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Living Apart Together Individuals in the Netherlands and Changes in  
their Relationship Satisfaction:  
Does Life Stage Matter?

Name: Isabell Nadine Cohrs  
Student Number: S3433250  
Supervisor: Roselinde van der Wiel, Clara Mulder  
i.n.cohrs@student.rug.nl  
Master Thesis Population Studies  
Population Research Centre, University of Groningen  
13-08-2018, Groningen

Isabell Nadine Cohrs

Matrikelnr.: 5710278

E-Mail-Adresse: cohersi@smail.uni-koeln.de

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## **Abstract**

During the last years, living apart together (LAT) relationships came into the focus of research. Some things are already known about individuals in this specific type of relationship. They are, for example, more individualistic and work-oriented and have more liberal attitudes than marrieds. Additionally, they have the lowest relationship satisfaction compared to cohabiters and marrieds. Furthermore, different approaches for defining subgroups exist. Nevertheless, little is known about the development of the relationship for individuals in LAT relationships, and the differences between LAT subgroups. With the interdependence theory and the life course perspective as a guideline, this work aims to investigate the influence of the life stage of LAT individuals on changes in their relationship satisfaction. Four life stages are defined: Never cohabited, cohabited before, single parents, and divorced/widowed. The first three waves of Netherlands Kinship Panel Study are used. The four years between two waves result in a sample that only includes long-term LATs. The analyses show, that it is not possible to predict a general decrease in the relationship satisfaction. It is more realistic that some items indicating the relationship satisfaction increase while others decrease. Further, the life stages do not significantly influence changes in relationship satisfaction. It is unknown if this is a consequence of the limited sample size. Nevertheless, there are some differences between the life stages concerning the relationship satisfaction, for example, individuals that cohabited before have an increasing relationship satisfaction, while for single parents the relationship satisfaction does decrease for all three items used (quality, happiness, and strength of the relationship).

Key words: LAT, LAT subgroups, changes in relationship satisfaction, life stages, Netherlands, NKPS

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# 1. Introduction

Earlier surveys and studies often differentiated between relationships based on their marital status (married or unmarried) (e. g. Sabatelli, 1988), but because of a generally increasing number of relationship arrangements in the Western world (Lesthaeghe, 2014) this distinction is not sufficient anymore (Soons & Liefbroer, 2008). In the Netherlands, marriage rates are decreasing, and divorce rates are increasing (StatLine, 2017). This trend is in line with a change in the society and the growing acceptance of non-marital intimate relationships during the end of the last century (Duncan et al., 2013). A stronger research emphasis was first placed on unmarried cohabiting couples (e.g. Cohen & Manning, 2010) (Roseneil, 2006) and during the last years, there further is growing attention to so-called living apart together relationships. Living apart together (LAT) means “being in an intimate relationship with a partner who lives somewhere else” (Duncan & Phillips, 2010, p. 112). Around 10% of the adult population in Western Europe lives in LAT relationships (Duncan et al., 2013), which means they are a small but significant group (Strohm et al., 2009). Some researchers assume that LAT will become more common over time (Tai et al., 2014; Roseneil, 2006), leading to a growing part of the society living apart from their partner. LAT is seen as a more flexible relationship type (Duncan et al., 2013). There are various motives to live apart. For example, some individuals live apart as a testing phase of the relationship before moving on to cohabitation and marriage. Moreover, some classify living apart as an own relationship form for individuals who are striving for independence (Asendorpf, 2008; Duncan et al., 2013; Liefbroer et al. 2015) and others live apart because of restrictions, for example, because of mobility that is necessary for work or education (Asendorpf, 2008).

Researching about intimate relationships is an important topic because they are a big part of the human life and influence the subjective well-being as well as the overall life satisfaction (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015). One major factor that is investigated in family research is the relationship satisfaction (Shafer et al., 2014). Relationship satisfaction can be defined as the degree of happiness an individual has “with several facets of their relationship including intimacy, conflict, and equality” (Shafer et al., 2014, p. 212). Analyses with cross-sectional data showed a difference in relationship satisfaction between relationship types: Married couples had the highest relationship satisfaction, LAT couples the lowest, and cohabiting couples were located in between (Lewin, 2017). Also, there is evidence that LATs with the intention to cohabit have a higher relationship satisfaction than those without this intention, the same applies to cohabiting individuals concerning the intention to marry (Tai et al., 2014). What is often not considered is the fact that relationship satisfaction is dynamic and not static (Mitnick et al., 2010). Thus, there is a lack of knowledge about the changes over time, especially for LAT couples. Feldhaus and Huinik (2006) argue that panel data is further needed to integrate the life course perspective. With this, it should make visible how changes in intimate relationships are embedded in the individual life course.

This work aims to explore if and in which way relationship satisfaction trajectories differ for LAT subgroups. It is already known that the life course has an influence on the commitment in a relationship and that relationship satisfaction and commitment are interlinked (Carter, 2012). Nevertheless, it is still unknown how life course elements influence relationship satisfaction. Thus, this work will investigate life stages that refer to prior relationship experiences, more precisely if an individual already was in a co-residential relationship or was already married and has children living at home. As a result of this, the effect of the individual life course on changes in relationship satisfaction will be analysed. Consequently, this work investigates the following research question:

*How does the relationship satisfaction of individuals in living apart together relationships changes over time? To what extent does the development of the relationship satisfaction of non-cohabiting individuals differ with regard to the life stage an individual is in?*

This study can create new knowledge about the way relationship satisfaction changes for LATs. Additionally, it is a first step to gain insight into the influence of belonging in a specific subgroup on those changes. Further, it can help figuring out if subdividing LATs based on their life stage is useful.

The subsequent section of this work contains a literature review to give an overview of already existing literature in the field of investigation. Following, a description of the theory that is used as a guideline is added. The literature and the theory are afterwards combined to design a conceptual model and to derive hypotheses and expectations. The fourth section contains information about the data and the sample, the variables that are used, and the analytical approach. The subsequent part includes the results of the analyses and is subdivided into a sample description, descriptive results, and multivariate results. The final section draws a conclusion that contains limitation and implications for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

A main advantage that can be found in the literature for living apart together relationships was that people could combine a certain level of autonomy with the intimacy that being a couple provides (Carter et al., 2015). There have been a few studies that focused on differences between LAT and cohabitation and marriage (e.g. Liefbroer et al., 2015; Strohm et al., 2009) to answer questions about specific characteristics of individuals in LAT relationships. On average, LATs had more individualistic, work-oriented and liberal attitudes than marrieds (Strohm et al., 2009), and compared to cohabiters and married persons they were more likely to have experienced a union dissolution and to be enrolled in education (Liefbroer et al., 2015). For Western Europe, individuals living apart from their partner were also more likely to have a child from a previous relationship than cohabiting or married couples (Liefbroer et al., 2015). Additionally, there is evidence that LAT relationships are less stable than cohabitation and marriage (Asendorpf, 2008). In general, there are some significant differences between individuals in LAT relationships compared to cohabiting and married couples. Thus, LAT is an independent relationship form which justifies a separate look on them.

LATs were a very heterogeneous group (Strohm et al., 2009) so many studies tried to subdivide individuals into different subgroups based on different relationship or personal characteristics. Often, these groups are based on the reasons why partners live apart, in qualitative as well as in quantitative works. Well known is the differentiation of Roseneil (2006) in LATs that were gladly apart, regretfully apart, and undecided apart. Gladly apart were those who live apart from their partner by preference, often because they want to maintain their independence. The group of the regretfully apart included those people that prefer to live together with the partner but in fact, live apart. In Roseneil's sample, those people often first cohabited with their partner but then decided to move away, mostly for career reasons. In general, they hoped to cohabit with their partner in the future. Another reason for living apart could be a severe housing situation, which makes it impossible for the couple to find affordable housing (Liefbroer et al., 2015). LATs who were undecided apart have not decided on the topic. This group included couples who felt that they were too early in their relationship living together and those that doubted their relationship (Roseneil, 2006). Liefbroer et al. (2015) created subgroups that are a bit more detailed. They divided the LATs into five groups: First, those who were not able to live together because of circumstances. Second, individuals that lived apart from their partner because of the practical advantages, like previous children or financial aspects. The third group lived apart to

maintain their independence, and the fourth subgroup included LATs that are not ready to cohabit with their partner because it was too early in the relationship. The last group contained LATs for which the reason to live apart was not apparent. Carter et al. (2015) extended the subgrouping based on the reason to live apart and included the commitment to indicate if the level of attachment in the relationship is high or low. In general, building subgroups based on the reasons to live apart can make sense but can also be complicated because individuals often state more than one reason why they live apart, sometimes they state even contradictory motives (Duncan et al., 2013).

A different approach was to subgroup LATs based on the distance between the partners. Krapf (2017) distinguished long- and short-distance LATs and investigated the influence on the likelihood of separation and co-residence. Krapf classified long-distance as those couples where individuals needed more than one hour to travel to the partner. Resulting, those in short-distance had a lower risk of separation compared to long-distance LATs and a higher risk of transition to co-residence (Krapf, 2017).

If researcher integrate life stages into their research, they often do it by examining characteristics of one specific life stage. For example, they look at college students (Stavrianopoulos, 2015), widowed (Lopata, 1996; Silverman & Klass, 1996), divorced individuals (Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2015) or single parents (De Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013; Moore, 1989; Stevens, 2002). Few studies focus on one relationship type and compare those different life stages. An exception is the work of Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009). Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009) based their work using French data on different life stages of non-cohabiting couples. They clustered four groups, which were young adults, out of the family, single parents, and seniors, although they did not always find clear boundaries between the groups. There were no significant differences between the groups when comparing the distance between the partners. Nevertheless, the clusters differed concerning the duration of the relationship, which was partly based on the age differences between the groups. Further, the reason for living apart influenced the relationship duration, too. The most striking difference between the groups was found regarding the stated reason to live apart. These results are to some extent in line with those of Liefbroer et al. (2015) who found that people in older age mostly chose LAT to maintain their independence while younger LATs are most likely to live apart because they were not ready yet but expected to live together with their partner in the future. Most of the individuals in the young adult's group by Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009) were separated due to financial reasons but intended to move in together during the next three years. On the contrary, most LATs in the senior cluster did not intend to transit to co-residence, and the most stated reason to live apart was to maintain independently. A majority of the individuals in the out of the family group stated to live apart due to constraints with the intention to live together in the future, while in the single parent's group living apart as a constraint and as a choice was indicated with nearly similar frequency. Liefbroer et al. (2015) came to a conclusion, that the main point for people with children was to restrict the influence of the new partner on the child, so people with previous children were most likely to live apart either to maintain their independence or for practical reasons. Divorced and widowed were more likely to live apart because of independence (Liefbroer et al., 2015; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009). Additionally, there were differences regarding the factors on which the decision to move together was based on, for example, children are only stated by single parents and young adults based their decision more on work than on love, which was for the other groups the most critical factor (Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009). Concluding, it is possible to say that although not in all analysed areas, there were significant differences between LATs in different life stages and that age, life circumstances and reasons to live apart had a connection in some way. Nevertheless, although there are many approaches to subdivide LATs, little is known about the effects of the characteristics of a specific subgroup on relationship satisfaction.

Frazier and Esterly (1990) further found a connection between relationship experience and relationship satisfaction. However, their focus was not on the relationship types the individuals already experienced it but was based on the number and duration of previous relationships. Additionally, the work of Shafer et al. (2014) focused on the connection between union type and relationship satisfaction. Indeed, the authors found significant differences concerning relationship satisfaction between non-marital cohabitation and divorced cohabitation in comparison to first marriages, the last group having a slightly lower relationship satisfaction than the first two. In contrast, there was no significant difference between first marriage and remarriage. Although the sample did not include LATs, it is evidence that there are differences in relationship satisfaction with regard to the union type.

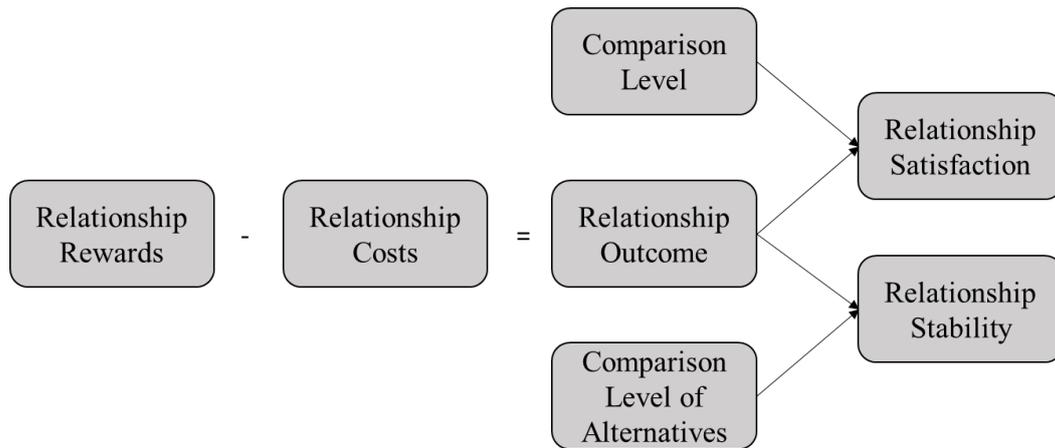
The mentioned studies show that, in general, it makes sense to subdivide individuals in LAT relationships into more homogenous groups. Further, the division based on the life stage and consequently on prior experiences as by Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009) can be useful. Relationship satisfaction is one of the most commonly investigated topics in family research, and there already is evidence that different union types vary in their degree of well-being (Soons & Liefbroer, 2008) and satisfaction (Shafer et al., 2014). Nevertheless, very little attention has been paid to the influence of belonging to a specific LAT subgroup on the satisfaction that individuals have with their relationship. An exception is the work of Tai et al. (2014). During their analyses, they found a difference between LATs with the intention to move in together and LATs who did not have those intentions with the last group having a lower relationship satisfaction. Still, further research about LAT subgroups and relationship satisfaction needs to be conducted to gain more knowledge about the experiences that LAT couples have in their relationship.

Moreover, there is disagreement regarding the influence of time on relationship satisfaction. Contrary to the results of Rusbult et al. (1998) who stated that relationship duration does not influence the relationship satisfaction, Mitnick et al. (2009) reviewed different studies and came to the conclusion that relationship satisfaction decreases over time.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theory that is used as a guideline in this work is the interdependence theory by Thibaut and Kelley (1959). It is a social exchange theory and an essential theory in sociology to explain behaviours in social relationships and can be applied to interpersonal as well as to economic relations. The interdependence theory combines sociological mechanisms with ideas from economics and psychology. The central message of the theory is, that the costs and the benefits which one individual derives from a relationship have an influence on the relationship satisfaction (Shahsavarani et al., 2016) and the termination of the relationship (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). The theory is visually represented in figure 1. In an intimate relationship, the partners exchange material or immaterial resources, and the whole relationship is based on mutual trust (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008).

**Figure 1** Visual representation of the interdependence theory



Source: Thibaut and Kelley, 1959

In general, the reason for a foundation and preservation of a social relationship is that an individual expects this connection to be beneficial (Zafirovski, 2005). If a relationship is advantageous is determined by the rewards and the costs that are experienced by an individual. This evaluation is subjective and hence varies from individual to individual (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). Nevertheless, a reward is defined as a positive value an individual experiences within a relationship. A reward can be a material, as a gain in finances, or immaterial, like emotional support and companionship (Shahsavarani et al., 2016) or pleasure (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). On the contrary, costs are values that are experienced as negative by a person. Examples for costs can be divided into opportunity costs or direct costs (Emerson, 1976), which can, for instance, be effort or a loss of money and time (Shahsavarani et al., 2016). The comparison of rewards and costs leads to the outcome of a relationship, or in other words the value that a relationship has to an individual. The baseline of the interdependence theory is that every relationship has such a specific outcome (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

One other factor which is in the focus of the interdependence theory is the attraction towards the relationship (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008) or the relationship satisfaction (Shahsavarani et al., 2016). For this, the real outcome of a relationship is compared to a construct called comparison level, as visible in figure 1. The comparison level is the level of outcome each person thinks that he or she deserves. An outcome above the comparison level leads to a satisfying relationship. Contrarily, if the comparison level exceeds the real outcome, the relationship is rated as unsatisfying (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The comparison level consists of prior experiences (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008; Sabatelli, 1988). However, different experiences vary in the influence they have on the comparison level (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). Nevertheless, it is safe to say that previous relationships have an influence on the amount of satisfaction an individual has within the following relationships.

Furthermore, the theory aims to explain relationship stability. This assumption is based on the evaluation of the comparison level for alternatives. The comparison level for alternatives is the level of outcome an individual expects from an alternative to the current relationship, and this can be a different partner or the choice for career over personal life (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). The outcome of the relationship is compared to the comparison level of alternatives to calculate the relationship stability (as visible in figure 1). Theoretically, as soon as the comparison level of alternatives is above the outcome, the individual will end the relationship. In reality, some people stay in unsatisfying relationships because they expect rewards in the future (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) or because of other barriers like avoiding a fight or a financial loss (Shahsavarani et al., 2016).

Although the interdependence theory is often used in social science, it has its drawbacks. The main problem is the definition of costs and rewards because every individual evaluates differently on what is a negative and a positive value. Thus, the same resource that is a reward for one person can be a cost for another person. Furthermore, it can be hard for individuals to evaluate a specific value of a reward. Consequently, it is unclear how many resources need to be exchanged to receive a positive reward (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). The interdependence theory is not tested in this work, and it does not focus on individuals and neither precisely on cost nor rewards. Instead, the idea of the comparison level is used as an inspiration to come up with the conceptual model and the hypotheses. Thus, the limitations of the theory are not too severe.

Further, the life course perspective is used as a guideline in this work to subdivide the LATs into subgroups, formulating the hypotheses and in interpreting the results. In general, it is used to study the human development, the relationship between development and the social path of lives, and influence of culture (Elder & Rockwell, 1979). The life course perspective can be applied in various areas like sociology, psychology, and epidemiology. It contains several ideas like the life-long development, the influence of the historical time and place, timing and sequencing, and liked lives. Since around the 1990s, the life course approach is becoming increasingly popular in science (Shanahan et al., 2016).

In the life course perspective, the age of an individual can be regarded from different perspectives: from a developmental, a social and a historical side. A developmental perspective emphasises that people show various life patterns in different (chronological) ages. Social age is the social connotation of age. This means that for different ages a specific behaviour is evaluated as appropriate by the society. Of course, what is seen as suitable is also influenced by the historical time. During life, there is thus an appropriate time for different interpersonal events, like marriage and childbearing. Following the historical perspective of age, the individuals are seen as embedded in a specific historical setting based on the year of birth (Elder & Rockwell, 1979). Thus, also social changes are visible (Shanahan et al., 2016). Further, the birth year is the basis for belonging to a specific birth cohort. Cohorts are exposed to historical events at similar ages which can also influence the later life (Elder & Rockwell, 1979). What is essential in this work is the idea that earlier events can influence later events (Alwin, 2012).

The life course approach can have various meanings. It is often more seen as a paradigm than as a real theory. Thus, it can have various interpretations (Shanahan et al., 2016). Moreover, even the terms are not clearly defined, as there is not one commonly accepted definition (Alwin, 2012). This makes it hard to describe and imply the life course approach.

### **3.1 Conceptual Model**

Based on the theory and the already existing knowledge due to prior research, the conceptual model of this work is derived.

Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009) already found evidence for significant differences between individuals living apart from their partner in different life stages concerning the reasons to live apart and the intentions related to the future of the relationship. Even though not investigated, further differences with regard to the life stage and earlier experiences are probable. Concerning the interdependence theory, one of the relationship outcomes which could be affected is the relationship satisfaction (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

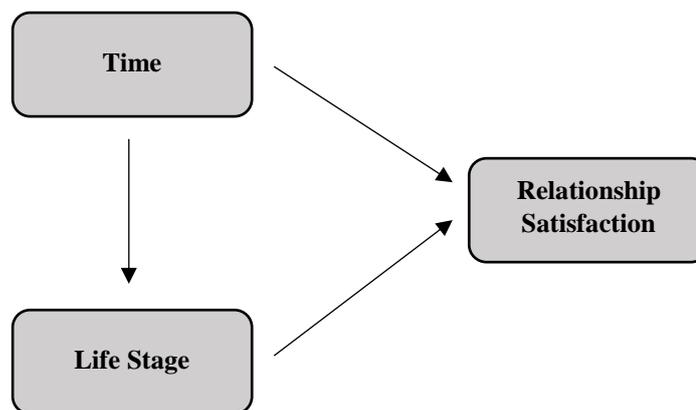
Based on the interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), the relationship satisfaction is referring to the positive versus negative value in comparison to the comparison level. An individual gets used to a specific level of relationship satisfaction and starts to see this as standard. Thus, the comparison level rises. So, even if costs and rewards do not change, it is

expected that the relationship satisfaction changes over time (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Resulting, there is an influence of time on the relationship satisfaction.

The comparison level includes the prior experiences of an individual (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008; Sabatelli, 1988). In this work, the life stage a person is in is used as an indicator for prior experiences regarding relationships. In the life course approach, it is stated that earlier experiences shape following outcomes (Alwin, 2012) and that the life stage has an impact on the way events are experienced (Shanahan et al., 2016). Further, for different stages in life, different relationship statuses are seen as acceptable. This concept is included in the life course approach as the social age. Not being in one of those relationship types could lead to societal pressure and consequently increases stress. Therefore, not being in a normative relationship type is assumed to have an influence on the costs and benefits that an individual has about their partnership which then again influences the relationship satisfaction (Elder & Rockwell, 1979). Thus, it is expected that the life stage of a person influences the relationship satisfaction.

In sum, based on the theory and the literature, time influences the relationship satisfaction. Additionally, the time affects the life stage of an individual which then again affects the relationship satisfaction. The whole conceptual model is visualized in figure 2.

**Figure 2** Conceptual model



Source: Own depiction

Time influences the life stage because the life stages change over time. For the sake of completeness, this relationship is visualised in the conceptual model, although it is not further considered in the analyses.

### 3.2 Hypotheses and Expectations

When investigating changes in relationship satisfaction for individuals in LAT relationships, two time points are needed. Consequently, some specifics need to be considered. LAT individuals who invest more resources are also more likely to transit to cohabitation or marriage, and unsatisfied couples are less likely to commit more to the relationship and are thus more likely to persist in living apart (Soons & Liefbroer, 2008). This means that couples with higher relationship satisfaction do not stay in a LAT relationship but move in together between the two points of measurement and thus drop out of the sample. A consequence can be a generally lower relationship satisfaction in the selected sample. Furthermore, the intentions to move together differ with regard to age (Asendorpf, 2008; Lewin, 2017), gender, and the fact if children are living in the household (Lewin, 2017) which could lead to a sample that differs in some characteristics to the total group of LATs. In general, the need for two different times of measurements could also lead to a non-representative sample in terms that the relationship satisfaction of the individuals in LAT relationship is lower than the relationship satisfaction of

LATs when using cross-sectional data and consequently only looking at one time point. Further, the prevailing Dutch values towards intimate relationship are not very traditional (Georgas et al., 2004; Halman & Luijkx, 2008), which could influence the results.

In general, there is evidence that relationship outcomes change with the duration of the relationship and that, for example, marital quality seems to decrease over time (Umberson et al., 2005). Moreover, there is evidence that relationship satisfaction decreases with relationship duration, at least for married and cohabiting couples (Mitnick et al., 2009; Shafer et al., 2014). As this trend is sufficient for married as well as cohabiting couples, it can be expected that it applies to relationships in general and thus also to LATs. At the second time point in the data, there is necessarily a longer relationship duration than at the first. Consequently, lower relationship satisfaction is expected. This idea about a decrease in relationship satisfaction over time is contradictory to some results by Rusbult et al. (1998) and Franzier and Esterly (1990). The interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) has a different approach to explain changes of relationship satisfaction over time: People get used to a specific amount of satisfaction and start to see this as standard, which means that the comparison level rises. Thus, after a while, the same relationship outcome leads to a lower amount of satisfaction (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Following this argumentation, a decrease of relationship satisfaction over time is also expected for individuals in LAT relationships, although the analyses by Shafer et al. (2014) and the review by Mitnick et al. (2009) do not prove this as they only focus on married or cohabiting couples. As a consequence, the first hypothesis is formulated.

***H1: The relationship satisfaction will decrease for individuals in LAT relationships over time.***

The second part of the analyses focuses on the different life stages a person is. The life course approach mentions that different behaviours are seen as appropriate by the society (Elder & Rockwell, 1979). Based on the life course, it is expected that individuals, in general, are differently opposed to social pressure which leads to a difference in costs and rewards of a relationship. Concerning LATs this means, that the acceptance of the society that a person lives apart from the partner varies between different life stages and, thus, the costs and rewards differ. Additionally, the experiences made in intimate relationships differ for people in various life stages. For example, different relationship types often vary in their duration (Wu & Schimmele, 2005) and how serious they are. Further, the kind of dissolution influences the feeling towards the ex-partner, widowed individuals often feel a strong connection to their ex (Silverman & Klass, 1996). In an earlier work, Frazier and Esterly (1990) found that the number of previous relationships as well as their duration and the relationship satisfaction were interlinked. Thus, experiences and relationship satisfaction seem to be connected. In the interdependence theory, the experiences influence the comparison level of an individual (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). So, in general, it is expected that the relationship satisfaction is related to the life stage.

To study the effect of being in a specific life stage on the relationship satisfaction, the sample needs to be subdivided. One of the few existing studies that divided LATs based on their life stage was the work by Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009). Their classification leads to fruitful results, as already described, and thus, the groups used in this work are designed based on the groups by Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009). During their work, they divided their sample of individuals in LAT relationships into four groups. The first one contained young adults under 25 years and mainly included individuals that never cohabited before and without children. Many of them were students. The second group is called out of the family. The people associated with this group were independent of their parents. A majority did not have children, or if they had, the children were not living in the same household. Many individuals in the sample of Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009) in this group were foreigners that lived apart from their family. The third group included single parents, many of the individuals in this group were female. The fourth group contained seniors that were at least 55 years old. This barrier was chosen by the authors

because at this age children reached an age which released parents from tasks related to raising children and often, people stop working. In the French sample, this group was very heterogeneous regarding prior relationship experiences.

Based on this, in this work are also four groups used: Never cohabited before, cohabited before, single parents, and divorced/widowed. Main differences with regard to Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009) can be found in the restriction of the first and the fourth group. The focus of the groups does not lay on the age, but the experiences made. Therefore, the groups are expected to more homogenous concerning previous relationship experiences. This differentiation is also in line with other findings. First, the boundary between people who had been married and those who have not been married makes sense because individuals who cohabited before tend to begin a new relationship faster than those who have been married (Wu & Schimmele, 2005). Consequently, they differ with regard to relationship dynamics. Second, it is reasonable to have a group of people who are divorced or widowed. Marriages are more long-term, so they usually last longer than other relationships which include more investments. Further, marriages are characterised by higher fertility compared to cohabiters. Because of the longer union duration, widowers are often older than divorced (Wu & Schimmele, 2005). Also, about the life course perspective, divorce marks the end of a phase, which is marriage but also initiates the start of a new phase with one or several new potential partners (Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2015). In this case, divorced and widowed are taken together to increase the group size. Third, the fourth group will be the oldest group, and the first groups will contain the youngest respondents. Older LATs often see this relationship as more long-term than younger ones, because they do not intend to move in with the partner. Often, one major point for them is that do not want to be responsible for caring for the new partner in case he or she is sick (Connidis et al., 2017).

The first group contains people who never cohabited before. Although age does not restrict the group, it is expected that on average, the people in this group will be the youngest. Further, as in the first group of Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009), it is expected that many students are part of this group. During education, there is only a small risk for marriage and cohabitation (Mulder et al., 2006). Students are in a phase where they find themselves and try things out, also regarding relationships (Stavrianopoulos, 2015). Moreover, there is evidence that romantic beliefs are associated with higher relationship satisfaction. On the one hand, those romantic beliefs decrease with age and relationship duration. On the other hand, if the beliefs of an individual remain unrealised, it leads to a lower relationship satisfaction (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2017). Thus, it is expected that the individuals in group one start with a relatively high relationship satisfaction but then have a steeper decrease than individuals in the second group, because of their high romantic beliefs which remain unfulfilled.

Individuals who belong in the second group already experienced the advantages and disadvantages that cohabitation offers. It is expected that they are on average older than the respondents in group one and that they have a higher variance in age. In comparison to couples who do not live together, those who cohabit can spend more time together, and they can share personal resources, material and well as non-material (Mulder et al., 2006). Thus, they are expected to have already experienced a more committed relationship than individuals in the first group. This group includes individuals who cohabited once and people who did serial cohabitation, so who were in more than one cohabiting relationship (Cohen & Manning, 2010). In general, it is expected that because of the experience they already had with being in relationships, their romantic beliefs are more realistic than they are in group 1, especially earlier in their relationship. This supports the idea that the decrease in relationship satisfaction is not as steep as it is for individuals in the first group.

The third group contains single parents. Different circumstances can lead to being a single parent (Moore, 1989). In this work, all individuals who have a cohabiting child but live apart

from their partner are in this group. The first possibility is that they have a relationship with the other parent of the child but do not live with them. Second, they have a new partner and are separated or divorced from the other parent. Lastly, the other parent could be dead. There is no differentiation about the age of the child. Although minor children increase stress more than older children, even adult children decrease the well-being of mothers (Umberson et al., 2010). It makes sense to look at single parents separately because we already know that children influence their parents' relationship trajectories. Of course, some children support their parent's new relationship, but they can also be the source of conflicts. For example, children affect the re-partnering process of the parents, if children are present the risk of being single is higher for both, men and women (Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2015). Additionally, on the one hand, some children do not tolerate their parent's new partner and do not want to share their parents (De Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013). On the other hand, not every new partner wants to be a step-parent (Stewart et al., 2003). Often, the decision of parents to live apart from their new partner is based not only on their preference but on the well-being of their children (De Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009). Thus, another reason to live apart is for parents to reduce the influence of the new partner on the children (De Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013; Liefbroer et al., 2015). Umberson et al. (2010) reviewed different articles. About children, they concluded that children increase the level of stress for both parents, but especially for single mothers. Because most of the time, children live with their mother (Duncan et al., 2013), it is expected that a majority of the LATs with cohabiting children are mothers. In general, it is expected that LATs with cohabiting children have a steeper decrease in relationship satisfaction than LATs without cohabiting children in the first and the second group due to a higher risk of conflict and higher stress.

Group four combines the LATs who are divorced or widowed. It is expected that the individuals in this groups are on average the oldest. Concerning age, the goals they have in a relationship change. The focus is mainly on avoiding loneliness (Stevens, 2002) and fulfilling the needs of companionship. Children, for example, are frequently no longer an issue (Connidis et al., 2017). The fact that LAT relationships can provide a combination of intimacy and autonomy (Carter et al., 2015) seems to be especially important for older LATs. Often, older LAT individuals want to maintain their independence (Liefbroer et al., 2015; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009), so they do not have the intention to live together with their partner (Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009). One reason for this is that they do not want to care for their partner if he or she is sick (Lewin, 2017). Another central topic for widowed is the relationship to the dead partner. Often, widowed feel kind of attached to the deceased partner (Silverman & Klass, 1996) which can hinder the formation of a new relationship (Stevens, 2002) or can lead to an idealisation of the former relationship (Lopata, 1996) and thus can decrease the commitment to or satisfaction with the new partner. Additionally, Williams and Umberson (2004) argue that for older people it is a non-normative status not to be married. This can be transferred to LAT relationships: Elder and Rockwell (1979) argue regarding the concept of the social age that it is more unusual for older than for younger individuals to live apart from a partner. This could lead to more social pressure and more costs in their relationship. These higher costs accumulate over time. Taken together, older individuals have other obstacles than younger ones, but for many LAT also has significant advantages. Hence, the relationship satisfaction is expected to decrease steeper than for the on average younger individuals in the first and second group, and, but not steeper than for single parents. This leads to the second hypothesis.

*H2: The relationship satisfaction will decrease differently for LATs in various life stages.*

*2: For LATs who already cohabited, the decrease will be the lowest.*

*1: For LATs who never cohabited, the decrease in relationship satisfaction will be the second lowest.*

*4: For LATs who are divorced and widowed, the relationship satisfaction will decrease steeper than for those without cohabiting children, but not as steep as for single parents.*

*3: LATs with cohabiting children are expected to have the steepest decrease in their relationship satisfaction.*

## **4. Data, Measures, and Method**

### **4.1 Data**

Panel data about LATs is quite limited. There are two main reasons: First, the focus of surveys often lies on households and therefore excludes questions about partners living in a different home (Strohm et al., 2009). Second, people who do not cohabit are often automatically defined as being single (Roseneil, 2006).

The data in this work is from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS). The NKPS consists of four waves of which the first three will be used. Reason for the exclusion of wave four is the different questioning about the relationship satisfaction. The survey was conducted between 2002 and 2011. Between the start of the fieldwork of each wave are four years. The NKPS is a multi-actor panel study (NKPS, 2018). In the first wave, the NKPS had a response rate of 37.1% which leads to 8,161 respondents (Dykstra et al., 2005). Between the first and the second rate, the panel attrition composes of 9% non-contact and of 17% refusal to participate. Thus, the retention rate was about 75% (Dykstra et al., 2012). For the third wave, the retention rate was a bit lower (72.1%). In total, 4,390 respondents participated in the third wave (Merz et al., 2012), this sums up to about 54% of the individuals that participated in the first wave.

The sample selection is based on individuals who state to have a partner who is living in a different household in two consecutive waves. The questionnaire contains an item questioning if the respondent has a relationship which lasted for at least three months. Afterwards, the respondent is asked if the partner lives with the respondent. No further limitations are set about cohabitation, and it is up to the respondent to define the relationship type. Respondents who state to have the same partner but are not living with him or her either in first and the second wave or wave two and three are included in the sample. Additionally, those who corrected their relationship status from the wave before into being in a LAT relationship are added. As LATs are a rather small group, not too many restrictions are set to the sample. For example, respondents living with their parents as well as homosexual individuals are kept in the sample. Nevertheless, 13 respondents were deleted because they were married to their LAT partner. Further, those respondents who did not answer all necessary items about their relationship satisfaction are excluded. This limitation leads to a considerable decrease in the sample size, about 22% of the respondents in the initial sample are deleted because they did not state their relationship satisfaction in the two analysed waves.

### **4.2 Measurements**

The primary dependent variable for testing both hypotheses is the relationship satisfaction. In the self-completion part of the NKPS questionnaire, the respondents are asked to state their satisfaction with the relationship. Four items were used to define the satisfaction: We have a good relationship, The relationship with my partner makes me happy, Our relationship is strong,

The relationship with my partner is very stable. The respondents needed to state their agreement on a scale from 1 “strongly agree” to 5 “strongly disagree”. The answers to the first three items are used in this work. The item about the relationship stability is not included because it does not necessarily reflect satisfaction. The scale of each item is reversed, resulting in a scale from one to five where five indicates the highest satisfaction. These steps are done for both time points. The relationship satisfaction at time point one is also used as an independent variable.

The primary independent variable for H2 is belonging in a specific life stage. In this work, four different life stages are used: 1. Never cohabited, 2. Cohabited before, 3. Single parents with co-residential children, and 4. Divorced/Widowed, without co-resident children. The respondents are grouped based on their life stage at the first time point. In the main questionnaire of the first wave, the respondents answered questions about their prior relationships and if they ever cohabited before. In the following interviews, information about relationships and children since the last interview is again collected. This information is used to group the individuals. First, respondents that stated to have never lived with a partner before are merged into the first group. The other respondents are in a next step all combined into the second group. Subsequently, based on the marital status, the divorced and widowed are classified into the fourth group. Thus, respondents who cohabited before and are divorced or widowed are now in group four. The self-completion part of the NKPS contains a question about children living at home. If the answer is affirmative, the respondents are clustered as single parents. As only LATs are in the sample, it is unlikely that these children are the current partner’s children. The single parent’s group is defined at last, because respondents who are already in group two or four can be single parents, too. As the influence of the child at home is expected to be the biggest, those individuals should be in the third group. For each life stage, a dummy variable is generated, indicating if the respondent is part of this specific group.

Based on the literature, some control variables are selected. All control variables are based on the answers the respondents made at the first time of measurement. Used in this work are among others the age of the respondent. For married individuals, for example, age has a positive connection to marital quality (Umberson et al., 2005). Further, Tai et al. (2014) found that, at least for women, the association between age and relationship satisfaction is not linear. Therefore, age is added as a continuous variable, as a squared variable, and as age groups. Further, the sex of the respondent is used as control variable. There are contradictory prior results, Rusbult et al. (1998) found a higher relationship satisfaction for women, whereas Tai et al. (2014) concluded that women have lower odds of being very happy in a relationship compared to men. This result is in line with Umberson et al. (2005) discovery that women tend to state a lower marital quality. Sex is inserted as a dummy variable indicating females. Another control variable is the relationship duration. Like already mentioned, there are inconsistent results about the influence of the relationship duration on the relationship satisfaction. Some predict a negative influence (e.g. Shafer et al., 2014) and some a positive influence (e.g. Frazier & Esterly, 1990; Rusbult et al., 1998). Tai et al. (2014) further found a non-linear connection for women. The variable about the duration of the relationship is based on the year of the interview and the year in which the relationship started, so it indicates the completed years within the relationship. If some information is missing for a respondent either because they did not state a year or because they corrected the relationship status in the following wave and are thus not asked, a relationship duration is generated manually. For this purpose, the mean and the median relationship duration of similar people are compared, so people who are in the same life stage and who are in a relationship between the same waves. This can either be between wave one and two or between waves two and three. It is also considered if they are a LAT between wave two and three and had the same partner in wave one. A regression without the respondents for whom the relationship duration is computed was run and is compared to a regression with those individuals. In total, there are no salience changes. Thus, the individuals

are kept in the analyses. Additionally, the squared relationship duration is added. Furthermore, it is controlled for the education of the respondent. Tai et al. (2014) found that for men the relationship satisfaction is lower the higher educated. For women, there was not such an effect. Nevertheless, although Tai et al. (2014) unexpectedly found a negative effect, a positive effect of having a higher education on the relationship satisfaction is predicted. The education of the respondent is simplified into a dichotomous variable. Hence, the respondents are grouped into secondary education or lower and post-secondary education. Finally, the employment status is included as an economic factor. Therefore, a new variable is generated indicating the main activity of the respondent in three categories: Employed, student, or other. Because of the small sample, there are only a few control variables, and those are kept rather simplistic with only a few categories.

### **4.3 Analytical Approach**

The first step is to merge the three waves of the NKPS which are used for the analyses. Two variables are generated which indicate individuals who were in a LAT relationship two consecutive waves with the same partner, so either at wave one and two or wave two and three. Then, the whole dataset is changed into long format. In this way, each respondent has two rows. Now, only those respondents are kept twice in the data which were in a LAT relationship between wave one and wave two as well as between wave two and wave three. In a next step, the respondents who did not answer the items about their relationship quality in the two waves are deleted. Additionally, respondents who are married to their LAT partner are deleted. In total, some respondents are twice in the analyses and some only once. It is not differentiated in which waves the individuals are in LAT relationships, and the data is generalised into time point one and time point two.

In the analyses, the hypotheses are first checked in a descriptive way. For this purpose, the means of the three items about the relationship satisfaction (good relationship, happy relationship, strong relationship) are compared for the two time points. With this, the influence of time becomes visible. Firstly, the whole sample is analysed. Secondly, the different life stages are investigated separately. Afterwards, the multivariate analyses are carried out by performing ordered logistic regressions. The dependent variables are the three items about the relationship satisfaction a time point two. The main predicting variable for relationship satisfaction at time point two is the satisfaction as measured at time point one. In this way, the connection between the two measurements is calculated, and the coefficient provides information about the direction of change. The control variables are included in the analyses. For H2, in a first step associations are calculated for all individuals in a LAT relationship at wave one to investigate the connection between being in a specific life stage and the relationship satisfaction. Second, ordered logistic regressions like for H1 are conducted with the life stages as independent variables.

## **5. Results**

### **5.1 Sample**

To visualise the selectivity of the sample, the relationship developments of those who are in a LAT relationship in wave one are further regarded. Initially, 577 respondents have a LAT partner in wave one without being married to him or her. The most significant share of people who drop out of the sample is those who drop entirely out of the panel (27.9%). Moreover, 27.38% of the respondents still have the same partner but moved in together between wave one and wave two. These were probably the most satisfied respondents. 22.36% got separated, or the partner died. Only 22.36% of those respondents who are in a LAT relationship in wave one

can be included in the sample. This is the share of people who are still together with the same partner and still live separately at wave two. Therefore, most of the LAT individuals in the survey are not part of the sample. The different waves are four years apart, so only long-term LATs are in the sample. There is no information about long-term LAT and how they differ from short-term LAT, it could also be that they are more satisfied with their relationship as this is the kind of relationship they prefer. It is further expected that these relationships are very serious and very committed. In general, there could be some characteristics that differ for this group in comparison to short-term LATs or the general group of LATs. All results in this work are only valid for long-term LATs, and it is not known how and in which way they are generalisable to LATs in general.

After dropping those respondents who did not answer the three items about their relationship satisfaction in two waves and deleting two further observation because of illogical answers, the sample consists of 172 observations. All the characteristics which are described are referred to the first time of measurement. In the sample, there is an uneven distribution of gender, 49 are male, and 133 are female. Hence, about two-thirds of the sample is female. The age of the individuals in the sample varies between 18 and 79, while the mean age is 48.61 years. The highest level of education attained was grouped into secondary or lower and post-secondary. In the sample, most units had attained post-secondary education (about 63.95%). It should be noted that nine of the respondents are still mainly in education. To not further limit the size of the data, homosexual as well as heterosexual couples are included in the sample (20 individuals are in homosexual relationships). As already mentioned, two time points are needed. In the NKPS, two waves are at least four years apart. Thus, only long-term LATs are included in this sample. The relationship duration goes up to 60 years for the first time of measurement, and the mean is 7.56 years. As this is the mean of the first time of measurement, the individuals are in this relationship for at least four more years.

To give a better impression of the sample, table 1 gives an overview of the frequencies and means of the control variables for the different life stages.

**Table 1** Frequencies and means of the life stages

	Never Cohabited	Cohabited Before	Single Parents	Divorced/Widowed
Mean Age	37.26 years	47.27 years	43.89 years	58.63 years
Sex				
Female	52.38%	76.92%	97.22%	52.94%
Male	47.62%	23.08%	2.78%	47.06%
Mean Relationship Duration	8.38 years	7 years	5.5 years	8.37 years
Highest Education Attained				
Secondary or lower	40.48%	19.23%	25%	45.59%
Post-Secondary	59.52%	80.77%	75%	54.41%

**Table 1 continued**

	Never Cohabited	Cohabited Before	Single Parents	Divorced/Widowed
Main Activity				
Employed	54.76%	69.23%	66.67%	35.29%
Student	21.43%	-	-	-
Else	23.81%	30.77%	33.33%	64.71%

Source: NKPS, 2004; NKPS 2007, NKPS 2011

The first life stage consists of those individuals who never cohabited with a partner before. This group contains 42 of the 172 units which are in the sample. The age of the individuals in the group varies between 18 and 66 years. The mean age in this group is higher than expected and to make sure that the mean is not biased because of outliers, the median is checked. The median is 38.5 years and is thus similar to the mean. Consequently, the mean seems to be fitting to describe the distribution of the ages. Nevertheless, this group is, as assumed, on average younger than the others. Surprisingly, the average relationship duration is longer than for the other groups. The fact that the individuals in this group never cohabited could be an indicator that, at least some of them, do not want to share a home and prefer to live apart. Consequently, while respondents in other groups move together after a few years and drop out of the sample, the respondents in this groups stay in a LAT relationship. All of the nine respondents whose main activity is studying are in this group, which is similar to the group by Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009). Based on the finding by Mulder et al. (2006) that students have only a small risk for cohabitation and marriage, the high number of students could also be a reason for the long average relationship duration. The respondents in this group mainly live alone (69.05%), followed by those who still live with the parents (23.81%), which is probably the case because the youngest respondents in the sample are in this group. Moreover, 11 of the respondents are in a homosexual relationship which contributes to 26% of the individuals in group one and more than half of the homosexual respondents of the total sample. This could be an indicator for different attitudes towards living together between homosexual and heterosexual couples.

The second group, those individuals that cohabited before, contains 26 respondents. The age ranges from a minimum of 35 years to a maximum of 57 years. Consequently, the variance is way smaller than the one in the first group. This is contradictory to the expectations. All the respondents in this group for which we have information live in a one-person household. A majority of the individuals had one prior cohabitation, a few already were in two or three cohabiting relationships, and one person had four prior cohabitations. Three respondents did not answer the question in the survey, and the number of prior cohabitations is thus unknown. Five individuals in this group have children that live outside the household. Further, two of the respondents in this group are still married to their ex-partner. As they did not have experienced the event of a divorce, they are in this group.

In the third life stage are 36 single parents. Their age varies between 31 and 56 years. The majority of the respondents in this group are females, which does support the fact that most often children tend to live with their mother when the parents split up (Duncan et al., 2013). The respondents in this group have between one and five kids. As all single parents are grouped, regardless of their marital status, the respondents in this groups are in this respect quite heterogeneous. More precisely, 10 were never married, four are still married, 18 are divorced, and four are widowed. All different marital statuses are included in this group because it is expected that the cohabiting child will have a stronger influence on the relationship satisfaction

than the marital status. Unfortunately, the household type that respondents in this group stated does not match with other answers. Although all respondents do have concerning some variables a child living at home, 11 persons stated to live in a one-person household, and one stated to live in a one-person household with another person. However, the rest stated to live in a single parent household.

The group of the divorced and widowed is with 68 respondents the biggest group. Nevertheless, division into two groups is not reasonable as 56 are divorced, and only 12 individuals are widowed. The respondents in this group are as expected on average the oldest. The youngest person in life stage four is 36 years old, and the oldest one is 79 years old. In comparison to the other groups, the individuals in this group have the lowest share of higher educated. This could be a cohort effect that shows the increasing importance of education in younger cohorts. A majority of the individuals is not mainly employed, probably because many respondents are already retired. There are only two different household types in this group: 63 persons live in a one-person household, and the others live in a household together with one other person. For one, the household type is unknown. This group contains six of the individuals that live in a homosexual relationship. Additionally, the individual with the most extended relationship duration (60 years) is in this group, which is probably influenced by the fact that the oldest respondents are in this group (Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009).

## 5.2 Descriptive Results

The means of the relationship satisfaction of the two time points are compared to test H1 in a descriptive way. Each item is regarded individually. The results are in table 2. Further, the average relationship satisfaction over all three items compared for the two time points.

**Table 2** Changes in relationship satisfaction

Good relationship		Happy relationship		Strong relationship		Total	
Time Point 1	Time Point 2	Time Point 1	Time Point 2	Time Point 1	Time Point 2	Time Point 1	Time Point 2
4.2791	4.2326	4.2151	4.157	4.068	4.128	4.188	4.1725

Source: NKPS, 2004; NKPS 2007, NKPS 2011

The first item is the one about the quality of the relationship. The comparison shows that the average satisfaction decreases from 4.2791 to 4.2326. This indicates that on average, respondents state their relationship as less good four years later. The happiness with the partner draws a similar picture. The mean at the first time point is 4.2151 and at the second time point 4.157, therefore the happiness with the partner declines, too. An exception is the item about how strong the relationship is. The average increases from 4.068 to 4.128. Thus, the respondents evaluate their relationship as stronger at the second time point.

Looking at the average satisfaction for all three items reveals a decrease from 4.188 to 4.1725. The difference is quite small. In total, two of the three items as well as the average satisfaction declines which is in line with Mitnick et al. (2009) and Shafer et al. (2014). Nevertheless, the strength of the relationship increases. Therefore, it is hard to predict a general decrease or increase in relationship satisfaction for LAT individuals. H1 cannot be fully supported.

The changes in the relationship satisfaction are regarded individually for the different life stages to investigate H2. Again, each item is analysed separately. Table 3 summaries the results.

**Table 3** Changes in relationship satisfaction for the different life stages

	Good relationship		Happy relationship		Strong relationship		Total	
	Time Point 1	Time Point 2	Time Point 1	Time Point 2	Time Point 1	Time Point 2	Time Point 1	Time Point 2
Life stage 1	4.4762	4.381	4.2857	4.3571	4.2143	4.4286	4.3254	4.3889
Life stage 2	4.1154	4.1923	4.0385	4.1538	4.1154	4.1538	4.0897	4.1667
Life stage 3	4.0556	4.0278	4.0834	3.9167	3.8611	3.7778	4	3.9074
Life stage 4	4.3382	4.2647	4.3089	4.1618	4.0735	4.1176	4.2402	4.1814

Source: NKPS, 2004; NKPS 2007, NKPS 2011

Firstly, the respondents who never cohabited are further regarded. For them, the happiness as well as the strength of the relationship increases while the respondents evaluate their relationship as less good at the second time point compared to the first time point. Further, there is a small increase in their average relationship satisfaction. Consequently, the change of the mean relationship satisfaction, the happiness and the strength of the relationship are contrary to the expectation. The individuals in this group have on average the highest relationship satisfaction at the first time point, which fits the high starting relationship satisfaction that was predicted.

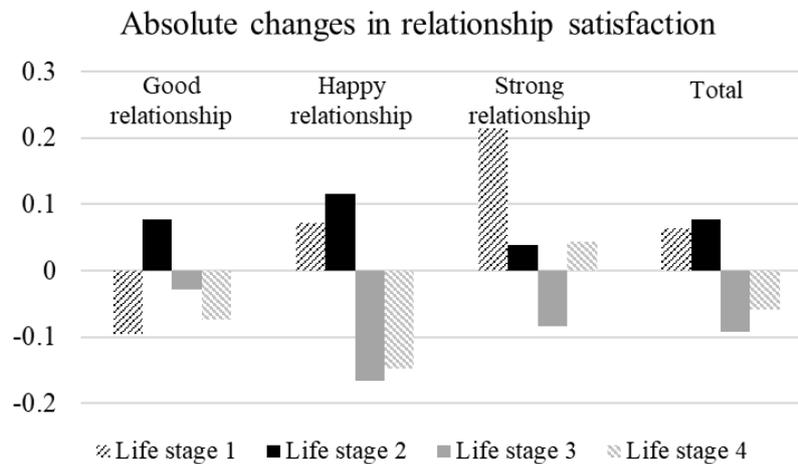
Secondly, those who cohabited before are regarded. All three indicators of the relationship satisfaction used and consequently also the average relationship satisfaction increases. The happiness of the respondents rises the strongest compared to the other two items. Interestingly, the respondents in this groups have the lowest happiness of all four life stages. Furthermore, the individuals in this group are the only ones that indicate that their relationship is better on the second time point. The increase in the average relationship satisfaction is slightly bigger than for those who never cohabited, but the relationship satisfaction is still lower than for group one. Again, the change of the relationship satisfaction is the opposite to what was predicted in H2.

Thirdly, the single parents are investigated. For all three items, the respondents state a lower satisfaction with their relationship at the second time point in comparison to the first time point. Hence, their average relationship satisfaction decreases, too. Consequently, the relationship satisfaction develops as predicted and decreases over time. Comparing the different life stages, the single parents have the lowest satisfaction with their relationship at the starting point and states that their relationship is less good and less strong than the respondents in the other life stages. Moreover, they are the only group that has a declining strength of the relationship.

Finally, the last group investigated is the one of the divorced and widowed individuals. For them, the strength of the relationship does increase over time. However, they state lower happiness in their relationship and that their relationship is worse at the second time point than at the first time point. In total, the relationship satisfaction decreases. This change is a bit smaller than for single parents.

Next, the changes in the relationship satisfaction are compared for the different life stages. Figure 3 graphically depicts the changes in the relationship satisfaction in the three items and the average satisfaction. Because only the changes are essential, the relationship satisfaction at time point one is transferred into zero. A bar above zero indicates an increase, a bar below zero a decrease.

**Figure 3** Changes in relationship satisfaction for the different life stage



Source: NKPS, 2004; NKPS 2007, NKPS 2011

Figure 3 supports that there is no general trend for each life stage. For example, respondents who never cohabited (life stage one) have the biggest increase in the strength of their relationship but also have the biggest decline in how good they rate their relationship. The relationship satisfaction of the single parents (life stage three) declines for all items, but although they have the sharpest decrease in strength and happiness of their relationship, the decline in the quality of the relationship seems smaller than for respondents that never cohabited and for divorced and widowed. Therefore, it is hard to describe an overall trend for the life stages. There seem to be different patterns for the various life stages. The mean relationship satisfaction for those who never cohabited and those who cohabited before increases, and the one for single parents and divorced and widowed decreases. This is in line with the contradictory results concerning the development of relationship satisfaction over time (Franzier & Esterly, 1990; Mitnick et al., 2009; Rusbult et al., 1998; Shafer et al., 2014). In total, these changes are quite small. However, the expected order is the same than predicted in H2. The relationship satisfaction decreases the steepest for single parents and the second steepest for divorced and widowed. For those who cohabited before was a slower decrease in relationship satisfaction predicted than for those that never cohabited, and the data show a steeper increase. Nevertheless, H2 can not be fully supported, because there is no overall decrease in relationship satisfaction and because there is no general trend for the life stages over the three different items. However, there are some differences between the life stages, although they are quite small.

### 5.3 Multivariate Results

In general, for all analyses, the three items about relationship satisfaction are compared. Firstly, H1 is tested. As a dependent variable, the relationship satisfaction at time point two is used. The relationship satisfaction at time one and further the age and the sex of the individual, the relationship duration, the main activity and the highest education attained are added as control variables. Relationship satisfaction at time point one refers to the item that is used as the dependent variable in each regression. An overview of the results is given in table 4.

**Table 4** Results of ordered logistic regressions with the three items indicating relationship satisfaction at time point two as the dependent variable

	Regression 1, good relationship	Regression 2, happy relationship	Regression 3, strong relationship
	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.
Relationship satisfaction time point 1	1.1256***	0.9661***	1.0157***
Age respondent	0.1054	0.0524	0.0779
Age respondent squared	-0.0012	-0.0008	-0.0006
Age groups	0.1441	0.3719	-0.2844
Sex respondent	-0.4370	-0.4817	-0.5472*
Relationship duration	-0.0714	-0.0823	-0.05856
Relationship duration squared	0.0019	0.0026	0.0026
Highest education attained	0.057	0.11	0.0094
Main activity (ref. employed)			
Student	0.5595	1.1398	1.8585*
Else	0.5805	0.2691	0.2180
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.0974	0.0963	0.1070
N	172	172	172

\*\*\*p<0.001 \*\*p<0.05 \*p<0.1

Source: NKPS, 2004; NKPS 2007, NKPS 2011

As visible in table 4, not many variables seem to have a significant effect on the dependent variables. This could be a consequence of the small sample size. Therefore, the control variables are further regarded even if they are not significant.

Regression one analyses the item about the quality of the relationship. Not surprisingly, there is a positive, significant effect of the relationship satisfaction with this item at time point one on the relationship satisfaction with this item on time point two. None of the added control variables seem to be significant. Nevertheless, some trend can be derived from the results. The age of the respondent is added in three different ways. Either, it could be that age increases the ordered log-odds of being more satisfied with the quality of the relationship. Or, the ordered log-odds of being more satisfied with the quality increase as age went up and remain stable in older years or slightly decreases again. Moreover, the negative coefficient for the sex indicates that the ordered log-odds of being more satisfied with the quality of the relationship at time point two are lower for females than for males. Additionally, an increase of the relationship duration could decrease the ordered log-odds of being more satisfied with the quality of the relationship, or the effect is non-linear. This would mean that an increase in relationship duration first decrease the ordered log-odds of being more satisfied with the quality of the relationship and then remain stable. Having a post-secondary education does increase the ordered log-odds of being more satisfied with the quality of the relationship. The effect of the

main activity is calculated with being employed as the reference category. The results indicate that students and respondents in the category else seem to have higher ordered log-odds of being more satisfied than employed individuals four years later.

The results of the second regression show that the happiness with the relationship at the time point one has a positive, significant effect of on the happiness with the relationship on time point two. Like in regression one, none of the control variables is significant. Nevertheless, it either seems like the ordered log-odds of being more satisfied with the quality increase as age went up and remain stable in older years or slightly decrease again, or the ordered log-odds increase linearly. The sex of the respondent has a negative coefficient, indicating that the ordered log-odds of being more satisfied with the quality of the relationship are lower for females than for males. For relationship duration, if the linear effect is more likely, an increase in the relationship duration is connected to lower ordered log-odds of being happier with the relationship at time point two. If the connection is non-linear, an increase of the relationship duration could first decrease the ordered log-odds of being more satisfied with the quality of the relationship and then remain stable for higher relationship durations. There is a positive effect of higher education, so those with post-secondary education have higher ordered log-odds of being more happy with the relationship than those with lower education. Again, being employed is used as the reference category when calculating the effect of the main activity. Like in regression one, those who are students or in the category else seem to have higher ordered log-odds of being more satisfied than employed individuals at time point two.

Regression three has the strength of the relationship at time point two as the response variable. The results show that the effect of the strength at time point one is positive and significant, like in regression one and two. The only control variable that is slightly significant is the sex of the respondent. It indicates that being female compared to being male decreases the ordered log-odds of having a strong relationship four years later. Concerning age, a linear effect would indicate an increase of the ordered log-odds of having a stronger relationship. The non-linear effect would indicate that the ordered log-odds of having a stronger relationship increase as age went up and remains stable in older years or slightly decreases again. Additionally, an increase of the relationship duration could decrease the ordered log-odds of having a stronger relationship, or an increase in relationship duration first decreases the ordered log-odds having a stronger relationship and then remain stable. Having a post-secondary education does increase the ordered log-odds of having a stronger relationship at time point two compared to having a lower education. Additionally, there is a slightly significant difference between employed and students, showing that students have higher ordered log-odds of having a stronger relationship four years later. Further, the same seems to apply to respondents in the category else compared to employed, but this effect is not significant.

In general, the results show, that the relationship satisfaction at time point one has a significant, positive influence on the relationship satisfaction at time point two. Because none of the variables indicating age is significant, it is not sure if the effect of age is linear on non-linear. Nevertheless, an increase in age seems to increase relationship satisfaction for some ages. Even if the effect was more likely to be non-linear, the effect would differ to the findings of Tai et al. (2014) for women in their analyses. They suggested that satisfaction declines as age went up and then remained stable. For all three items, there are indications that females seem to have a lower relationship satisfaction than males four years later. This finding matches the works of Tai et al. (2014) and Umberson et al. (2005). Furthermore, relationship duration seems to be negatively connected to relationship quality. The results for the non-linear effect of the relationship duration matches the results that Tai et al. (2014) had for women. An increase in relationship duration first decreases the relationship satisfaction and remains stable for higher relationship durations. The individuals with post-secondary education have a slightly higher relationship satisfaction for years later than those with secondary education or lower. This

finding is consistent with the expectation but contradictory to results by Tai et al. (2014). Additionally, employed seem to have a lower relationship satisfaction at the second time point than students and others, the difference between students and employed on the strength of the relationship is even slightly significant.

The added control variables from the first time point do change the effect of the relationship satisfaction from time point one on time point two. Therefore, even characteristics from four years ago can influence the relationship satisfaction and thus changes in the relationship satisfaction. Nevertheless, an increase in the relationship satisfaction at the first time of measurement leads to an increase in the relationship satisfaction at the second time of measurement, which does not indicate that H1 can be supported. Interestingly, the results concerning which variables are significant are for quality and happiness more similar compared to those for the strength of the relationship. It could be, that the first to items are more connected to each other and that the strength has some different underlying mechanisms.

As a first step to test H2, associations are calculated. Therefore, all individuals which are in a LAT relationship in the first wave are used, independent from their relationship status in the other waves. In this way, the number of respondents in the analyses is maximised. The results are listed in table 5.

**Table 5** Associations between the life stages and the relationship satisfaction for all LATs in wave one

	Regression 1, good relationship Coef.	Regression 2, happy relationship Coef.	Regression 3, strong relationship Coef.
Life stage (ref. life stage 2)			
Life stage 1	0.0479	0.0099	0.1875
Life stage 3	-0.2077	0.0492	-0.1100
Life stage 4	0.3784	0.6112	0.2646
Age respondent	-0.0378	-0.0646	-0.0682
Age respondent squared	0.0004	0.0006	0.0006
Age groups	-0.0479	-0.0848	0.0036
Sex respondent	-0.0978	-0.0844	0.0347
Relationship duration	-0.0921**	-0.0716**	-0.0579*
Relationship duration squared	0.0014*	0.0007	0.0008
Highest education attained	0.1077	0.2408	0.2924
Main activity (ref. employed)			
Student	-0.1921	-0.0665	-0.4169
Else	-0.3352	-0.2469	-0.0653

**Table 5 continued**

	Regression 1, good relationship	Regression 2, happy relationship	Regression 3, strong relationship
	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.0263	0.0303	0.0214
N	498	498	495

\*\*\*p<0.001 \*\*p<0.05 \*p<0.1

Source: NKPS, 2004; NKPS 2007, NKPS 2011

In regression one, there are no significant differences between life stage one, three and four compared to life stage two on the expected relationship quality. However, respondents who never cohabited and divorced and widowed seem to have slightly higher log-odds of having a higher relationship quality, while for single parents the log-odds are lower in comparison to respondents who cohabited before. The only control variables that are significant are the relationship duration and the squared term of the relationship duration. Thus, the effect of the relationship duration on the ordered log-odds of having a higher relationship quality is non-linear. It indicates that the ordered log-odds of having a higher relationship quality decrease as relationship duration increases and remain stable for higher relationship durations. None of the variables indicating age has a significant influence on the quality of the relationship. Nevertheless, either, it could be that as age increases the ordered log-odds of having a higher relationship quality decrease. Or, the ordered log-odds of higher relationship quality decrease as age went up and remain stable in older years. Additionally, the ordered log-odds of having a better relationship seem to be higher for males compared to females and for higher educated individuals compared to the ones who have secondary education or less. The main activity indicates that employed respondents have higher log-odds of having a higher relationship quality than students or others.

Additionally, regression two shows that the differences between life stage one, three and four compared to life stage two on the expected happiness in the relationship are insignificant. Nevertheless, individuals who never cohabited, divorced and widowed and single parents seem to have slightly higher log-odds of having higher happiness with their relationship in comparison to the respondents who cohabited before. The results further encourage that the effect of the relationship duration is linear, the ordered log-odds of having a higher happiness with the relationship decrease as relationship duration increases. For age, all the three variations are not significant. It could be that age decreases the ordered log-odds of being happier in the relationship or the ordered log-odds of being happier decrease as age goes up and remain stable in older years or rather slightly decrease again. Further, women are more likely to have lower ordered log-odds of having higher happiness in their relationship than men. Additionally, the differences between employed in comparison to students and others are not significant but suggest that employed have higher log-odds of being very happy in their relationship.

The third regression further show that there seem to be no significant differences between life stage one, three and four in comparison to life stage two on the expected relationship strength. However, respondents who never cohabited and divorced and widowed seem to have slightly higher log-odds of having a stronger relationship and single parents have lower log-odds in comparison to respondents who cohabited before. The coefficient for relationship duration is slightly significant, thus a linear effect is supported. An increase of the relationship duration decreases the ordered log-odds of having a stronger relationship. The effect of age is not significant. Age either decreases the ordered log-odds having a stronger relationship or the ordered log-odds of relationship strength decrease as age went up and remain stable in older years or slightly decreases again. Interestingly, in this regression, females seem to have a bit

higher ordered log-odds of having a stronger relationship than males. Additionally, respondents with post-secondary education seem to have higher ordered log-odds of having a stronger relationship. Furthermore, employed have higher ordered log-odds of having a strong relationship than students and others. All effects apart from the relationship duration are not significant.

To further test H2, ordered logistic regressions are calculated. In comparison to the analyses for H1, the life stages are used as the main independent variable. The results are given in table 6.

**Table 6** Results of the ordered logistic regressions with the three items indicating relationship satisfaction at time point two as the dependent variable and inclusion of the life stages

	Regression 1, good relationship Coef.	Regression 2, happy relationship Coef.	Regression 3, strong relationship Coef.
Life stage (ref. life stage 2)			
Life stage 1	0.3052	0.1931	0.6519
Life stage 3	-0.3199	-0.6906	-0.5173
Life stage 4	-0.1029	0.041	0.0087
Relationship satisfaction time point 1	1.0882***	0.9667***	0.9947***
Age respondent	0.1386	0.0912	0.148
Age respondent squared	-0.0015*	-0.0012	-0.0012
Age groups	0.0984	0.3077	-0.3599
Sex respondent	-0.3172	-0.2596	-0.2911
Relationship duration	-0.0864*	-0.0978*	-0.0734
Relationship duration squared	0.0021*	0.0029*	0.0025
Highest education attained	0.0585	0.1527	0.0691
Main activity (ref. employed)			
Student	0.4998	1.0574	1.864*
Else	0.623	0.3323	0.2846
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.1009	0.1045	0.1174
N	172	172	172

\*\*\*p<0.001 \*\*p<0.05 \*p<0.1

Source: NKPS, 2004; NKPS 2007, NKPS 2011

In regression one, the results show no significant differences between life stage one, three and four compared to life stage two on the expected relationship quality. Nevertheless, respondents who never cohabited seem to have slightly higher log-odds of having a higher relationship

quality, while for single parents and divorced and widowed the log-odds are lower for time point two in comparison to respondents who cohabited before. Like in the test for H1 and expectable, the relationship quality at time point one has a significant, positive effect. Additionally, the effect of the squared age is slightly significant, confirming the idea of the negative, non-linear influence of age. Furthermore, the results approve the idea of the non-linear effect of relationship duration. It indicates that the ordered log-odds of having a higher relationship quality at time point two decrease as relationship duration increases and remain stable for higher relationship durations. The other control variables are not significant. However, the coefficients indicate an increase in the ordered log-odds of having a higher relationship quality for males compared to females and for higher educated individuals compared to the ones who have secondary education or less. The main activity indicates that employed respondents have lower log-odds of having a higher relationship quality than students or others four years later.

The second regression further reveals that also the differences between life stage one, three and four compared to life stage two on the expected happiness in the relationship are insignificant. However, individuals who never cohabited and divorced and widowed seem to have slightly higher log-odds of having higher happiness with their relationship, while for single parents the log-odds are lower at the second time point in comparison respondents who cohabited before. The results further encourage that the effect of the relationship duration is non-linear, as this coefficient is slightly significant. Thus, the ordered log-odds of having a higher happiness with the relationship at time point two decrease as relationship duration increases and remain stable for higher relationship durations. For age, none of the three variations is significant. Either, it could be that age increases the ordered log-odds of being happier in the relationship. Or, the ordered log-odds of being happier increase as age goes up and remain stable in older years or slightly decrease again. Further, women seem to have lower ordered log-odds of having higher happiness with their relationship than men four years later. Like in regression one, the differences between students and others in comparison to employed are not significant but indicate that employed have lower log-odds of having a very happy relationship at time point two.

Regression three has similar results regarding the life stage. There seem to be no significant differences between life stage one, three and four in comparison to life stage two on the expected relationship strength. Regardless that the differences are not significant, respondents who never cohabited and divorced and widowed seem to have slightly higher log-odds of having a stronger relationship at time point two and single parents have lower log-odds in comparison to respondents who cohabited before. The only control variable that is highly significant is the stated strength of the relationship at time point one. Furthermore, the difference between being a student and being employed is slightly significant, indicating that students have higher ordered log-odds of having a strong relationship four years later. The same trend applies to respondents in the category else in comparison to employed, although this difference is not significant. Age either increases the ordered log-odds having a stronger relationship or the ordered log-odds of relationship strength increase as age went up and remain stable in older years or slightly decreases again. For relationship duration, an increase of the relationship duration could decrease the ordered log-odds of having a stronger relationship, or an increase in relationship duration first decreases the ordered log-odds having a stronger relationship and then remain stable. Additionally, males and respondents with post-secondary education seem to have higher ordered log-odds of having a stronger relationship at the second time point, although both effects are not significant.

In total, the results show a positive, significant effect of the relationship satisfaction on time point one on the relationship satisfaction at time point two. This finding is similar to those from testing the first hypothesis. The squared term of age has a slightly significant influence on the

quality of the relationship four years later, indicating that the effect of age is most likely to be non-linear. Also, Tai et al. (2014) found a non-linear effect of age, but it was the other way around. Interestingly, the effect of age was similar to Tai et al. (2014) in the associations, but not significant. Age seems to have different short-term and long-term effects. There is an accordance for sex between the three regressions with the life stages. This finding matches to H1, Tai et al. (2014) and Umberson et al. (2005) because it implies that women tend to state a lower relationship satisfaction than men. Concerning the associations, for quality and happiness women also tend to be more satisfied. For the strength, the effect is the other way around, but insignificant. Therefore, it is expected that this result is an outlier. Tai et al. (2014) indicated that the influence of relationship duration is non-linear. This finding is supported for quality and happiness of the relationship four years later. Thus, the relationship satisfaction decreases with an increase in relationship duration and remains stable for higher relationship durations. For the strength, this connection is not significant. In the regressions calculating the associations, the relationship duration also has a non-linear effect on the quality. For happiness and strength, the effect is more likely to be linear, thus higher relationship duration is associated with a lower relationship satisfaction. The results for education are in accordance with all regressions, the individuals with post-secondary education seem to have a higher relationship satisfaction in the first wave as well as four years later than those with lower education. This finding is consistent with the results for H1 and is, again, contradictory to the results of Tai et al. (2014) for men. Additionally, the associations show that for wave one, employees have more likely a higher relationship satisfaction than students and others. Contradictory, students and respondents probably have a higher relationship satisfaction than employees at the second time point. Although most of these differences are not significant, there seem to be differences for the influence of the main activity on the relationship satisfaction at the same time and four years later. As education seems to increase the relationship satisfaction, studying might be a way to secure higher relationship satisfaction at a later point. For the strength of the relationship, the difference between students and employed is even slightly significant. This underlines the suggestion that strength seems to differ from the quality and the happiness of the relationship. However, the influences of the different life stages compared to the second life stage do not differ significantly. There is no general answer which life stage is connected to higher relationship satisfaction or changes in relationship satisfaction. For example, having cohabited before seems to lead to a higher relationship quality four years later, being divorced or widowed seems to lead to higher happiness and higher strength of the relationship. Therefore, there is no definite order in how steep the relationship satisfaction of the different life stages changes. These findings do not support the second hypothesis.

## **6. Conclusion and Discussion**

This work investigated the differences between LAT subgroups and their changes in the relationship satisfaction, more precisely for different life stages. For this purpose, the interdependence theory, the life course approach and prior literature were combined to build a conceptual model that indicated an influence of time on the relationship satisfaction and additionally an effect of the life stage of an individual on changes in the relationship satisfaction. Firstly, it was expected that the relationship satisfaction decreases over time. The interdependence theory stated that through the comparison level, prior experiences influence the relationship satisfaction. Thus, secondly, it was anticipated that respondents in various life stage, based on prior relationship experiences, differ concerning their changes in relationship satisfaction.

The analyses in this work did not fully support the first hypothesis that the relationship satisfaction of long-term LAT relationships generally decreases over time. The happiness and quality of a relationship seemed to decrease, while the strength of the relationship increased.

Consequently, the concept of relationship satisfaction may be too broad and for the different items, there may be different underlying mechanisms. For example, the increase of the strength over time could be explained by an increasing feeling of belonging to the partner. Thus, the partners grow closer together. Nevertheless, being attached to someone does not necessarily influence the quality or happiness.

Further, the influence of being in a specific life stages did not differ significantly on the changes in the relationship satisfaction. Additionally, the associations showed that even when looking at one time point the life stages do not differ significantly concerning their relationship satisfaction. Either, there is not such an effect, or the life stages are not elaborated enough and are constructed too broadly. The individuals in the groups were still very heterogeneous, for example, the age varied a lot within the groups, and the single parents group did include different marital statuses. In addition, widowed and divorced were grouped together although they could differ from each other. Maybe the criteria by which the groups were distinguished are not sufficient to subdivide the sample into meaningful groups that are homogenous enough to differ significantly from each other. Even though the differences between the groups were insignificant, they did exist. Not all groups had a decreasing relationship satisfaction. The descriptive results showed an increase in all items for the respondents who cohabited before and in at least one item for individuals which never cohabited and for divorced and widowed. However, the insignificant differences between the life stages were compared to the expectations. For example, as expected, the respondents who never cohabited before started with the highest relationship satisfaction. This could be a consequence of less everyday life stress. Basing the expectation about the decrease in relationship satisfaction for respondents that never cohabited before on the unrealised romantic beliefs may be wrong. There is evidence that romantic expectations do decrease with age (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2017), so maybe the respondents in the first group became more realistic over time. In this way, their romantic beliefs were met and thus lead to increasing relationship satisfaction. Alternatively, romantic beliefs could be independent of prior relationship experiences and are more interlinked to individual characteristics. Interestingly, the first group seemed to be very differentiated. On the one hand, they showed the biggest increase in the strength of the relationship. On the other hand, they have the largest decrease in their relationship quality. This underlines the idea that the items seemed to differ strongly from each other. For respondents who cohabited before, a slower decrease was predicted. The results showed a stronger increase. This group is the only one that stated their relationship got better in all items over the four years. With respect to the work of Tai et al. (2014), a possible explanation could be based on different intentions to move in together. Individuals in this group already shared a home with a partner, which could be an indicator that LAT may not be their preferred relationship type, but they would rather live together with their partner. Tai et al. (2014) concluded that LATs with the intention to move together have a higher relationship satisfaction. Therefore, more respondents in this group could have the intention to move together with their partner which would explain the increase in the relationship satisfaction. Further, Shafer et al. (2014) found that lower, more realistic expectations towards a relationship lead to higher relationship satisfaction. Respondents who cohabited before having more and diverse relationship experiences than respondents who never cohabited, so probably have more realistic expectations. This in combination that they do not have to consider others (like co-residing children) could lead to the general increase of relationship satisfaction. The single parents had the steepest decrease in relationship satisfaction and the lowest relationship satisfaction at the first time point. This supports the idea of more stress and the higher risk for conflicts than for the other groups (De Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009; Stewart et al., 2003; Umberson et al., 2010). They often do not live apart because they prefer this relationship type, but because of their children (De Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013; Liefbroer et al., 2015; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009). Therefore, to a certain amount, they “sacrifice” for their children. Further, single parents had the biggest

decline in strength and happiness of the relationship. Again, a possible explanation could be that not the relationship to the partner but to their children has priority and thus they invest less. In conclusion, no support was found for the second hypothesis because there is no general decrease in relationship satisfaction and it is not possible to order the different life stages concerning their changes in the relationship satisfaction in a logical way.

In total, it must be kept in mind that these results only apply to long-term LATs. Maybe the results reflect characteristics that are unique for long-term LATs, or they could also just be valid for this particular sample. Nevertheless, the study was a first step to gain insight into the influence of belonging in a specific subgroup on changes in the relationship satisfaction. Although there were no significant differences between the life stages, some specifics for the life stages could be observed.

## **6.1 Limitations**

One major limitation of this study was the size of the sample. With 172 respondents, the sample was quite small. In general, those that choose a LAT relationship are quite selective. Additionally, the time gaps between the waves influence the selectivity of the sample. As two time points are needed in this research, there are only those in the sample who stay in a LAT relationship. This is problematic as the NKPS waves are four years apart and this is quite a long time for LAT relationships. For example, in a German sample, after two years relationship duration 33% of the LAT relationship had separated. Further, 24% of first-partnership and 35% in higher-order relationships moved in together (Schnor, 2015). After four years the numbers are consequently even higher. Individuals with higher relationship satisfaction transit to cohabitation or marriage and those with lower relationship satisfaction break up. Consequently, this work only included long-term LATs. It is not known in which way long-term LATs differ from short-term LATs or the general group of individuals living apart. Moreover, the reasons for living apart were not part of the questionnaire and thus could not be included in the analyses. Not all the partners of the respondents participated in the survey, so it was not possible to include their perspectives.

This work only focused on respondents in the Netherlands, so only one country is included. Therefore, the results are part of the unique setting of the Netherlands, and it is unknown if in other countries the results would be the same. In Europe, the Dutch values are most similar with the Scandinavian countries. They are characterised by the lowest level of religion and the highest disapproval towards traditional family norms (Georgas et al., 2004). In the Netherlands, the prevailing opinion is that sexual behaviour is a personal issue (Halman & Luijkx, 2008). Thus, people in the Netherlands are quite free to choose the relationship form they prefer without being pressured by the society. Generalising the results of this work can be problematic, as it is probable that the satisfaction within a LAT relationship is influenced by the values and norms that are prevalent in their specific culture. If marriage is the ideal relationship type in a country, their view about LAT relationship could be more critical (Connidis et al., 2017) and thus influence the individuals.

In general, intimate relationships are very complex. Even in the interdependence theory changes in the relationship satisfaction can be explained in two ways: Either because of changing demands or because of changes in the partner's behaviour (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Further, the complexity increases the risk that the influence of special external and internal factors like the character of the respondent are underestimated. The fact that the control variables in this work do only slightly help explaining changes in the relationship satisfaction underlines this point.

## 6.2 Future Research

In general, the number of LAT couples will probably rise (Tai et al., 2014; Roseneil, 2006), leading to an increasing share of the society. Despite an increasing amount of research about LATs, not much is known about the circumstances that lead to a decrease or an increase in relationship satisfaction for LAT couples, but also in comparison to other relationship types. LATs have the lowest relationship satisfaction (Tai et al., 2014), but they are a very heterogenous group (Strohm et al., 2009). We do not know which characteristics lead to the lowest relationship satisfaction. For this reason, more research about different LAT subgroups and their relationship satisfaction could be useful. For example, as already stated, the differentiation by Roseneil (2006) is well known. But do people who live regretfully apart and those who live gladly apart differ concerning their relationship satisfaction?

Relationship satisfaction is an essential issue in family research and can have a significant influence on the total well-being of an individual (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015). Therefore, further investigation of this topic can improve the understanding of how relationship satisfaction works and develops, especially for LAT couples. In this work, three different items indicating the relationship satisfaction were analysed: The quality of the relationship, the happiness of the respondent, and the self-stated strength of the relationship. The results indicate that the influence of the used independent variables on the different item seems to differ. Especially for the strength of the relationship seem to exist different patterns compared to the quality and the happiness of the relationship. Firstly, it is not known how this finding is unique for individuals in LAT relationship or long-term LATs in particular. Secondly, further research could focus on investigating if there are further differences between different items indicating relationship satisfaction. Additionally, the influence of some factors (like age and the main activity) seem to have a different influence on the relationship satisfaction at the same time and at a later time. Research could help to gain a better understanding of these mechanisms.

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