on

by formal recognition of the child by the father. But if this does not happen, the lack of formalization could have far-reaching consequences. If a biological father does not legally recognize the child as his before marrying the mother, the biological father would formally be registered as the stepfather from the date of marriage.

5. Higher risks of breaking up partnerships

The number of divorces has risen sharply in the Netherlands, especially since the 1970s. In 1970, the top year for marriages, there were only 10 thousand divorces. Five years later that number had doubled to 20 thousand. A significant *economic* trigger in the increase of the number of divorces was the introduction of an Income Support Law in the early 1970s that guaranteed women an income after divorce. It was accompanied by a legal change in 1971 that widened the accepted reasons for divorce. By 2001, the total number of divorces hit a record high level of 37 thousand. In 2002 the number of divorces dropped to 32 thousand (Figure 8). This decrease does not, however, accurately reflect the empirical reality of marriages ending in divorce. The decrease was mainly a reflection of a new route to divorce, the so-called flash divorce (see also Section 2.3). Flash divorces were obtained by having a marriage transformed into a registered partnership and thereafter dissolving that partnership at short notice. These flash divorces did not appear in the official divorce statistics. The route of a flash divorce was abolished in 2009; among the reasons was that it was not recognized outside the Netherlands.

>>>>Figure 8. Divorces and flash divorces, the Netherlands, 1960-2010

The total annual number of divorces including flash divorces remained fairly stable since 2001 (Loozen & Van Huis, 2010). So the long-term increasing tendency in the annual number of divorces seems to have come to an end around the year 2000. This apparent stability hides a continuously rising risk of divorce for successive cohorts of marrieds, however. Couples who married in the late 1960s or early 1970s had a risk of one in six to be divorced within 20 years time. For those married in the early 1990s this share is expected to be over a quarter.
Various studies have shown that the likelihood of a partnership break-up is considerably higher for unmarried than for married couples. The 2008 Fertility and Family Survey indicates that the risk of breaking up an unmarried cohabitation has increased steadily. Around one in seven unmarried partnerships that started in the second half of the 1980s was broken up within four years. For unmarried partnerships started in the early 2000s this share came close to three in ten (Statistics Netherlands, 2009a, p. 57).

6. Living apart together

A special type of informal relationship is the living apart together (lat) relationship. In a lat relationship, single people or single parents maintain an intimate relationship without moving in together. Part of these relationships can be seen as a modern form of courtship or engagement for young people, preceding a co-residential partnership. But there are signs that lat relationships are not just that. According to the results of the 2003 Fertility and Family Survey, a considerable

share of those with a steady partner do not want to live together. Most of these are over 40 years of age and have previously lived together with a partner. Just over four out of ten people in their forties and even more than seven out of ten over-50s who do not live with their partner at present do not want to do so in the future. When asked for a reason, more than half say that they want to maintain their freedom. For one in ten, children from a previous relationship play a role. Some divorced do not prefer to start a family with a stepparent but prefer to maintain a living apart together relationship for the time their children live at home. One could also expect the new tendency of co-parenting to slow down the search for a new co-residential partner. Furthermore, nearly 10 percent do not want to live together because of unfavourable past experiences of living together (Loozen & Steenhof, 2004). An analysis by De Jong Gierveld and Latten (2008) showed that among older people, the experience of divorce leads some to want a lat relationship rather than a co-residential partnership. Figures from the 2008 Fertility and Family Survey show that of all divorced women one third have a lat relationship or want to have one. The fact that there are children, and their potential reaction to the new partners, may play a role in this choice. Over a quarter of the unmarried people over fifty want a lat relationship. Over half of the people in a living-apart-together relationship turn out to live together on a regular basis, often one or two days a week (Statistics Netherlands, 2009b).

7. Revisiting the Second Demographic Transition

The theory of the Second Demographic Transition comprises a fine description of how demographic behavior changes in accordance with changing circumstances (Van de Kaa, 1994). It points to the strong connections between demographic behavior, economic circumstances, value change (secularization, individualization) and technical change. From the 1960s onwards, changes in relationships, partnerships and family life fitted into the greater contexts of social change: a growing enrolment in education and risen education level of women and a stronger position of women on the labor market, and hence a changing gender balance within partnerships in favor of women. Secularization, new contraceptive techniques and new fertility techniques added to these changes. Changing values and changing demographic behavior were connected with or even grounded on these social and technical developments.

After almost five decades of continuous change in partner relationships and family life, we ask ourselves three questions: How do the most recent changes in partner relationships fit in with the Second Demographic Transition? Are there indications that the underlying economic, social and technical trends have come to an end? And is it more realistic to expect changes in demographic behavior to end soon, or to expect further changes – and which?

7.1 The newest trends in partner relationships: A continuation of the Second Demographic Transition

The main demographic changes Van de Kaa and Lesthaeghe pointed to when they introduced the theory of the Second Demographic Transition in the 1980s and 1990s were a decrease in fertility, postponement of parenthood, a rise in unmarried cohabitation accompanying a decrease in marriage, a rise in divorce, and an increase in living alone. As can be derived from the previous sections, the latest trends in partner relationships in the Netherlands can be summarized as follows. The trends pointed to by Van de Kaa and Lesthaeghe are still going on: the decrease in marriage has continued, and so have the rise in unmarried cohabitation, the rise in divorce and the

increase in living alone. The latest changes can be categorized under two major trends: an *informalization* of partner relationships and a *diversification of formal arrangements* of co-residential partnerships. Changes indicating informalization are the long-term character of cohabitation for an increasing number of couples; the increase in children born to cohabiting couples; and the rise in living-apart-together relationships. Changes indicating a diversification of formal arrangements are the introduction of same-sex marriage; the introduction of the registered partnership as a new marital status (temporarily accompanied by the flash divorce); and the rise in cohabitation contracts.

Although the growth of unmarried parenthood is new, the informalization trend can be seen as a continuation of an already existing tendency towards informalization as indicated by the growth in unmarried cohabitation, and thus, as fitting in with the Second Demographic Transition. The diversification of formal partnership arrangements was not foreseen by Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa and is, at first sight, perhaps somewhat contradictory to the informalization trend. But it is completely in line with ongoing changes in the meaning of marriage: from an institution exclusively meant for a man and a woman, sanctioned by the church and the only accepted way of starting a co-residential partnership and a family, marriage is now just one of the options to formalize a partnership, for two-sex and same-sex couples alike. Couples now not only have a choice *whether* to formalize their partnership but also *how* to do that. In all, we think we can argue that the latest trends in partner relationships in the Netherlands indicate a continuation of the Second Demographic Transition.

Despite the changes in partner relationships, it is important also to note what has not changed thus far: the vast majority of the population prefers to be in a partner relationship and the vast majority of children is born within a co-residential partnership.

7.2 The economic position of women

In the past few decades the level of education of men as well as women has risen continuously. However, by 2005 Dutch women in their thirties surpassed men in level of education for the first time in history. By 2010 43% of the 25-43 year old women against 37% of men had completed tertiary education. At the bottom of the education distribution men dominate. Education results for youngsters in The Netherlands indicate an ongoing success for females above men. In all EU countries the share of young women that is expected to complete a higher education surpasses the share of men (Statistics Netherlands, 2011). From these findings one can expect the average knowledge capital of women – irrespective of age - will surpass that of men in the long run. Regarding the important meaning education had up to now for partnerships an ongoing influence of the rising education level of women on future partner relationships seems to be inevitable.

During the first decade of the 21st century, the absolute number of working women has risen by half a million in The Netherlands whereas the number of working men has stabilized. In 2005, 40% of the families with young children had one breadwinner. Only four years later, this percentage had decreased to 30. Being a housewife only is rapidly becoming rare. Among new generations of mothers the majority combine motherhood with a – mostly part-time - job. Around 2010 a majority of those in partnerships were dual earners. In one in five two-earner couples the woman has the highest income.

Already in 1988 Oppenheimer stated that, due to the rising breadwinner capacity of women, the assortative mating process was changing. As women's labour-market attachment grows and becomes life-long, there will increasingly be two careers (instead of one) in a relationship, which could result in conflicting demands on, for example, the residential location

of the couple (close to his work or close to hers?). Conflicting demands, however, will less easily be solved within the partnership: "The feasibility of using post marital socialization as a corrective matching mechanism is declining, placing more of the burden on assortative mating selection for producing a good match. This will lead inevitably to a rise in age at marriage and a greater marital instability since early uncertainties about what is being matched are increasingly characteristic of females as well as males. Serious marriage search may then be postponed….The increasing prevalence of cohabitation may also represent one type of response" (Oppenheimer, 1988, p. 583).

Given the increasingly stronger potential of new generations of women on the labour market, Oppenheimer's arguments seem to have gained strength. There is reason, therefore, to expect a continuous tendency in favour of unmarried cohabitation, cohabitation agreements and postponement of marriage in the future.

7.3 Individualization of norms and the 'pure relationship'

Together with rising levels of education and an ongoing rise in labor force participation among women, younger generations of partners will more often be co-breadwinners and hence economically less dependent on each other. Independence is a characteristic that belongs to the concept of individualization, a concept that encloses more dimensions of life, including the individualization of norms in general. According to Dutch lawyer Dorien Pessers (2003), "The citizen has withdrawn from the public square, in a 'Rückzug ins Private' ". Pessers is referring to matters like the cult of personality, the desire for authenticity, for genuine living, for a recognition of the hyper-personal identity and the revolution of feeling. She concludes that "the emancipated individual has liberated himself from – often suffocating – norms that were imposed by society, tradition, the state or religion. (…) More than ever people look for an individualized morality, making his own moral judgments. Flowing from this personalized morality is a desire for a personalization of decision-making about matters of life, death, and happiness. Every human being has the right to shape his life the way he sees fit, based on his own moral judgments.". Pessers' thoughts are in line with the secularization trend: Even after a long term trend of secularization, in the period 2000-2010 the share of population reporting not to have an religious affiliation rose further from 41% to 44%, and among 20-25 year olds even from 49% to 56% (Statistics Netherlands, Statline, 2010). Next to the economic independence of partners, secularization explains why individuals increasingly test their relationships on the basis of their emotional value here and now. Indeed it shows a move towards a more authentic, hyper-individualized decision-making processes, away from formal or religious conditions. An individualized decision making process is the connecting concept, also when it concerns the ending of relationships and partnerships.

Individualization has led to a profound change in the meaning of partner relationships. According to Giddens (1991), the contemporary partnership can be described as a *pure relationship*, in which intimacy and emotional commitment are crucial and which is based on democratic and egalitarian interaction between partners.

As generations are developing new norms for relationships, namely that any relationship should be based on bilateral and emotional grounds, relationship break-ups are legitimized when cracks appear in the emotional foundation. This results in a higher risk of splitting up. Sennett (2000) claims to have observed a similar detachment tendency in attitudes to work. He thinks that the modern individual's character is less attached to the physical workspace and to the employer. This makes him or her more flexible and aimless – the two main characteristics of modern

society according to Sennett. “How do we decide what’s of enduring value in ourselves, in an impatient society that only lives for the here and now? How to pursue long term goals in an economy that only cares about the short term?” he asks. It is far from implausible that a greater emphasis on short-term experiences in work life would be transposed to the personal field of human relationships. Moreover, because of the rising female labor force, more women than ever will be involved in this new pattern. According to Sennett, the new pattern will stimulate an attitudinal transformation that in turn will affect the way individuals deal with relationships.

If we assume secularization, individualization and the pure relationship to continue to gain importance, we might expect single people increasingly to form partner relationships only when they see important gains in emotional value, and couples to dissolve their relationships as soon as the emotional value no longer meets their expectations. This could lead to further postponement of partnership formation and a further increase in separation. It could also lead to an increase in highly individualized partnership forms, for example partnerships in which the couple shares a residence for part of the time and lives apart for another part (so-called commuter partnerships; Van der Klis & Mulder, 2008).

7.4 From contraception to fertility techniques

Together with the introduction of the morning after pill, the birth control pill has helped trigger the Second Demographic Transition in the 1960s. Traditional restrictive norms, aimed at controlling biological urges and preventing unwanted pregnancies, began to lose their function. Pre-marital sex and unmarried cohabitation could become unproblematic since unwanted pregnancies could be prevented. Partner relationships as well as marriage itself became increasingly detached from the previously self-evident link with parenthood. The emotional concept of ‘romantic love’ could gain importance as a legitimate base for partnerships. Partnerships – and relationships - could get more the character of a bilateral, individual, emotional obligation and less of a formal societal obligation. “Romanticism, the container concept referring to a whole range of modern sensibilities, is more important in shaping people’s identity than the bourgeois concepts of profession, class, and rank.” (Van Stokkom, 1997). Being a couple increasingly became an accepted goal in itself. The acceptance of couples choosing to remain childless grew. This was a prelude to the social acceptance of other childless types of relationships and partnerships. For why should same-sex couples not be accepted as a couple when the legitimate base for partnerships developed towards a bilateral emotional obligation away form family formation as a matter-of-course? Or why should lat relationships of divorced elderly not been accepted socially? In short, next to rising secularization, female education levels, participation on the labor market and increasing dual earnership, contraceptive tools help explain a detachment of sexual relations from parenthood and of parenthood from marriage, and therefore a declining significance of marriage.

From the 1980s on, new fertility techniques have introduced new options that help infecund couples to have children: in vitro fertilization and egg donation became possible and became a topic of discussion in the public debate. At first these options were open for opposite-sex couples, later on also for same-sex couples, followed by single women. Increasingly one can see that in the public debate singles claim the same rights as cohabiting or married people. And indeed legislation has changed in accordance with the upcoming new attitudes. Anno 2010 in vitro fertilization is a legal option for single women in The Netherlands. Singles can legally adopt children. Recently the discussion arose about rights of single women to have their eggs frozen in order to have children at a later age when they might have a partner and better opportunities to

become mothers. This demonstrates a growing tendency in the public debate to disconnect parenthood from partnerships or even relationships. The institutionalization of co-parenting after divorce can be viewed from the same perspective. And although exceptional niches in family formation, women looking for gay men to have children with them on a co-parental basis without having a relationship are manifestations of the same phenomenon.

A possible new future trend might be an increase in the detachment of parenthood from co-residential partnerships or from partner relationships in general, not just as a hypothetical possibility or a rare phenomenon but as a realistic choice among diverse living arrangements: couples in lat relationships, or singles, who become parents. Internet will facilitate finding partners for parenthood without being a couple. In The Netherlands websites already exist for this niche in family formation.

8. Conclusion

In this article we have sketched the latest trends in partner relationships in the Netherlands, and we have raised the question to what extent these trends can be seen as a continuation of the Second Demographic Transition. We have also discussed the main economic trends, trends in values and technical trends that have triggered the Second Demographic Transition, the extent to which these trends are still going on, and what further changes in partner relationships we may expect based on these underlying trends.

We argue that the new trends in partner relationships can be summarized under the headings of informalization (decrease in marriage, increase in unmarried cohabitation, cohabitation becoming a long-term arrangement and a common way of having and raising children, increase in living-apart-together relationships) and the diversification of formal arrangements in partner relationships (introduction of same-sex marriage, introduction of registered partnerships, rise in cohabitation contracts). Both these main trends can be seen as signs of a continuation of the Second Demographic Transition.

We see no signs of an end to the underlying trends, and neither of an end to the Second Demographic Transition itself. The economic independence of women is likely to grow. Secularization and individualization are still on its way. New fertility techniques are opening new options, not only for infecund couples but also for same-sex couples and single women, and internet facilitates finding co-parents or donors of sperm or eggs. There is still room for a further decline in marriage, a further growth of parenthood among cohabiting couples, a further increase in separation and a further growth in living alone.

A continued increase in the risk of separation could fuel a tendency towards disconnection of parenthood and partnership. Up to now we already see signs of this disconnecting tendency in a trend towards family life after divorce in which co-parenting by the two ex-partners is institutionalized legally. A by-product of this trend could be a diffusion towards other situations. Couples could increasingly choose for parenthood without living together. Likewise, single parenthood among divorced people could spread towards parenthood without having an intimate relationship with a partner.

We also see a diminishing difference in partnership behavior between same-sex couples and two-sex couples. Both choose between marriage, cohabitation with or without formal registration, and a registered partnership. Some have children, either of their own or from previous relationships or donors.

One thing we see no sign of as yet is a declining tendency of people to form partner relationships at all in their life courses, or a declining importance people attach to partner relationships. But we cannot know for sure that such tendencies will never appear: they might form a future phase in individualization trends.

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Figures

Figure 1. Number of marriages in the Netherlands, 1960-2010

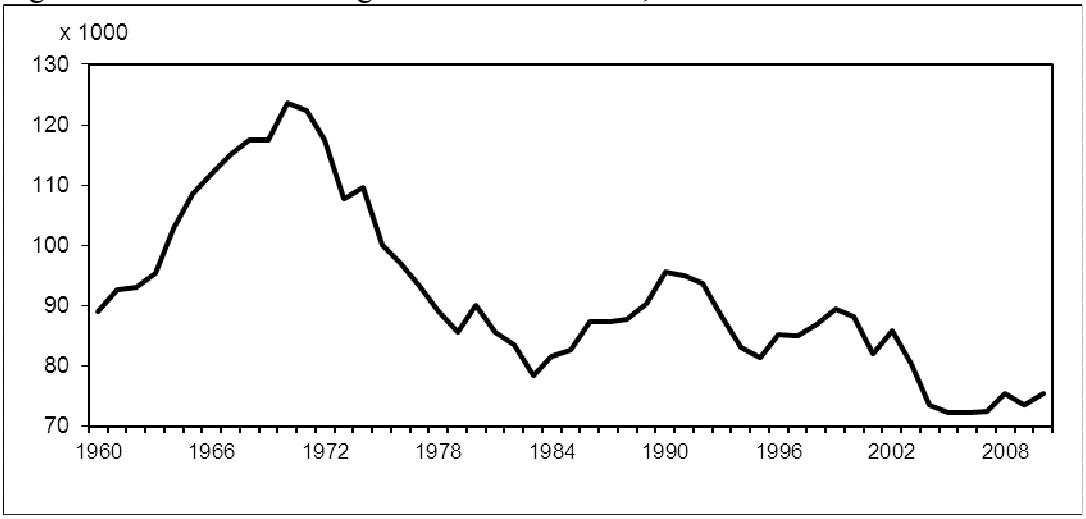
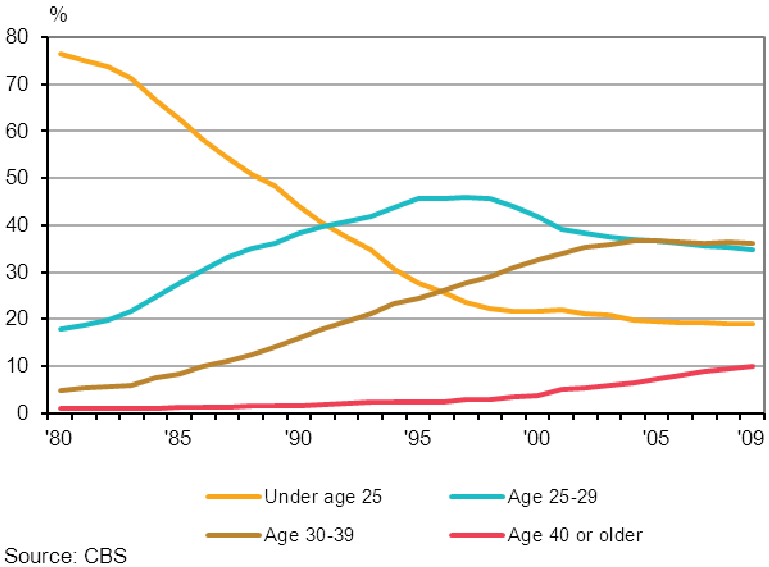


Figure 2.Women's age at first marriage, the Netherlands, 1980-2009



Source: CBS

Figure 3. Share of marrieds by age-categories in the Netherlands, 1970 and 2010

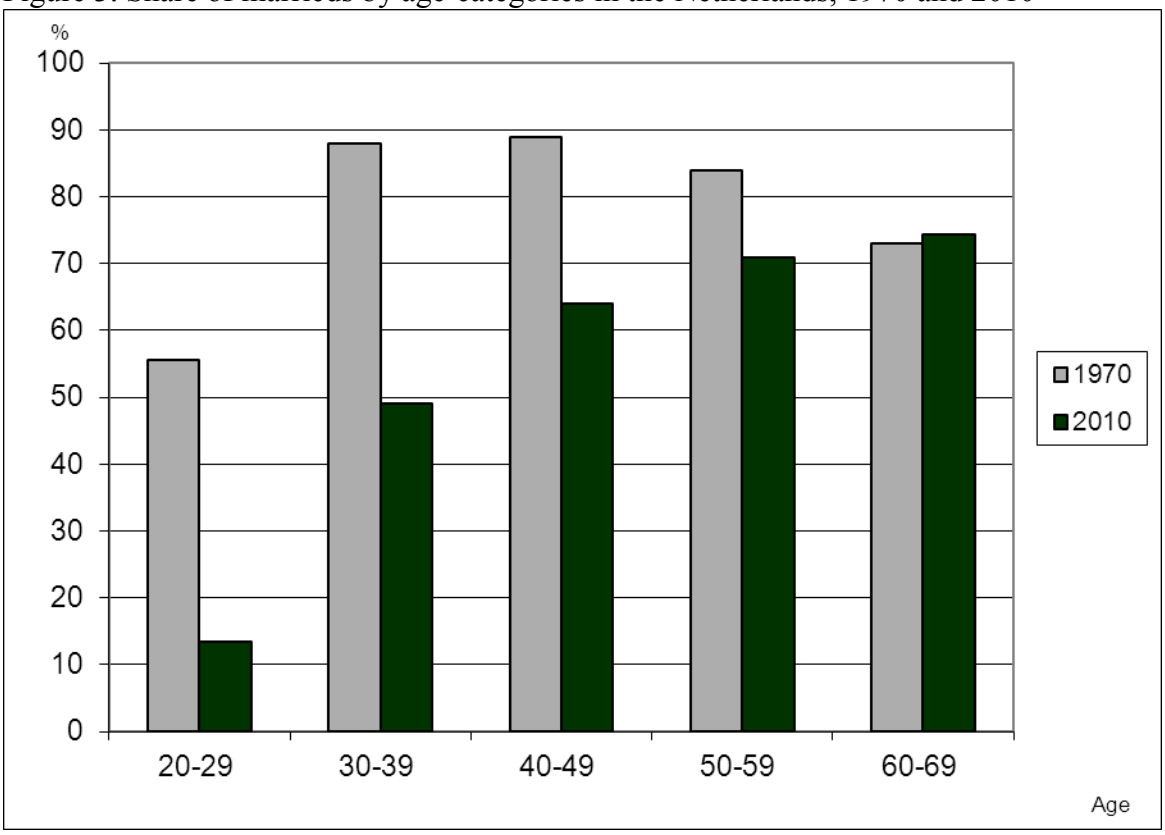


Figure 4. Married couples (including registered partnerships) in the Netherlands, 2010

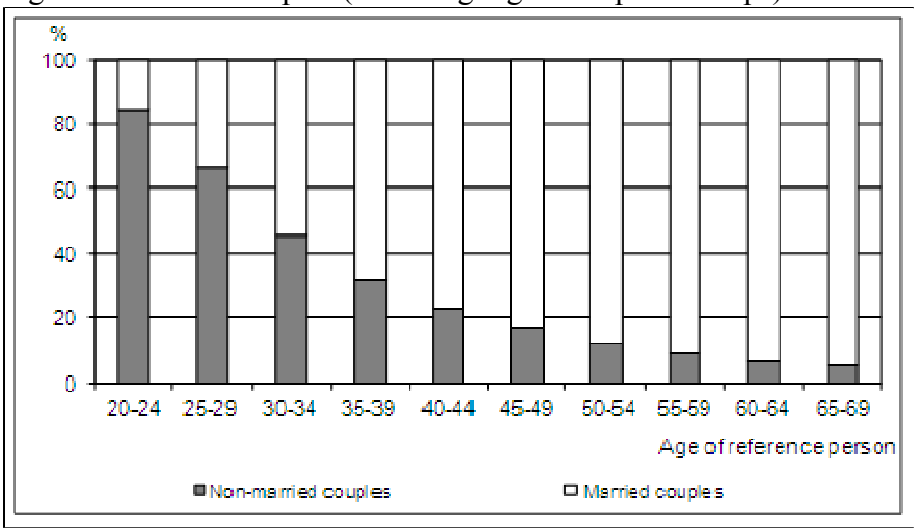


Figure 5. Intentions to marry among cohabiting couples, the Netherlands 2008
Source: OG2008

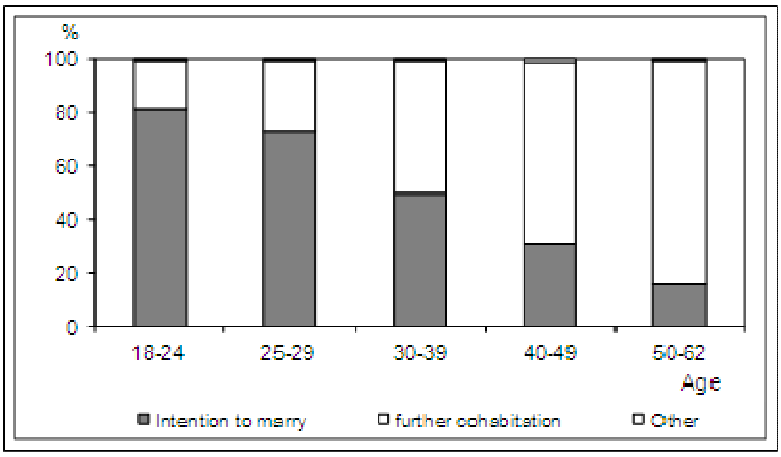


Figure 6. Cohabitation contracts among cohabiting couples by age, the Netherlands 2008
Source: OG2008

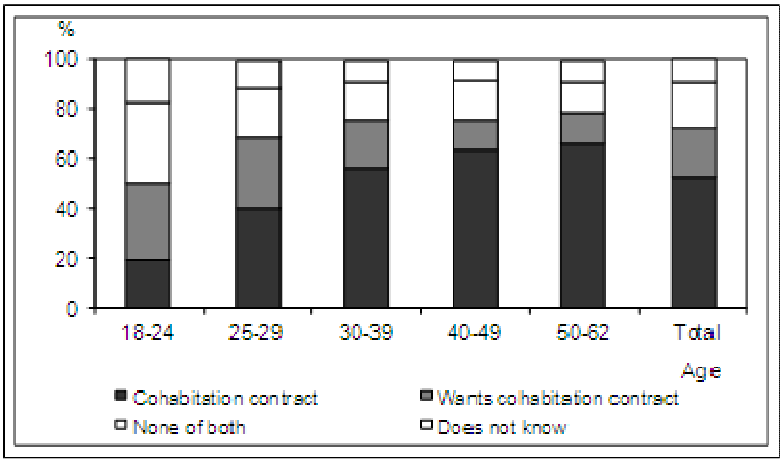


Figure 7. Percentage children born to unmarried mothers in the Netherlands, 1960-2010

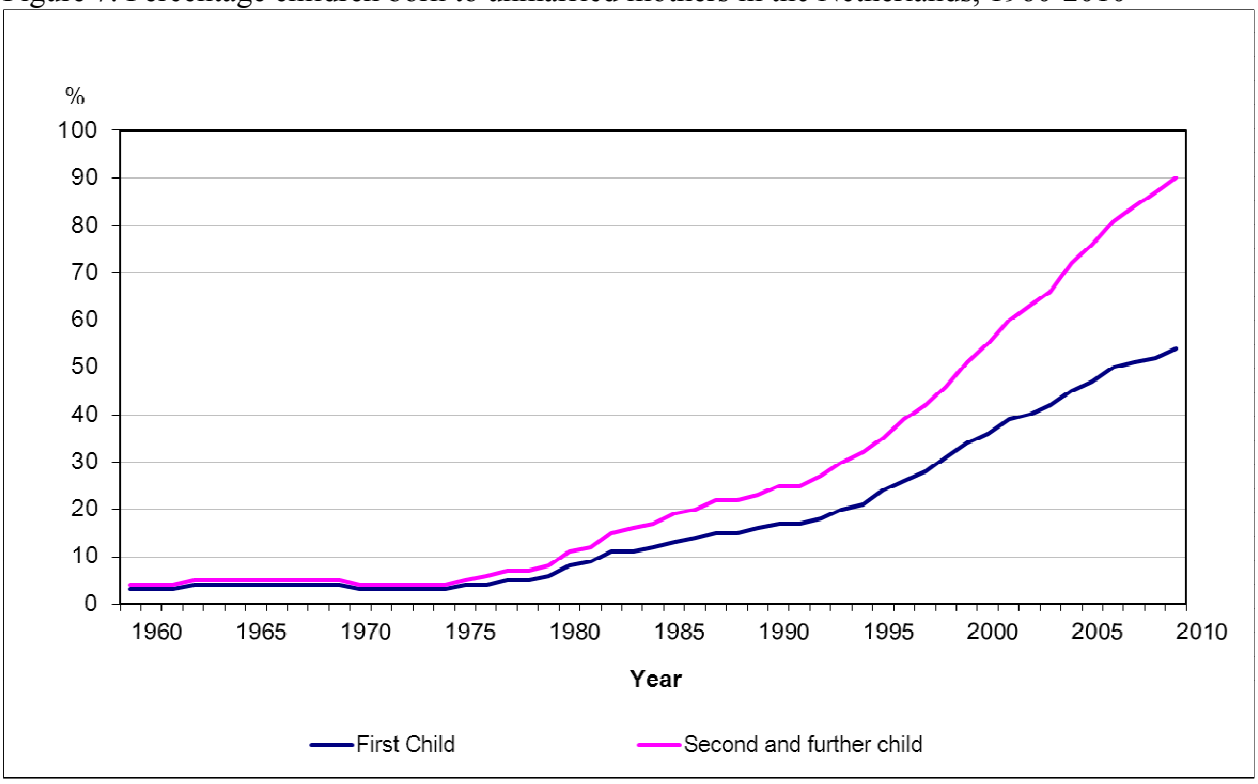


Figure 8. Divorces and flash divorces, the Netherlands, 1960-2010