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# *Strategies of Nest-Leavers: 'Settling Down' Versus Flexibility*

CLARA H. MULDER AND DORIEN MANTING

**ABSTRACT** In this paper the concept of strategy is used to develop hypotheses about the way joint careers, namely the migration, housing, and household careers, are shaped for young nest-leavers. Two main strategies are distinguished: one towards 'settling down' and the other towards 'flexibility'.

Data, derived from three Housing Needs Surveys, conducted in 1981, 1985, and 1989 by The Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics, have been arranged in such a way that young people could be followed over a four-year period after leaving their parental home. In this way, event-history analyses could be used for gaining insight into the consistency of degrees of flexibility in the different life domains of the individuals involved.

Even though only three cohorts of nest-leavers are observed, the last leaving the parental home only eight years later (cohort 1985) than the first (cohort 1977), remarkable behavioural changes have been found. For example, the most common pattern has changed from marrying at home-leaving and having children within four years to leaving home single and remaining so for the next four years.

## INTRODUCTION

Many events which have great impact on the later life course occur in the period around young adulthood, a relatively short span of the life course (Marini, 1985; Willekens, 1991; De Jong Gierveld *et al.*, 1993). Some of the events characterizing this period are exit from the parental home, union formation, establishment of a household of one's own, and entry into parenthood. It is the period in which individuals become less committed to the family of origin and its values and start making their own commitments.

Leaving the parental home is a very important event in this transition period because it marks the beginning of the young adult's own migration, household, and housing career (migration is defined here as all changes of usual residence). By leaving the parental home independence is gained in several life spheres—for example in daily consumer behaviour.

In The Netherlands, as in other Western countries, the past few decades have shown major changes in the timing of exit from school,

job-entry, home-leaving, marriage, and child-bearing (Manting *et al.*, 1992). The determinants of (changes in) the timing of the distinct life events in the transition period around young adulthood have been studied fruitfully from a life-course perspective. In this paper we focus on the connection between various life events in the transition period rather than on a specific life event. We take the event of leaving home as the starting-point of the transition period and study subsequent events in the household and family career (marriage and childbirth) and the housing career (migration and the transition to home-ownership).

The central assumption behind our analyses is that people leaving home follow strategies in the sense that they co-ordinate the various careers in the life course, they behave purposefully, and they have a perspective beyond the short term.

In the next section we present two hypotheses relating to types of strategies and changes over time in strategies chosen. The third section describes our data-set and the methods we employ. Next we present the results of analyses

of the respondents' living arrangements immediately after leaving home and the transitions of marriage, first childbirth, and migration and home-ownership. The fifth section discusses the combination of transitions as 'pathways' of nest-leavers, and in the final section we conclude with a discussion of the results.

#### STRATEGIES OF NEST-LEAVERS: HYPOTHESES

In the literature on migration and nest-leaving in The Netherlands, it has been established that the timing of nest-leaving and reasons for leaving home differ strongly between sub-groups of the population. The highly educated are younger when leaving home than are the less well-educated (Baanders *et al.*, 1989). The reasons for leaving are closely related to age and sex (De Jong Gierveld *et al.*, 1991; Latten and Vermunt, 1991). In a study of age-specific motives for migration in The Netherlands in the early 1980s, Mulder (1991) showed that education is an important reason for moving, especially for the very young independent movers aged 18–21, a large majority of whom are presumably nest-leavers. The proportion leaving home to live with a partner increases with age; but after age 25 this proportion decreases again (cf. Crommentuijn and Hooimeijer, 1991). Women leave home more often than men to form a couple, and on average do so at a younger age (Baanders *et al.*, 1989). Goetgeluk and colleagues (1991) observe that tenure type after leaving varies with reasons for leaving. They show that nest-leavers leaving home for enrolment in higher education or to accept a job opportunity frequently start their housing careers in rented multi-family dwellings or in furnished rooms, dormitories, and so forth.

These findings suggest that, at the moment of nest-leaving, consistent patterns can be distinguished in behaviour in three inter-dependent careers: the educational/occupational career, the household career, and the housing career. Moreover, De Jong Gierveld and colleagues (1993) have shown that within one of these careers, namely the household career, consistency can be found between initial nest-

leaving behaviour and subsequent union-formation behaviour, both closely linked to the degree of individualism in attitudes. In this paper, we interpret consistency within and between careers as the behavioural outcomes of strategies. By a strategy we mean consistent decision-making on the basis of a more or less conscious idea of what life should be like on more than the short term. Our concept of strategy resembles Willekens's (1991) concept of a 'coordinating process' organizing activities in parallel careers. A major advantage of the concept of strategy is that it allows the formulation of hypotheses on the way joint careers are shaped. Two central hypotheses pertaining to the housing and household career and their interconnections form the starting-points of our analyses.

Our first central hypothesis is that there are two different types of strategies for nest-leavers which lead to consistent patterns in the degree of flexibility in behaviour both within the household and housing career and in their interconnection.

The first strategy is directed towards 'settling down' in the sense of making long-term commitments in the household and housing career. We assume that different levels of commitment are associated with different steps in these careers. Sharing a residence with a partner means that one has to incorporate the daily-life needs and wishes of the partner within one's own. Marriage involves a higher level of commitment in that it creates legal barriers to union disruption. The next step, parenthood, involves an even greater commitment in that it is almost certainly life-long, especially for women. Levels of commitment also vary with tenure type: home-ownership requires a higher level of commitment than tenancy in the sense of long-term financial obligations. Occupancy of 'other' types of housing (dormitories, furnished rooms, etc.) can be seen as the opposite of settling down. We expect to find a strong relationship between commitments in the household and the housing careers. The strategy towards 'settling down' will be chosen more frequently by people with family-oriented attitudes than by those with individualistic attitudes.

The second strategy is directed towards remaining flexible and postponing 'settling down'. It is followed by people with individualistic attitudes who attach a high value to keeping their options open. It is also followed by people who, even temporarily, give priority to their educational and/or occupational career over the household and housing career: they are investing in human capital, and have neither time nor resources left for making commitments in the household and housing career. People who follow this strategy want to avoid the considerable emotional or financial costs generally associated with undoing long-term commitments, and the restrictions commitments place on shaping their future biographies (cf. Birg, 1987).

In further career steps after nest-leaving, migration is in some cases a sign of flexibility, in others a sign of 'settling down'. We view migration as instrumental to other careers in the life course, not an end in itself but rather a means to an end (Willekens, 1987; Mulder, 1992). Migration may be related not only to the household or housing careers, but also to the educational or occupational careers. Migration related to the latter two careers will typically be undertaken by people who have not yet settled down in the household and housing careers, but are instead busy investing in human capital; mainly the younger, the singles, and those enrolled in education. Migration by renters to an owned dwelling, however, is clearly a sign of settling down in the housing career.

Higher education will be associated with individualism (Ganzeboom, 1988) and with giving priority to the educational and/or occupational career over the household and housing careers, and so with choosing a flexible strategy. There is also reason to expect that young home-leavers will often choose this strategy: it will take them more time to build up the financial resources required for home-ownership, and they will feel they have more time left to start a family at an appropriate moment in the life course.

Our second hypothesis pertains to changes through time in strategies of home-leavers. We hypothesize that strategies towards flexibility

have become increasingly popular, whereas strategies towards 'settling down' show decreasing popularity. This shift in strategies is hypothesized as a reflection of a long-term trend of individualization in Western societies: the increasing centrality of individual goal attainment; that is, the individual's right and freedom to define both goals and the means of achieving them (Lesthaeghe, 1983). We expect that people increasingly leave home to live alone, and that people who do so are increasingly likely to stay in this situation for a few years. As stated by Goldscheider and Waite (1987), leaving home alone is a new option allowing young people the independence and autonomy of adulthood while postponing the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood. Accordingly, we expect the proportion leaving home to marry to decrease. The people who do so will still be those aiming to have children and become home-owners within a few years, thus following a strategy towards 'settling down'. However, they will increasingly become a minority. We hypothesize that, to a large extent, the changes of the past few decades in the timing of events in the period around young adulthood (the increase in mean age at leaving home, marriage, and first childbirth) can be traced back to this shift in strategies.

The shift in strategies will partly be caused by changes in population composition: as participation in higher education rises among the nest-leavers, and enrolment in education is prolonged accordingly, so will the proportion choosing flexible strategies (see the first hypothesis). We do expect, however, an autonomous shift towards flexible strategies in addition to this.

It should be borne in mind that the choice of a specific strategy need not always be guided by a preference for it; individual resources and constraints may play a role as well. For example, not everyone with family-oriented attitudes will succeed in finding a marriage partner. Besides, behaviour is guided not only by individual strategies and circumstances, but also by macro-level opportunities and constraints. Behavioural changes through time may therefore be related to changes in opportunities and constraints

at the macro level: the transition to home-ownership in particular has much to do with opportunity structures (e.g. the situation in the housing market).

#### DATA AND METHODS

We derived our data from the three Housing Needs Surveys (*Woningbehoefte-onderzoeken*) conducted in 1981, 1985, and 1989 by The Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics. Sub-samples of the three surveys were combined and analysed together in a pooled sample.

We selected those respondents who reported leaving home for the first time four years before the year of interview, which permitted the reconstruction of an approximately four-year period in the life course starting with the event of leaving home. This period is short, but, given the fact that a transition period is studied in which many events occur, this was not considered to constitute a problem.

From those interviewed in 1981, we selected those who left the parental home in 1977. From the surveys of 1985 and 1989 we selected those leaving the parental home in 1981 and 1985 respectively. This gave us three cohorts of nest-leavers, each four years apart: each cohort was followed over four years and spaced four years apart. We decided to exclude those leaving home after the age of 35 (3.4 per cent of our sample), because we expected them to be a special group. A total of 3754 respondents remained. Of those, 37 per cent belonged to those leaving home in 1977 compared with 32 and 31 per cent leaving home in 1981 and 1985. The difference comes mainly from differences in sample size. The sample should be representative of the 200 000 people leaving home for the first time in each of these years.<sup>1</sup>

The Housing Needs Surveys contain information on year of birth, leaving the parental home for the first time, (last) marriage, (last) divorce or death of spouse, and birth of children who are part of the respondent's household at the moment of interview. In addition to the question about year of home-leaving, respondents were asked whether they left home alone, with a partner, or with others.<sup>2</sup> It has been assumed that the oldest child in the household is

the respondent's own oldest child. All this information on household states and events in the housing career could be combined in order to construct a time-varying variable 'household state'. This variable is updated for each year of observation. The timing of cohabitation, however, is not completely documented. Initial singles inviting a cohabiting partner to move in can therefore not be updated into the cohabiting category until they move themselves. If they do not move, they are not observed as cohabiting until at the moment of interview.

One of the categories in the household-state variable is denoted 'marrying'. People are placed in this category in their year of marriage. This category has been used in order to measure 'synchronization' effects of marriage on migration (Mulder, 1993; Mulder & Wagner, 1993). Information on migration refers to the year of the interview and the three preceding years. It should be noted that consequently, subsequent migrations by the selected respondents within their year of home-leaving are not recorded. Tenure type (rented, ownership, other) at home-leaving could be reconstructed for those respondents who did not report more than one residential move. Those who moved more than once (between 3.0 and 3.6 per cent in the three samples) were assumed not to have started in a dwelling they owned.

Survey questions on other topics only refer to the moment of interview. It was therefore not considered appropriate to use information on working status and income, because these are subject to rapid change, especially in the transition period following home-leaving. This implies that behaviour in the household and housing careers cannot be linked with behaviour in the respondents' work or income careers with the data at hand.

Questions about the highest educational level reached allow for a reconstruction of a low and a high level of education at (approximately) the moment of leaving home. The respondent's school enrolment history is not measured, so that level of education also has to serve as a proxy variable for school enrolment. This seems reasonable because the higher the level of education, the longer it takes to finish education. It seems likely that the combination of home-

leaving at a young age and high education is often connected with participation in post-secondary education.

The variable 'age' refers to age at the moment of nest-leaving. This means that the respondents remain in the same age group during the full four years of observation. This has been done in order to make a distinction between earlier and later nest-leavers. This distinction was considered more important than the exact age at making a transition. The border between early and late was set at age 21 (up to and including age 21 versus above age 21). This is approximately the median age at home-leaving in the sample.

The initial positions immediately after nest-leaving were analysed using hierarchical log-linear models for cell frequencies (Bishop *et al.*, 1975). The units of analysis are individuals. Subsequent transitions were analysed with hierarchical logit models applied as discrete-time event-history models (Allison, 1982; Yamaguchi, 1991). A data-file of person-year observations was constructed in order to apply this method. These person-year observations are the units of analysis. The dependent variable may have the values 'no event' or 'event'. The other variables are categorical. The analysis includes only those respondents who are 'at risk' of experiencing an event. This means that, after marriage, the respondent is removed from the population at risk of marriage; the same holds for first childbirth. Since migration is a repeatable event, no removal from the risk set takes place in the migration analysis.

Separate models were estimated for the events of marriage, first childbirth, and migration. Furthermore, a logit model was estimated for the choice between renting and owning a dwelling by moving renters.

The fitting and estimation procedure was the same for both types of models. First, we followed a backward-selection procedure. Starting from a saturated model including all the interactions between variables, those interaction effects not contributing to the model significantly in likelihood ratio chi square at the 5 per cent level were deleted stepwise. Secondly, we estimated the parameters of the selected model. The parameters are coded so that one category of each variable is the reference

category and is assigned the parameter value zero. This is referred to as dummy coding (see Hagenaars, 1990: 36). A positive parameter value denotes an over-representation (model of cell frequencies) or positive effect (logit model); a negative value denotes the reverse. In interaction effects the parameters are related to the reference category in one variable. A positive parameter for the category 'highly educated, older' denotes a positive effect in relation to both 'highly educated, younger' and 'less well-educated, older'. This implies that the effect for 'less well-educated, younger' is also positive.

#### THE INITIAL POSITION AND SUBSEQUENT TRANSITIONS OF NEST-LEAVERS

Before presenting the results of the analysis of the initial position of the three cohorts of nest-leavers in the household and housing career, and the analysis of subsequent transitions, the two general hypotheses are re-formulated as concrete expectations.

##### *Expectations*

Our first hypothesis encompasses three expectations with regard to consistent behaviour. The first is that flexibility and 'settling down' in the household and housing careers are associated with each other. The second is that those making a flexible start in the household or housing career will also show flexibility in further career steps for a few years. The third is that it is especially the young and the highly educated who choose strategies favouring flexibility.

From the first expectation it follows that people leaving home married will more often become home-owners at the same time than people leaving home to live alone or to cohabit. Occupancy of 'other' types of housing will mainly be confined to singles. Singles are expected to move more frequently than married people, but to buy a home less often. For singles, many of the moves will be related to and occur at the same time as (synchronize with) household formation: we expect a 'synchronization effect' of marriage. The synchronization effects of cohabitation were not measured since

the data did not permit an update of the initial singles into the cohabiting category. Contrary to other moves by singles, this specific type of move is a sign of 'settling down' and will often concern an owned dwelling. We will therefore treat those who marry as a separate category and denote them as 'marrying'. People with children will migrate less but buy more often than others.

From the second expectation it follows that those who live alone will run a lower risk of marriage than those who cohabit. Many cohabitators start to cohabit with the intention of marrying in the future. Also, when leaving home without a partner it takes time to find one, let alone marry one. The risk of having a first child will be lowest for single women, and it will be much lower for cohabiting than for married women (see also Vermunt, 1991). Those starting in 'other' types of dwellings will move more often, while home-owners, on the other hand, will move rarely (see also, among others, Courgeau, 1985; Wagner, 1989).

The third expectation implies that the younger and the highly educated are hypothesized to be less likely to marry, have fewer children, migrate more, be less likely to buy and more likely to start in 'other' types of dwelling than the older and less well-educated. Research has shown that educational enrolment highly influences the risk of marriage, both for cohabiting couples (Manting, 1993) and for young singles (Liefbroer, 1991). Higher education has often been associated with a higher migration propensity (Courgeau, 1985; Wagner, 1989). In the period of the life course we have chosen to study we expect that this higher migration propensity is mainly associated with enrolment in education. We should therefore expect a negative effect of education on home-ownership.

The second hypothesis leads to the expectation that, across the three cohorts of nest-leavers, people will increasingly opt for flexibility. We expect a growing proportion of people to leave home to live alone. If they leave home to live with a partner, we increasingly expect them to do so while unmarried. Transitions to marriage, parenthood, and home-ownership will become less common. It is now common knowledge that, in recent years, first marriages have been postponed (for The Netherlands, see De Beer,

1989). Our expectation is that this postponement of marriage is also apparent across cohorts of nest-leavers. Given the instrumental nature of migration, the hypothesis does not directly lead to an expectation of changes in migration behaviour other than those related to changes in population composition.

#### *Initial Position at the Moment of Leaving the Parental Home*

In accordance with the evidence presented above, the women in our sample leave home to form a relationship, whether married or unmarried, more frequently than men do and on average when younger. The average age at nest-leaving observed from our data does increase to some extent. For males, it increases from 23.0 in 1977 to 23.2 in 1985. For females, it increases from 21.1 to 21.4. The proportion with a higher educational level increases across the years (28.1, 29.1, and 37.5 per cent), indicating a change in composition of the nest-leaving cohorts.

In Table 1<sup>3</sup> a strong association can be seen between initial tenure and initial household position. Only a small minority of those leaving home as singles start as home-owners. Of those who leave home to cohabit, the proportion of home-owners is about twice as high. The proportion of the married who buy a dwelling on leaving home is approximately three times higher than the proportion of owners among the cohabiting starters. The log-linear model<sup>4</sup> (Table 2) shows that this difference is significant (note the interaction between initial household position and initial tenure). Our finding conforms with that of Rindfuss and Van den Heuvel (1990), who found that in the United States cohabitators are more similar to the single than to the married in their likelihood of owning a dwelling. As we expected, it is the singles who are most likely to start in 'other' types of housing.

The interactions between education and initial household position and between education, age, and initial household position show that, as we expected, the highly educated—especially the younger ones—do not start to cohabit as often, and marry even less often, than do the less well-educated—especially the older ones. From the interaction between education, initial household

TABLE 1 Initial household position and initial tenure of nest-leavers

Initial position	Initial tenure				Total
	Rent	Own	Other	>1 move	
<i>Cohort of nest-leavers: 1977</i>					
	125	26	295	33	479
Alone	26.1	5.4	61.6	6.9	34.1
	402	258	79		739
Married	54.1	34.7	10.6	—	52.9
	91	22	64	5	182
Cohabit	50.0	12.1	35.2	2.7	13.0
	618	306	438	38	1400
Total	44.0	21.8	31.2	3.0	100.0
<i>Cohort of nest-leavers: 1981</i>					
	124	29	241	31	425
Alone	29.2	6.8	56.7	7.3	35.7
	257	194	57	5	513
Married	50.1	37.8	11.1	1.0	43.0
	164	30	54	6	254
Cohabit	64.6	11.8	21.3	2.4	21.3
	545	253	352	42	1192
Total	45.7	21.2	29.5	3.5	100.0
<i>Cohort of nest-leavers: 1985</i>					
	212	43	249	32	536
Alone	39.6	8.0	46.5	6.0	46.3
	150	138	25		313
Married	47.5	43.7	7.9	—	27.3
	194	58	47	7	306
Cohabit	63.4	19.0	15.4	2.3	26.4
	556	239	321	39	1155
Total	48.0	20.6	27.7	3.6	100.0

— = Too few observations, left out of table.

position, and initial tenure, it can be seen that it is especially the single, highly educated—who are often still enrolled in education—who start in ‘other’ housing. The interaction between age and initial household position demonstrates that, compared with the young, older home-leavers do indeed marry more often and start less often as singles. The interaction between age and initial tenure shows that the older home-leavers buy more often than the younger ones, and start less often in ‘other’ housing. From the third-order effect of age by initial household position by initial tenure it can be seen that older singles in particular buy more often than young

TABLE 2 Log-linear model of initial position of nest-leavers

		Coeff.	Z-value <sup>a</sup>
Age > 21	(Age ≤ 21 = *)	0.341	6.262
High education	(Low education = 0)	-1.020	-18.999
Cohort 1981	(Cohort 1977 = 0)	-0.044	-0.863
Cohort 1985		-0.023	-0.452
Initpos = married	(Single = 0)	0.029	0.437
Initpos = cohabit		-0.510	-6.838
Initten = own	(Rent = 0)	-1.291	-18.266
Initten = other		-0.753	-13.484
Educ · age	(High, > 21)	0.017	0.191
Educ · initpos	(High, married)	-1.109	-9.177
	(High, cohabit)	-0.847	-6.224
Age · initpos	(> 21, married)	0.788	6.086
	(> 21, cohabit)	0.299	2.124
Educ · initten	(High, own)	-0.168	-1.307
	(High, other)	0.195	1.763
Initpos · initten	(Married, own)	1.415	8.713
	(Married, other)	-1.977	-14.966
	(Cohabit, own)	0.189	0.964
	(Cohabit, other)	-1.373	-11.039
Age · initten	(> 21, own)	0.931	7.427
	(> 21, other)	-0.673	-7.085
Cohort · initten	(1981, own)	0.058	0.542
	(1981, other)	-0.191	-1.805
	(1985, own)	0.204	1.802
	(1985, other)	-0.597	-5.467
Cohort · initpos	(1981, married)	-0.406	-3.690
	(1981, cohabit)	0.367	2.876
	(1985, married)	-1.372	-12.003
	(1985, cohabit)	0.179	1.453
Age · cohort	(> 21, 1981)	0.104	1.189
	(> 21, 1985)	0.317	3.461
Educ · cohort	(High, 1981)	-0.001	-0.015
	(High, 1985)	0.274	2.937
Educ · initpos · initten	(High, married, own)	0.333	1.199
	(High, married, other)	-0.266	-1.040
	(High, cohabit, own)	-0.376	-1.049
	(High, cohabit, other)	-0.657	-2.683
Educ · age · initpos	(High, > 21, married)	0.826	4.185
	(High, > 21, cohabit)	0.604	2.820
Age · initpos · initten	(> 21, married, own)	-0.523	-1.740
	(> 21, married, other)	0.721	3.312
	(> 21, cohabit, own)	-0.658	-1.862
	(> 21, cohabit, other)	1.358	6.068

Notes: Variables in the model: Age (≤ 21, > 21), Cohort (cohort of nest-leavers), Educ (education), Initpos (initial household position), Initten (initial tenure).

Likelihood Ratio Chi-square 90.496,

DF = 64, P = 0.016.

N = 3754.

<sup>a</sup>Z > 1.96 or < -1.96 means parameter is significant at 5% level.

singles, whereas they start in 'other' housing much less often than young singles. It can be concluded that there is consistency in the sense that the level of flexibility in the housing career is closely linked with the level of flexibility in the household career.

As we expected, fewer and fewer people 'settle down' in the household career at the moment of leaving home. In Table 1 it can be seen that the proportion of single starters in 1977 and 1981 is somewhat more than one-third. This proportion increases to 46 per cent for those leaving home in 1985. Whereas more than half of all nest-leavers in 1977 left home married, this has declined to only 27 per cent among those leaving home in 1985. The proportion starting as part of a cohabiting couple nearly doubled between 1977 and 1985. The most common initial living arrangement at nest-leaving has changed from marriage (53 per cent in 1977) to single-hood (46 per cent in 1985). The model results confirm this finding (see the interaction between cohort and initial household position). This means that the shift over the cohorts is still visible after controlling for education. This indicates that it cannot be attributed solely to a rise in educational level and prolonged educational enrolment—at least if the assumption holds that our variable for education largely captures these two factors.

There is no tendency towards a decline in 'settling down' behaviour in terms of buying a dwelling at home-leaving; the proportion choosing this option is about the same for the three sets of nest-leavers. The transition to home-ownership is possibly influenced more by opportunity structures than by people's inclination to settle down. We elaborate further on this matter below. However, the proportion starting in 'other' housing declines slightly, and this decline is significant when controlling for the other variables (see the interaction between cohort and initial tenure). This might result from special building programmes for young starters.

#### *The Transition to Marriage*

The transition to marriage has been studied for those leaving home to live alone or to cohabit. Although it would have been interesting to

incorporate the timing of cohabitation, our data do not permit this.

From Table 3, it is evident that the proportion married four years after leaving home is lower for single nest-leavers than for those leaving home to cohabit. Approximately one-fifth of the single starters marry at some point during the next four years compared with more than half of the cohabiting starters. We also see that one-tenth of those leaving home to cohabit are single after four years. The number of legal divorces is much smaller; this is an indication that the cohabiting status has a higher degree of reversibility than the married status. The number of dissolved unions is too small to permit further analysis. A small proportion of the nest-leavers have returned to the parental home; for the single starters, this proportion is somewhat higher than for the others (between 10 and 15 per cent).

The selected logit model (Table 4) fits the data well ( $P=0.47$ ). The fact that females leave home more often to marry than males do lead us to expect subsequent marriage behaviour to differ between the sexes as well. Sex was therefore included in the model as a control variable. It appears that females also have a slightly higher risk of marriage in the four years after leaving home.

The highly significant effect of initial household position on the risk of marriage shows that a flexible start in the household career is indeed linked to flexibility in further steps. Controlling for the other variables, the odds of marriage for initial cohabiters are  $\exp(1.296) = 3.7$  times as high as for single starters.

In accordance with our expectation, we find that the highly educated are less likely to marry in the four years after leaving home. The same is true for the younger home-leavers. The interaction between age and education tells us that the younger, highly educated have a low probability of marrying: at higher ages, the negative parameter for high education (main effect) is offset by a positive parameter from the interaction effect. This supports the idea that it is more the enrolment than the level of education that decreases the risk, because at lower ages a higher proportion of the highly educated are still undergoing education.

TABLE 3 *Initial household position and current household position of nest-leavers*

Initial position	Current household position						Total
	Alone	Cohab.	Married no child	Married + child	Other <sup>a</sup>	Back home	
<i>Cohort of nest-leavers: 1977</i>							
Alone	217 45.3	78 16.3	95 19.8	25 5.2	6 1.2	58 12.1	479 34.1
Married	—	—	296 39.8	434 58.4	—	—	730 52.9
Cohabit	—	58 31.9	61 33.5	49 26.9	8 4.3	—	176 13.0
Total	217 15.9	136 10.0	452 32.2	508 36.2	14 1.3	58 4.5	1385 100.0
<i>Cohort of nest-leavers: 1981</i>							
Alone	218 51.3	66 15.5	48 11.3	26 6.1	—	65 15.3	423 35.7
Married	7 1.4	—	209 40.7	289 56.3	5 1.0	—	510 43.0
Cohabit	15 5.9	77 30.3	81 31.9	65 25.6	7 2.8	9 3.5	254 21.3
Total	240 20.1	143 12.0	338 28.4	380 31.9	12 1.2	74 6.5	1187 100.0
<i>Cohort of nest-leavers: 1985</i>							
Alone	276 51.5	95 17.7	63 11.8	37 6.9	10 1.9	55 10.3	536 46.3
Married	—	—	124 39.2	183 57.9	—	—	307 27.3
Cohabit	15 4.9	114 37.3	89 29.1	65 21.2	9 2.9	14 4.6	306 26.4
Total	291 25.5	209 18.1	276 23.8	285 24.6	19 1.9	69 6.0	1149 100.0

<sup>a</sup>Other = cohabiting with children or lone parent.

—Too few observations, left out of table.

TABLE 4 *Logit model of the transition to marriage for initial singles and cohabitators*

		Coeff.	Z-value <sup>a</sup>
High education	(Low education = 0)	-0.343	-3.715
Initial cohabitators	(Initial singles = 0)	1.296	15.147
Cohort 1981	(Cohort 1977 = 0)	-0.281	-2.714
Cohort 1985		-0.446	-4.419
Women	(Men = 0)	0.255	2.957
Age > 21	(Age ≤ 21 = 0)	0.735	7.724
Educ · age	(High, > 21)	0.708	3.900

Notes: Variables in the model: Age, Cohort, Educ, Sex, Initpos. Likelihood Ratio Chi-square = 40.099, DF = 40, P = 0.466. No. of person-year observations: 7553. No. of transitions: 695.

<sup>a</sup>Z > 1.96 or < -1.96 means parameter is significant at 5% level.

Across the cohorts of nest-leavers, the proportion married after four years declines both for initial cohabitators and initial singles (Table 3). For cohabitators, there is a continuous trend from the oldest to the youngest cohort. For singles, the proportion married after four years only decreases between the 1977 and 1981 cohorts. The results of the logit model show that for cohorts 1981 and 1985 the odds of marriage are  $\exp(-0.281) = 0.8$  and  $\exp(-0.446) = 0.6$  times as low as for cohort 1977. As in the model of initial positions, this shift cannot be attributed to the rise of the proportion of highly educated people in the later cohorts. However, according to the logit model, there is no significant difference between initial singles and initial cohabitators in the degree of decline in marriage risk when controlling for the other variables (the effect 'cohort by initial household position' does not significantly contribute to the model). In brief, individuals marry less often at the moment of nest-leaving and in addition unmarried people have lower marriage risks in the next four years.

#### *The Transition to Parenthood*

There is a marked difference between initial cohabitators and initial married persons with respect to how many become parents within four years (Table 3).<sup>5</sup> Only about one-quarter to 30 per cent of the cohabiting starters have entered parenthood compared with more than half of the married people. Only a minority (approximately 6–9 per cent) of the singles enter parenthood. Of the cohabiting and single starters who have a child within four years, the large majority (about 90 per cent of the cohabitators, and about three-quarters of the singles who enter parenthood) also marry. This is an indication of the fact that marriage and parenthood are still closely linked in The Netherlands.

Those who leave home to live alone are left out of the logit model (Table 5). They have a very low risk of having a first child in the four years after leaving home (see above) creating zero cells in the logit model. A parsimonious model could be fitted including only initial household position and educational level ( $P = 0.61$ ).

The effect of initial household position is highly significant. Married home-leavers have  $\exp(1.024) = 2.8$  times higher odds of entering

TABLE 5 *Logit model of the transition to parenthood for initial cohabitators and married*

	Coeff.	Z-value <sup>a</sup>
High education (Low education = 0)	-0.464	-4.956
Initial married (Initial cohabitators = 0)	1.024	12.003

Notes: Variables in the model: Age, Cohort, Educ, Initpos. LR Chi-square = 18.543, DF = 21,  $P = 0.614$ . No. of person-year observations: 7205. No. of transitions: 985.

<sup>a</sup>Z > 1.96 or < -1.96 means parameter is significant at 5% level.

parenthood in the four years after leaving home than those leaving home to cohabit.

In accordance with our expectations, a higher level of education lowers the risk of a first childbirth. Contrary to our expectation, the effect of age is not significant. In our opinion, this suggests that once people have left the parental home, it is not so much their age that influences the risk (e.g. younger persons have a lower risk of having a first birth) but their household type (single persons have a lower risk and are very often young).

In Table 3 we see that the proportion of single and cohabiting starters with at least one child after four years diminishes across the nest-leaving cohorts. However, married home-leavers have not postponed the transition to parenthood. Apparently, the married home-leavers are a special group: their proportion has declined from a majority to a minority, but they still have children at the same rate. The results of the logit model show that, for cohabiting and married starters, there is no significant cohort effect. It is possible that the decline in risk among the cohabitators is caused by the changes in educational composition across the nest-leaving cohorts. Contrary to our second hypothesis, there is thus no 'autonomous' postponement of the transition to parenthood in addition to changes in participation in higher education.

#### *Migration and the Transition to Home-Ownership*

The majority of home-leavers move at least once in the four-year period after home-leaving. Of

TABLE 6 *Initial household position of nest-leavers and number of moves*

Initial position	Cohort of nest-leavers											
	1977				1981				1985			
	Number of moves											
	None	One	>1	Total	None	One	>1	Total	None	One	>1	Total
Alone	136	310	33	479	155	239	31	425	205	299	32	536
	28.4	64.7	6.9	34.1	36.5	56.2	7.3	35.7	38.2	55.8	6.0	46.3
Married	449	290		739	300	208	5	513	191	122		313
	60.4	39.0	—	52.9	58.5	40.5	1.0	43.0	60.4	38.6	—	27.3
Cohabit	71	106	5	182	100	148	6	254	138	161	7	306
	39.0	58.2	2.7	13.0	39.4	58.3	2.4	21.3	45.1	52.6	2.3	26.4
Total	656	706	42	1400	555	595	42	1192	534	582	39	1155
	46.7	50.3	3.0	100.0	46.6	49.9	3.5	100.0	46.1	50.3	3.6	100.0

the whole population aged 18 and older, only about a quarter moved independently at least once in the four-year period before the Housing Needs Surveys. We are therefore dealing with a very mobile group, especially since the people in our sample have by definition also moved at home-leaving. This is not surprising, since they are being observed in the transition period around young adulthood.

The influence of initial household position is evident and in the expected direction (Table 6). Of the single starters, a large majority (around two-thirds of each cohort) move at least once.

Of the married home-leavers, only about 40 per cent move. The initial cohabitators take an intermediate position. Their behaviour is closer to that of the singles than to that of married people.

Table 7 shows that, as we hypothesized, those starting in 'other' housing are the most mobile group. They probably often move into this type of housing with the intention of finding something better as soon as possible. Starting home-owners hardly move at all. Their number of moves is so low that initial tenure could not be included in the logit analysis, because too

TABLE 7 *Initial tenure of nest-leavers and number of moves*

Initial tenure	Cohort of nest leavers											
	1977				1981				1985			
	Number of moves											
	None	One	>1	Total	None	One	>1	Total	None	One	>1	Total
Rent	359	259		618	269	276		545	278	278		556
	58.1	41.9		44.0	49.4	50.6		45.7	50.0	50.0		48.0
Own	254	52		306	232	21		253	206	33		239
	83.0	17.0		21.8	91.7	8.3		21.2	86.2	13.8		20.6
Other	43	395		438	54	298		352	50	271		321
	9.8	90.2		31.2	15.3	84.7		29.5	15.6	84.4		27.7
Unknown, >1 move			42	42			42	42			42	42
			100.0	3.0			100.0	3.5			100.0	3.6
Total	656	706	42	1404	555	595	42	1192	534	582	42	1158
	46.7	50.3	3.0	100.0	46.6	49.9	3.5	100.0	46.1	50.3	3.6	100.0

TABLE 8 *Logit model of migration*

		Coeff.	Z-value <sup>a</sup>
High education	(Low education = 0)	0.198	3.823
Cohabiting	(Single = 0)	-0.058	-0.727
Marrying		0.800	8.168
Married		-0.345	-5.250
With children		-0.273	-3.846
Age > 21	(Age ≤ 21 = 0)	-0.489	-9.727

*Notes:* Variables in the model: Age, Cohort, Educ, Hhstat (household status, time-varying). LR Chi-square = 58.985, DF = 53, P = 0.266. No. of person-year observations: 14962. No. of transitions: 2145.

<sup>a</sup>Z > 1.96 or < -1.96 means parameter is significant at 5% level.

many empty and badly filled cells would have been created.

The logit model of migration (Table 8) contains the variables cohort, age at home-leaving, education, and household status as a time-varying variable. It includes the main effects of household status, age, and education ( $P = 0.27$ ). The results show that the synchronization effect of marriage is indeed highly significant. Marrying people move by far the most; even though what used to be the 'standard' move synchronized with marriage—leaving the parental home at marriage—has

already been accounted for in positions at nest-leaving. Controlling for synchronization effects renders the difference in mobility between singles and cohabitators (Table 6) insignificant. For married people, the odds of moving are  $\exp(-0.345) = 0.7$  of those for singles. Married people without children move the least; people with children move slightly more than these. Education has an effect in the expected direction. There is indeed a marked age effect in that older home-leavers move significantly less. As we expected, there is no significant difference between the cohorts of nest-leavers.

TABLE 9 *Logit model of the choice between renting and buying for moving renters*

		Coeff.	Z-value <sup>a</sup>
Cohabiting	(Single = 0)	1.429	7.452
Marrying		1.779	8.635
Married		2.342	13.800
With children		1.418	7.945
Cohort 1981	(Cohort 1977 = 0)	0.113	0.824
Cohort 1985		0.558	3.960
Age > 21	(Age ≤ 21 = 0)	0.653	5.555
Age · hhstat	(> 21, cohabiting)	-0.967	-2.521
	(> 21, marrying)	-1.402	-3.401
	(> 21, married)	-0.865	-2.547
	(> 21, with children)	-0.913	-2.557
Age · cohort	(> 21, 1981)	-0.870	-3.185
	(> 21, 1985)	-0.168	-0.597

*Notes:* Variables in the model: Age, Cohort, Educ, Hhstat. Coding of dependent: rent = 0, buy = 1. Likelihood Ratio Chi-square = 37.147, DF = 46, P = 0.821. N = 2069 (of whom buys: 536).

<sup>a</sup>Z > 1.96 or < -1.96 means parameter is significant at 5% level.

The model of the choice between renting and buying by moving renters (Table 9) fits the data well ( $P=0.82$ ). The results show that people in all other household states buy considerably more often than singles. From the migration model we saw that married people without children move the least; here, we see that if they do move from a rented dwelling it is they who buy most often. The association between our 'settling down' indicators is thus indeed large. Marrying movers buy the second most frequently. Since they move the most, they of all the renters make the transition to home-ownership the most often. Synchronizations between marriage and becoming a home-owner are thus quite common, not only at home-leaving, but also for people who marry later.

Contrary to expectations, there is no significant effect from education. The age effect shows that older home-leavers buy more often than younger ones. From the interaction between age and household state we can see that, among the singles, it is particularly the young who hardly ever buy, whereas the older buy more often (older single buyers have a zero parameter, all other household states have a negative one). On the other hand, among those who marry, it is the young who buy relatively often.

We expected people to become increasingly reluctant to buy a home in the four years after nest-leaving. The significant cohort effect on the choice between renting and owning leads however to the conclusion that, across the cohorts, more moving renters buy a dwelling. The third cohort in particular buys significantly more than the other two cohorts. Everaers and Dieleman (1992) showed with data from the Housing Needs Surveys that, in general, the proportion of households moving from rented accommodation to home ownership fluctuates highly with socio-economic developments such as changes in consumer confidence in the economy, in purchasing power, and in the mortgage interest rate; the general pattern they found in the period of 1978–89 was an increasing proportion of renting movers who became home-owners. Apparently, this is no less true for the specific group we are studying.

#### FLEXIBLE VERSUS NON-FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS

In the previous section, we analysed transitions in the household, housing, and migration careers and the way they influence each other. Here we give an indication of the prevalence of the most popular 'pathways' in the combined careers. Figures 1 and 3 show the pathways of home-leavers separately for each initial household position. The proportions of persons following the pathways are only given for the most common. The percentages outside the boxes relate to the proportion of those of a certain cohort occupying the previous status following that path. If this proportion exceeds one-third the pathway is continued to the next step(s). The percentages inside the boxes relate to the proportion of all home-leavers following a specific path. For example, from Figure 1 it becomes clear that 34 per cent of cohort 1977, 35 per cent of cohort 1981, and 46 per cent of cohort 1985 start as singles (without children; those who already have a child when they leave home are excluded). Of all the singles of cohort 1977, 95 per cent start in a rented dwelling (including the category 'other'). Thus, 32 per cent (95 per cent of 34 per cent) of all home-leavers in 1977 start as singles in rented dwellings, and so on.

Figure 1 depicts the most common pathway in the household career of singles in this four-year period as no event (single [rent]–single). Since people increasingly leave home alone, the pathway of leaving home alone and still being single after four years becomes increasingly popular across the cohorts of nest-leavers. About 15 per cent of the members of cohort 1977 still live alone and have no children compared with 22 per cent of cohort 1985. Most of them moved at least once. The incidence of mobility decreases across these single starters who remain single.

The most common pathway for the initial cohabitators is to start in a rented dwelling and to marry (Figure 2). The proportion showing this pathway declines, however, across the cohorts. About 58 per cent of the initial renting cohabitators of cohort 1977 married compared with 47 per cent of cohort 1985. Married

STRATEGIES OF NEST-LEAVERS

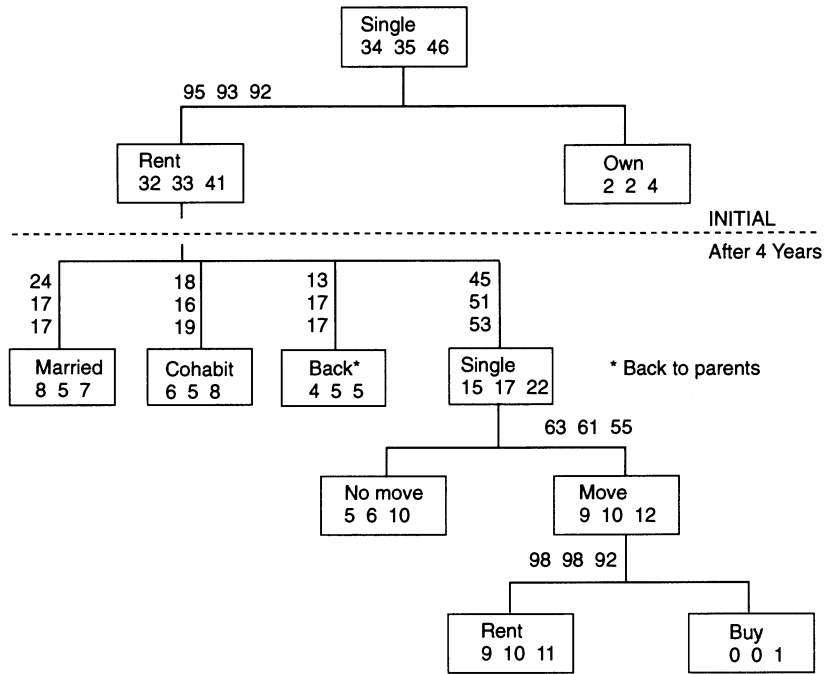


FIGURE 1 Pathways of single nest-leavers

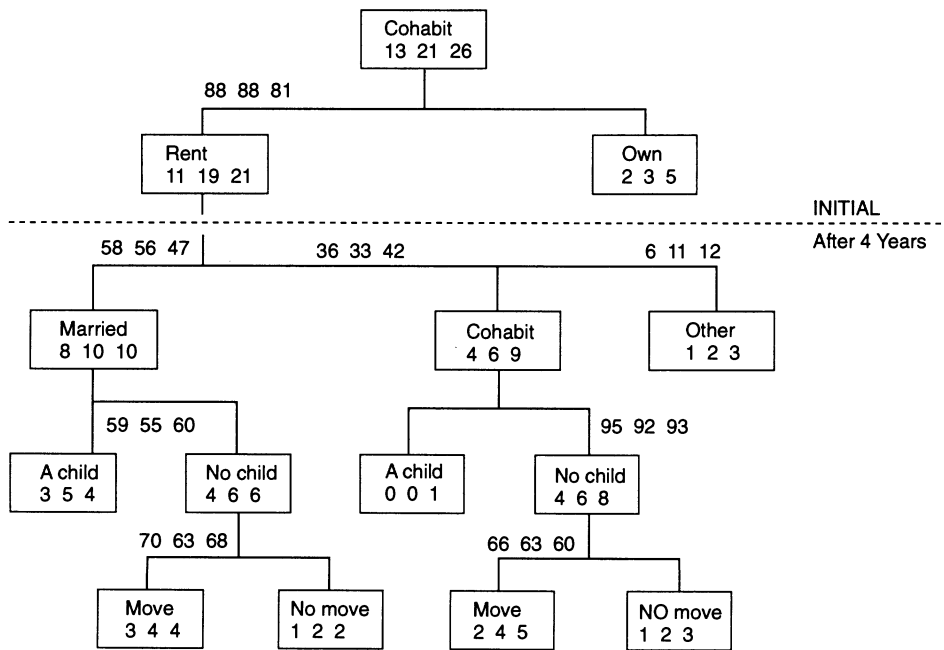


FIGURE 2 Pathways of cohabiting nest-leavers

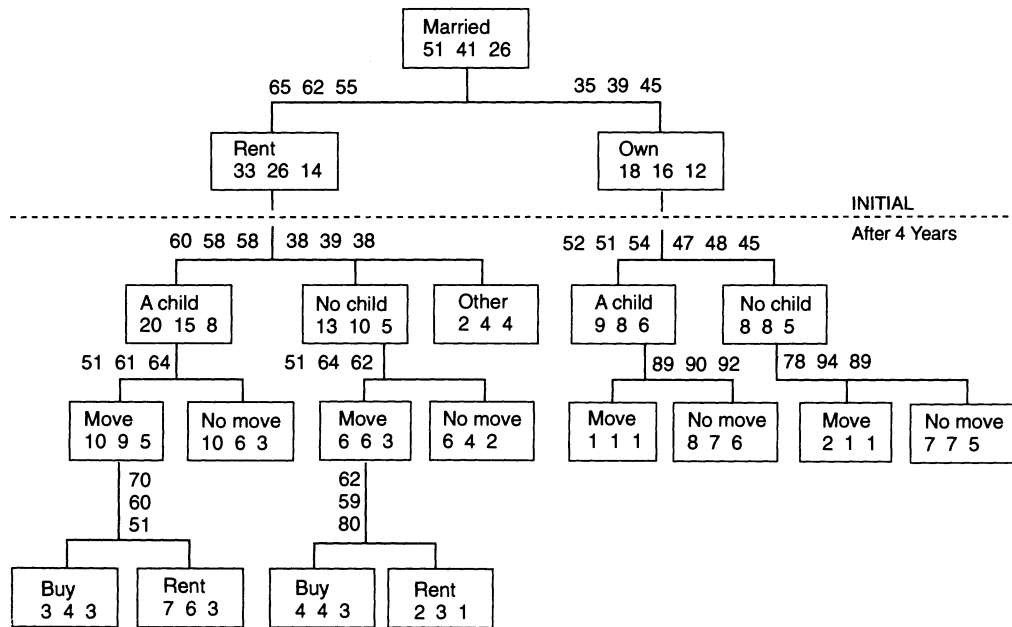


FIGURE 3 Pathways of married nest-leavers

cohabitators enter into parenthood more often than cohabitators who remain cohabiting. Yet, the most common pattern for both is to remain childless in the four years of observation. Most childless cohabitators move at least once, whether married or not. Since, across the cohorts, the proportion of initial cohabitators increases, whereas the proportion of marrying cohabitators declines, the overall percentage of those following this most common pathway remains more or less the same; about 4 to 6 per cent of all nest-leavers.

The initial married couples are the only people starting as home-owners to any considerable extent (though still as a minority; Figure 3). Of the renters, more than half enter parenthood. Most of these move. For those who become home-owners on home-leaving, the common pathway is to have children as well. However, the proportion of married home-owners that have a child within four years is lower than the proportion of married renters with a child. We suppose that the married people who buy a home do so in anticipation of having a child, but they postpone having this child until they have overcome the financial requirements of

investing in home-ownership: the cost of rearing children competes with the cost of purchasing a home (Courgeau and Lelièvre, 1992: 120). There is an increase in home-ownership among married home-leavers (from 35 to 45 per cent).

Because the percentage of persons leaving home married declines across the cohorts, the popularity of the most common pattern of married couples declines. Whereas 20 per cent of cohort 1977 left home married, started in a rented dwelling, and became parents within the next four years, only 8 per cent of cohort 1985 followed this pathway.

It should be noted that pluriformity among the home-leavers is large. Even the most common patterns are followed by only a small proportion across the cohorts. However, if we are aware of the fact that the number of theoretically possible paths is extremely large, it becomes clear that the most common pathways are indeed very highly over-represented.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In this paper we have described young people's strategies in the period around young adulthood.

Our results show that denoting this period as the transition period in the life course is justified: even though we observe no more than a four-year period, a large number of the respondents in our sample experience one or more events in the household and/or housing careers. It is also remarkable to note how great a behavioural change was found even though only three cohorts of nest-leavers were observed, the last leaving the parental home only eight years later than the first.

The first hypothesis was clearly supported by our findings in that the degree of flexibility in the household career was found to be closely associated with the degree of flexibility in the housing career in the four-year period after leaving home. Singles hardly ever become home-owners; the married buy much more often, especially when they do not as yet have children; the transition to home-ownership is apparently often undertaken in anticipation of childbirth in the not so near future. In general, singles move more often than cohabitators and married people; many of their moves, however, are related to the event of union formation (we could study the effect of synchronizations with marriage separately).

The effects of age and education were in the expected direction in that the young and the highly educated choose more flexible strategies, although the transition to parenthood is not influenced by age at nest-leaving. However, in both initial household position and subsequent transitions to marriage, we saw that it is the combination of being young and highly educated rather than age and education as such that is associated with flexibility. This indicates that either the highly educated who leave home young have particularly individualistic attitudes, or that enrolment in education rather than attitudes prevails. Initial positions in the household career (starting as a single, cohabitor, or married) influence strongly further pathways in the household career (the transition to marriage and parenthood). The same is true for the housing career: the propensity to migrate is strongly associated with initial tenure: starting home-owners hardly ever move, whereas starters in 'other' housing types are highly mobile. A remarkable finding is the large difference

between cohabiting and married people: in some respects—for example, tenure at home-leaving—we found that the behaviour of the cohabiting starters is closer to that of the singles than to the married individuals. In other respects, for example in the transition to parenthood, they take an intermediate position between the singles and those who are married.

The second hypothesis was supported in the sense that flexible starts in the household career (starting as a single and, when starting as a couple, doing so unmarried) gained popularity in comparison with 'settling down' (leaving home married). This also implies that flexible strategies as a whole became more popular. Moreover, the transition to marriage has become less popular for unmarried starters. The fact that home-leavers become less inclined to marry is all the more remarkable since, over time, we are dealing with slightly older home-leavers: postponement of marriage and parenthood after leaving home comes over and above the postponement of leaving home itself. The results made it plausible to conclude that the shift towards flexible strategies has been caused by more factors than increased participation in education and prolonged educational enrolment. We derive this from the assumption that, in the specific population under study, a high level of education is associated with educational enrolment, and from the fact that the cohort differences in initial household positions and subsequent transitions to marriage remain significant after controlling for education.

Contrary to expectations, the successive cohorts of nest-leavers did not become less reluctant to buy a home. The transition to home-ownership is apparently influenced more by housing-market conditions than by a tendency towards flexible strategies. The decision to buy a home is possibly felt to be less of a commitment than marriage or having children. Though being a decision for the longer term, it is not irreversible. It could also be true that demographic behaviour is more influenced by shifts in values and attitudes than economic behaviour.

Once a specific pathway in the household career is chosen, no changes in the inclination to have children within four years could be

observed. The conclusion which could be drawn is that it is not so much the strategies themselves that change, but rather the prevalence of flexible rather than less flexible strategies: the most common pathway has changed from marrying at home-leaving and having a child within four years to starting as a single and remaining single for four years.

An interesting further step worth taking would be the incorporation of the respondents' work histories into the study of strategies. It would also be interesting to study how strategies are matched between the adults in one cohabiting or married couple: do they follow the same strategies, are strategies followed by one of the partners dominant over those of the other partner, and so forth. Furthermore, it would be interesting to study life-course patterns for a longer period after leaving the parental home in order to get more insight into the longer term. The question could then be addressed whether strategies towards flexibility last beyond the educational period. These types of analyses would require detailed event-history data. Data of this kind will become available for The Netherlands in the near future. But even without these steps, it was shown that distinguishing between 'settling down' strategies and flexible strategies facilitates the understanding of the consistency both within and between careers in the life course.

#### NOTES

1. Two factors led us to use unweighted samples. First, the CBS weighting strata were designed to handle the whole data-set. The strata are rather broad, which leads to strange results when other categories are used (e.g. smaller age categories or a distinction between married and cohabiting couples). Secondly, we are interested in relations between variables and in dynamics over time rather than population figures. Response selectivity is expected to be the same for the surveys. It is mainly the singles that are under-represented.
2. It is only known for one survey whether the partner is a cohabiting or a marriage partner. Because only 4 per cent of those who married in the year of home-leaving reported they had left home cohabiting, those reporting leaving home with a partner who were married in the same year or earlier were recorded (for all surveys) as 'married home-leavers'.
3. As requested by CBS, observations in cells with very small absolute numbers have been left out of the tables.

This is the reason why marginals differ slightly between the tables.

4. The model includes a fairly large number of interaction effects, but still differs significantly from the saturated model ( $P=0.02$ ). However, the inclusion of still more effects did not add any substantive information, whereas the effects in the model we present hardly changed. The standardized residuals show no peculiarities. In the presented model the variable sex is not included. This is because the inclusion of yet another variable would make the model even more complex than it is now. A model in which sex was included (not shown) confirmed among other things that males leave home to live alone more frequently than females do and that females leave the parental home at significantly younger ages than males. The differences between the sexes did not change significantly between the cohorts of nest-leavers.
5. A small proportion have already entered parenthood at home-leaving. The highest proportions of parents at nest-leaving are found among those who leave home married (3.0, 3.7, and 5.1 per cent in the three cohorts, respectively). We could not include the variable sex in the model because empty cell problems arose. Results of models with fewer variables and including sex (not shown) suggested that females have children somewhat earlier after home-leaving than males, but that this difference gets smaller through the cohorts. This result was found in a model without education, so the change through the cohorts might be a result of increased female participation in education.

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