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Over the years, love lives and family lives have become more diverse and more complex. As part of this, singles in the partner market are increasingly diverse in terms of their relationship histories. Many have lived with a partner before, experienced the dissolution of one or more prior cohabitations or marriages, and some have children, either living with them or elsewhere. Experiences from past relationships may be an important factor in how people move on and into new couple relationships.

In this dissertation, I sought an answer to the question: What roles do prior relationship experiences and children born before the current relationship play in the process of union formation? Union formation refers to establishing a joint household with a romantic partner (i.e. starting co-residence) and is a key life-course event; here, I considered both first and higher-order unions. To improve our understanding of who does and does not enter into co-residence with their partner, I started my research by looking into the alternative of living-apart-together (LAT), with couples living in separate households. As the common phrase ‘moving in together’ suggests, union formation is inherently about moving. The spatial aspect of union formation therefore played a central role in my research, and I focussed on long-distance moving (also referred to as internal migration) and where parent’s children live after separation – with them, nearby or some distance away.

I conducted five empirical studies, each with its own focus, sub-questions and data. Chapter 2 centred on experiences of partner commitment in LAT relationships, Chapters 3 and 4 dealt with the transition from LAT to co-residence and Chapter 5 examined parents’ spatial mobility in relation to family complexity. Chapter 6 is a short data-driven assessment of where children are registered versus reported to live after parental separation. From these studies, it became evident that prior relationship experiences and children play a role in several steps and aspects of the union formation process: partner commitment, the choice to live apart versus together, the decision where to live as a couple, and spatial mobility as a single, repartnering or repartnered parent.
Conclusions and discussion

7.1 Summary of main findings

7.1.1 Commitment in LAT relationships

I started my research by studying the alternative or precursor to a co-residential union: living-apart-together. Through interviews with men and women in LAT relationships, Chapter 2 addressed the following research questions: *What shapes the partner commitment experiences of those in a LAT relationship?* and *How is their commitment interlinked with their choice for LAT and future plans for their relationship?* The interviews revealed that most LATs were emotionally highly attached to their partner, but that their commitment to maintaining their relationship in the future was less strong and clear-cut. They emphasised the significant uncertainty when it came to the future and the central importance of the relationship quality and satisfaction above all. Younger LATs without children and without prior union experiences envisioned themselves being in a cohabiting relationship and having children in the future – if not with their current partner, then with another. At the same time, they kept an open stance towards the future of their relationship, some referring to the high divorce rates. Those LATs who were older and more experienced in life and love tended to have a more practical than romantic conception of relationships. They lived apart to enjoy their regained freedom and independence, and/or to limit the consequences of a potential future separation which, they had learnt from experience, was a realistic scenario. Children often formed an additional, if not the main, reason to live separately from one’s partner. These parents wanted to offer their children a safe, stable haven after one or more separations and moves, wanted to raise their children without the interference of a new partner, or did not want to burden their new partner and/or their children with each other. For the group of LATs who had children and who had lived with a partner before, LAT was often viewed as a (semi-) permanent state without a clear intention to ‘progress’ to co-residence. Overall, it became clear that prior relationship experiences and children were central factors in people’s decision to live-apart-together, in how they experienced partner commitment, and how they thought about the future of their relationship.
7.1.2 From LAT to co-residence

The next study (Chapter 3) adopted a quantitative methods approach to address the question: In what way are children born before the current partnership associated with the likelihood of transitioning from LAT to co-residing? Survey data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) were used for this analysis. The results showed that women with own children are less likely to move on to co-reside with their LAT partner than childless women with previous union experience. If these mothers make the transition to co-residence at all, it is after a relatively long time. Unfortunately, the small sample lacked the statistical power to draw firm conclusions about differences between fathers and childless men, nor about the influence of different reasons for the onset of single parenthood. Nevertheless, the findings do tentatively suggest that, also for men, there may be a negative association between having children from a previous relationship and starting co-residence. Despite the limited data, what was clear is that the consequences of widowhood are different for men and women: this pathway into single parenthood was positively associated with the likelihood of entering co-residence for men, and negatively for women. Thus, the presence of children born before the current partnership is associated with a lower likelihood of women transitioning from a LAT relationship to co-residence with that partner.

7.1.3 Migration for co-residence

On entering co-residence, one of the most important decisions a couple has to make is where to live: who moves in with whom, or where will they both move to? Chapter 4 addressed this issue of moving at the start of co-residence, asking: What is each partner’s relative contribution to bridging the distance between them at the start of their co-residence, and how is this influenced by local family ties and gender asymmetries? I used Danish population register data and focussed on long-distance opposite-sex couples, for whom long-distance moves often have important repercussions as one or both partners will leave their local ties behind. The results showed that, on average, women bridge the larger proportion of the distance between them and their partner. It is more common for women to migrate towards their male partner than the other way around, and women move longer
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distances than men at the start of co-residence. Gender asymmetries are thus in play here. Further, local ties to children from a previous relationship and other family members have a strong influence on the partners’ relative contributions to bridging the distance between them. Living close to a minor child and, to a lesser extent, living close to a sibling, parent or adult child is associated with a smaller share of the total distance moved. Similarly, having resident school-age children is also strongly and negatively associated with one’s share of the distance moved: signalling parents’ desire to protect their children’s local ties to their school, friends and home. Seemingly, local family ties increase both the emotional costs of migrating for co-residence and the benefits of staying. It further seems that the man’s and the woman’s family ties are not equally important in the couple’s migration decision. That is, the man’s local ties to non-resident family seem to have more influence than the woman’s, whereas women’s resident children seem to exert more influence than a father’s. In addition to family ties, prior union experiences also affect migration for union formation. Being separated or divorced, and having stayed in the prior joint home at the time of dissolution, reduces one’s share of the distance moved for co-residence with a new partner compared to never having lived with a partner before. Widows and widowers also seem to bridge smaller proportions of the total distance moved by both partners for co-residence. To sum up, migration at the start of couple co-residence seems to be in favour of the male partner, and of a partner with local family ties and prior union experiences.

7.1.4 Family complexity and parents’ migration

Building on the results of Chapter 4, Chapter 5 answered a broader question about migration: What is the relationship between family complexity and parents’ internal migration behaviour? Using Dutch register data, I compared separated parents with young children (aged 12 or younger) with parents in two-parent families in terms of their likelihood of migrating. I used detailed records of these parents’ partnership events and statuses, including repartnering and being repartnered, and investigated the role of children’s post-separation residential situation in their parents’ likelihood of migrating. The results revealed that single mothers and fathers, as well as repartnered mothers, are more likely to migrate than their
counterparts in two-parent families. Repartnered fathers are as likely to migrate as fathers in two-parent families. Thus, internal migration seems to be at least as common among separated parents as it is among parents in two-parent families. Parents’ likelihood of migrating in a post-separation context depends heavily on where their children live. Having non-resident children who live some distance away is associated with a much higher likelihood of migrating than having resident children or non-resident children living nearby. Having both resident children and non-resident children who live nearby is associated with a considerably reduced likelihood of migrating compared to having resident children only – shared residence (i.e. joint physical custody) is likely common in this situation. It seems that children constrain migration when they live close, and frequently motivate migration when they live at a distance to reduce the gap. Further, one’s history of prior unions affected men’s but not women’s likelihood of migrating. After the initial peak in migration at separation, men’s likelihood of migrating reduced in each subsequent year. Men who moved out of the joint home at the time of separation were more likely to migrate in the years following than men who stayed in the home. All things considered, family complexities are associated with an increased likelihood of migrating among parents.

7.1.5 Children’s registered address

Chapters 4 and 5 rely on population register data to determine where children live. Chapter 6 was a data-driven assessment of whether the registered address of children of separated parents accurately reflects their place of residence. This short report addressed the question: *To what extent does the registered address of a child of separated parents, as recorded in the Dutch population register, match their residence as it is reported by one of their parents in the NKPS survey?* I found that, for the vast majority of children of separated parents, the address in the Dutch population register does indeed correspond to their main place of residence as reported by one of their parents. Most children were reported to live full-time at their registered address, and for those who live with their other parent part of

38 In this study, “single” means not in a co-residential partnership, in contrast to being “repartnered”.
the time, their registered address was typically the place where they were reported to spend most nights. Nevertheless, some children’s registered address differed from the parent-reported residential situation. This was more frequent when a child was registered as living with the father than with the mother. In addition, there were a significant number of children reported as living half the time with each parent, a situation that the population register does not accommodate. Nevertheless, overall, the Dutch population register does appear a reliable record of children’s main residence.

7.2 Discussion of the results

7.2.1 The role of children in the formation of new unions

The central question of this dissertation has two elements: the role of children and the role of prior relationship experiences. I discuss both separately, plus two other central themes: the role of gender and the role of family ties and family complexity in migration.

As romantic partners develop their relationship, intertwine their lives and potentially move in together, they need to find ways to combine and harmonise their own, individual commitments. Children are a prime example of such a commitment, representing a long-term tie and responsibility. My research shows how the commitment to a child born before the current partnership can conflict and compete with the commitment to one’s new partner, and how the consequences of the commitment to a child extend to one’s spatial mobility.

First, children affect parents’ choice of living arrangement with a new partner. Earlier research had already shown that LAT is a relatively common arrangement among those with children from a former relationship (de Jong Gierveld & Latten, 2008; Liefbroer, Poortman, & Seltzer, 2015). My interviews shed light on why children are an important reason for parents to choose to live-apart-together with their new partner (see Chapter 2), and my statistical analyses show that children reduce the likelihood of transitioning from LAT to co-residence (Chapter 3). Not surprisingly, these findings apply particularly to parents with young and resident children. LAT is a way for parents to protect the boundaries
of their family and the ties with their children. Sometimes the children themselves do the so-called “boundary work” (see de Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013). For many parents, LAT offers a solution that allows them to combine the responsibility for their children with an intimate partner relationship (see also Levin & Trost, 1999). Childless partners of single parents may also prefer LAT over co-residence. Co-residing with a single parent and children comes with additional emotional, social and financial costs. Moreover, such individuals may be reluctant to enter a more highly committed relationship, considering themselves to have a stronger position on the partner market than the single parent. Single mothers may be more hindered by a partner’s reluctance to co-reside than single fathers as it seems that women are more willing than men to be a stepparent to a partner’s children (Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006). Yet, given the multitude of factors and intangibles involved, one can largely only speculate about how couples together negotiate their living arrangements. To conclude, it would seem that LAT offers a solution to combine a new relationship with responsibilities for children, but that the arrangement can also be seen as a compromise by many single parents, and the result of competing or conflicting commitments – a conflict that is often won by the commitment to children. Whatever the reasons, my study of LAT suggests that an existing commitment to one’s children places a constraint on the development of a deeper partner commitment.

The commitment to children also has consequences for parents’ spatial mobility, especially when it comes to long-distance moving (i.e. migration). My research shows that when a parent enters into a new co-residential relationship, ties to children play an important role in the couple’s choice of location (see Chapter 4). If only one of the two partners has children, couples tend to establish their joint household close to where the partner with resident or near non-resident children lived before co-residence, implying that the other partner in this new couple migrates towards the partner with children. More broadly, parents’ migration behaviour in a post-separation context is heavily dependent on where their children live: with them, near them, or some distance away (see Chapter 5). Parents, if they do not live with them, will typically want to live close to their dependent children and, as such, near non-resident children form a strong tie to a location that makes
migration an emotionally costly endeavour. Further, children who already live some distance away seem to draw many parents to move closer to them. Parents with minor children often try to ensure stability in their children’s schooling and social network and are reluctant to uproot them by migrating (Bailey, Blake, & Cooke, 2004; see Simsek, Costa, & de Valk, 2021 on health outcomes of childhood residential mobility). As such, school-age children represent an especially strong local tie (Mincer, 1978). To summarise, commitment to a child represents a strong tie to a location, one that makes it difficult or unattractive to move away, including in the situation of new union formation. My findings suggest that many parents prioritise proximity to non-resident children or their resident children’s own local ties over opportunities or benefits that migration might offer them personally.

Theorists of late modernity have argued that people’s commitments are no longer as fixed and enduring as they once were, and have become more flexible and temporary (Pescosolido & Rubin, 2000). The changes associated with the Second Demographic Transition, including rising divorce rates and a rising number of births outside marriage, could be seen to support this idea. Indeed, the organisation of family life has arguably become more flexible (see also Allan, 2008), with shared residence arrangements a clear example. However, my research shows that the commitment to one’s children still carries great weight and is a priority in parents’ lives, and that children are a commitment for which parents regularly make compromises in other domains of their life.

### 7.2.2 The role of past unions in new union formation

My findings reveal how past unions affect the development of commitment to a new partner as well as the spatial mobility of separated and repartnering individuals. For many people, the experience of a prior union and union dissolution is a reason to live-apart-together with a new partner, rather than co-reside, and to, consciously or unconsciously, limit commitment to one’s partner. Earlier research had already shown that LAT relationships are relatively common among those who were previously divorced or separated (de Jong Gierveld & Latten, 2008; Liefbroer et al., 2015). Several studies report that an element of this is that these people choose LAT to avoid the problems they experienced in previous unions.
and to retain one’s regained independence (de Jong Gierveld, 2002; de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Levin & Trost, 1999; Régnier-Loilier, Beaujouan, & Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2009). In my research, I found commitment to be a helpful concept in better understanding LATs’ relationship experiences and choices (see Chapter 2). As a result of a previous union dissolution, some people are afraid to commit and again trust, and therefore enter new relationships more carefully. LAT is then an expression of this caution. Keeping reserves, preventing too great an attachment to one’s partner, and not orienting oneself too much to the future were ways to reduce the potential pain of another separation. Among my interview participants, LAT was a risk-avoidance strategy for many of those who were separated or divorced: a way to limit commitment to their partner and to limit the consequences of a potential break-up.

Jamieson et al. (2002, p. 356) spoke of a reduced “willingness to create and honour life-long partnerships” in society. In a not dissimilar vein, I found a reduced belief and interest in life-long partnerships among LATs. Many of those who had experienced union dissolution no longer believed in staying together forever. For those without prior union experience, personal satisfaction and love were deemed the most important aspects of their relationships, not the notion of a life-long partnership for good and bad. These experiences of partner commitment seem to be well captured by Giddens’ (1991) notion of “pure relationships”, in which autonomy and emotional commitment are centralised, and which are entered into and maintained purely for the sake of love and personal satisfaction. Or, as psychotherapist Esther Perel put it: “a relationship no longer lasts ‘till death do us part’, but until love dies” (Kamerman & Spiering, 2022).

My research findings further suggest that, as a result of a prior union experience, and perhaps mostly the experience of a union dissolution, people may become more protective of their own interests, including their economic position, their own home and place of residence. For instance, some individuals in LAT relationships envision that, even if they move in with their partner in the future, they will keep their home for a while as a form of back-up plan (see Chapter 2). Their home represents a safe, stable haven after one or more separations and moves. Moreover, in the case of couples starting to co-reside, women who have lived with a partner before, and whose new partner has not, are found to bridge a lower share of the total distance moved to enact co-residence
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(see Chapter 4). This finding suggests that these women tend to stay in place while their partner migrates towards them. In particular, a man’s or a woman’s share of the distance moved for co-residence with a partner is lower when one has remained in the prior joint home since the prior union was dissolved. Together, these findings suggest an element of self-protection after a prior union dissolution when it comes to one’s home and place of residence.

It is easy to imagine that those who have lived with a partner before and experienced a union dissolution are more aware of the investments involved when forming a joint household, and the consequences of dissolving one. Staying in place versus moving at the start of co-residence sees a large difference in terms of the required investment and sacrifice made for the new relationship. A joint home is an investment in one’s relationship, one that increases the costs and consequences of ending the relationship and, according to the Investment Model of Commitment (Rusbult, 1980), induces partner commitment. Here, the required investment involved with starting to co-reside will be lower if one’s partner moves rather than when moving in with one’s partner. If both partners move to a new joint home, the investment and sacrifice will be lower if one stays close to one’s prior place of residence rather than moving further away. Meanwhile, those who move a long distance (i.e. migrate) to live with their partner make a significant sacrifice by leaving their local ties to work, family and friends behind. Staying in place at the start of co-residence, either in the same home or in the same locality, not only reduces the investment at the start of co-residence, it may also diminish the consequences of a potential later dissolution. That is, if a partner moves in, they are also likely to be the one who moves out when the union dissolves (Mulder & Wagner, 2012). Further, those who did not move far at the start of co-residence will still have their local social network to fall back on should their union dissolve (see Das, de Valk, & Merz, 2017 on mothers moving closer to their own mothers following separation).

A person’s union history almost certainly affects the development of a new romantic relationship when one has children with an ex-partner. Separated parents tend to stay connected long beyond the duration of their romantic relationship because they share responsibilities and love for their children. Parents’ continued linked lives after separation show how the commitment to a child also implies a long-lasting commitment
to the child’s other parent. The continuing role played by ex-partners in post-separation life has been clearly demonstrated in research showing the interconnectedness of separated parents’ spatial mobility (Cooke, Mulder, & Thomas, 2016; Thomas, Mulder, & Cooke, 2017b). Separated parents have an interest in living near to each other as proximity facilitates frequent face-to-face contact between parents and children and enables parents to share the responsibilities for their children. Indirectly, my own research findings also hint at an interconnectedness between ex-partners’ mobility or lack thereof. I found that local ties to children reduce separated parents’ likelihood of migrating (see Chapter 5). A local tie to a child usually also amounts to a local tie to an ex-partner given that a non-resident child is likely to live with their other parent (i.e. the ex-partner). My results further suggest that parents who are involved in a shared residence arrangement39 are particularly unlikely to migrate, with many being unwilling to disrupt the lives of their children and the residential arrangement with their ex-partner by migrating. Further, where there is a shared residence agreement in place, parents have typically drawn up a parenting plan that often includes a statement regarding a maximum moving distance (Bakker & Mulder, 2013). In a sense, this parenting plan makes the ties between ex-partners explicit.

To summarise, previous union experiences seem to result in people taking steps for self-protection and self-preservation as they enter into new romantic relationships. This self-preservation is expressed through limited commitment to, investment in and sacrifice for the new relationship.

### 7.2.3 The role of gender

Traditional gender patterns seem to shape the union formation process. First, children affect women’s new union formation more strongly than men’s, a finding consistent with previous research (e.g. Ivanova, Kal-mijn, & Uunk, 2013). This could be expected given that mothers in the Netherlands tend to be children’s main carers after separation. Although shared residence arrangements have gained in popularity (Poortman &

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39 Shared residence arrangements could not be identified from the available data, but are likely to be in place for many of the parents who had both resident and non-resident children living nearby.
van Gaalen, 2017), a large majority of children still live primarily with their mother after parental separation (Statistics Netherlands, 2016). My research showed that in the transition of a relationship from LAT to co-residence, women appear to be more constrained than men by the presence of children (see Chapter 3). Similarly, a couple’s decision as to where to live together seems more strongly affected by the woman having resident children than by the man having resident children (Chapter 4). However, the same chapter also shows that men’s local ties to non-resident children have more influence in the couple’s location decision than women’s. A possible explanation for these seemingly contradictory results is that women may be less willing than men to disrupt the lives of their resident children through long-distance moving but, in other circumstances, men’s interests dominate in joint location decisions, even when ties to nearby non-resident children are concerned.

Second, irrespective of children, traditional gender patterns still shape couples’ decisions on where to live together as a couple and who migrates to do so. When long-distance couples start to co-reside, the larger share of the distance between them tends to be bridged by the woman moving (see Chapter 4). Thus, not only the migration of families and households (e.g. Cooke, 2003; Vidal, Perales, Lersch, & Brandén, 2017), but also migration to form a joint household is gendered in favour of the male partner. A partial explanation offered by Brandén and Haandrikman (2018) is that women tend to have a relative bargaining disadvantage to men, partly because they are usually younger. Also, a large proportion of women in the Netherlands are not economically independent. In addition, traditional gender norms may result in couples prioritising the man’s career and interests over the woman’s (Brandén & Haandrikman, 2018). Such gender asymmetries, grounded in traditional ideas about family responsibilities, are evident in the process of union formation. As such, a gendered approach should be adopted in studies into behavioural choices in relational spheres.

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40 In 2018, 43% of single mothers and 37% of single women (i.e. those not living with a partner) were not economically independent (Statistics Netherlands, 2019). Statistics Netherlands defines economically independent as earning an income that is at least as high as the net amount of social assistance provided to a single person, which is equivalent to 70% of the minimum wage.
7.2.4 The role of family ties and family complexity in migration

Some scholars have argued that people are nowadays footloose, and that place is no longer important in post-modern society (e.g. Castells, 1996). The current reality seems different. Declines in internal migration have been observed around the globe (Bell, Charles-Edwards, Bernard, & Ueffing, 2018). Some have suggested that the increasing complexity of family life may be a factor in these declining rates (Cooke et al., 2016; Thomas, Mulder, & Cooke, 2017a). However, based on my findings, one would expect the family complexities that arise from parental separation to be associated with higher rather than lower levels of migration. The events of separating and repartnering logically increase the risk of migrating and indeed, after these events, my research shows that single parents and repartnered parents seem to be at least as likely to migrate as parents in intact, two-parent families. This is not to say that separated parents are footloose, but they do appear to migrate more frequently than two-parent families.

While a negative link between family complexity and migration was not evident, local ties to family do seem to constrain migration (for more on the role of family in immobility, see Thomassen, 2021). This dissertation clearly shows that family members constitute important local ties that reduce the likelihood of migrating (see Chapters 4 and 5). This is true for both resident and near non-resident children, in part because children’s daily life takes place within a small geographic area, and they have limited mobility themselves. Siblings and parents living close by seem to play a similar role.

To conclude, my research shows that place still matters, and that people are far from footloose: rather, they are limited in their ability and willingness to migrate and thereby sever ties to their current location, which often include ties to non-resident family members.

7.3 Relevance for society

This dissertation contributes to our understanding of the role played by prior relationship experiences and children in the process of union
formation with a new partner. The insights provided by this research are highly relevant given the large number of separated individuals and single parents, and the fact that many of them will enter into new romantic partnerships. My research findings have several implications for society.

The first is to recognise that LAT may well offer an attractive alternative to singlehood, cohabitation or marriage for a growing number of people who have experienced a union dissolution at least once in their lives and prefer not to enter a new co-residential union. It seems that, especially for older adults, LAT is often a long-term if not permanent arrangement. If more older adults do opt for long-term LAT relationships in the future, this will have important implications for housing and healthcare. Partners who do not live together are less obvious than co-resident partners to be each other’s main caregiver in case of health issues. As such, the burden on the formal health care system as well as other informal family carers may be higher (see also Upton-Davis, 2012). Another implication is that more single-person homes and assisted housing may be needed in the future as a result of increased numbers of older adults living on their own, even when in a couple relationship.

My research highlights the inability of laws, regulations, policy and the population register to keep up with the changing reality of how people ‘do’ love and family. An important weakness is that many of these formal systems are based on households or residence and are thereby unable to reflect couples or families who do not form a shared household, or who do not live together all of the time. An unintended, undesirable consequence is government interference with highly personal choices, such as a couple’s decision to live apart or together. As an illustration, social welfare benefits and state pensions differentiate between people living with and without a partner. Resulting, one of the LATs I interviewed mentioned the potential loss of welfare income as a reason to delay co-residence. Besides, the differentiation between people living alone or together is not so straightforward in the case of LAT couples who keep separate homes but spend several nights a week at their partner’s place. Who does and does not qualify as being in a joint household becomes ambiguous and poses a challenge for the tax office and social insurance bank, as well as a financial concern for
some LAT couples\textsuperscript{41}. LATs are sometimes accused of co-residing and their welfare is withdrawn and, in other instances, people pretend to keep separate households while they are really living together. Clearly, residence-based regulations do not properly account for LAT and can play a role in a couple’s choice of living arrangement. Rather than intervening, it would be better if the government provided space for people to make their own choices when it comes to love and family. A positive example of recognising things change is the different options open to couples to formalise and institutionalise their relationship in the Netherlands, namely through a cohabitation agreement, registered partnership or marriage. The alternatives to marriage now available are increasingly popular (see Statistics Netherlands, 2019 on registered partnerships).

Work sometimes forms another external barrier to couples co-residing. A common practical reason for couples to live-apart-together is because partners have distant job locations (e.g. Régnier-Loïlier, Beaujouan, & Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2009). During the COVID-19 pandemic, telecommuting and remote working have become common practices. This increasing normalisation of remote working may to some extent take away a constraint that forces some couples to live apart or be in a commuter partnership\textsuperscript{42} when they would rather live together.

A further implication from my research on internal migration is that shared residence arrangements (shared physical custody of children) may be associated with reduced levels of internal migration, a view earlier advanced by Cooke et al. (2016). Most parents with shared residence arrangements are unwilling to disrupt these and the lives of their children by migrating. Hence, if shared residence agreements after separation become more common in the future, which seems plausible, this could lead to lower levels of migration.

\textsuperscript{41} An internet search in the Dutch language on LAT, welfare benefits ("bijstand", "uitkering"), rent allowance ("huurtoeslag") and state pensions ("AOW") allows a view of the many questions and concerns that people in LAT relationships have about financials that depend on their status as a single person to the government, in the meaning of living alone.

\textsuperscript{42} In commuter partnerships, one partner lives near work for part of the time, away from the joint home (e.g. van der Klis & Mulder, 2008).
7.4 Reflection on theory

7.4.1 Partner commitment

Partner commitment was the central concept in the theoretical frameworks applied in Chapters 2 and 3 regarding LAT and the transition to co-residence. I employed an extended version of the Investment Model of Commitment (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2011) that provided a useful framework for understanding how individuals in LAT relationships experience commitment to their partner and what shapes this commitment.

Commitment in this model is defined as having a long-term orientation regarding the relationship, intending to continue it into the future, and feeling emotionally attached to the person (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Rusbult, 1980). Exploring these dimensions of commitment separately helped in understanding the complex experience of commitment in LAT relationships.

The Investment Model predicts commitment along four mechanisms: when one feels satisfied with the relationship, perceives few attractive alternatives, has invested significantly and receives social support for the relationship. Not all four mechanisms proved equally relevant in the context of LAT relationships in my research. Social support, the quality of alternatives and extrinsic investments, such as mutual friends, were felt to contribute less than satisfaction with the relationship and intrinsic investments such as emotions and effort. One possible explanation could relate to social desirability and/or the reduction of cognitive dissonance. Not only was satisfaction described as directly contributing to commitment, it also influenced perceptions of alternatives and the extent that LATs invested in their relationship. For instance, when satisfied with the current relationship, individuals tended not to perceive any alternatives to that relationship. Conversely, when experiencing elements of dissatisfaction, one may be more open to see and feel attracted towards alternatives.

Whereas the Investment Model of Commitment considers the four mechanisms as independent, and they may indeed make independent contributions to commitment, my findings suggest that they may also be connected. Consequently, I would recommend extending the Investment...
Model to include possible interconnections between the four mechanisms, particularly revolving around satisfaction. As already noted, based on Chapter 2, greater satisfaction may result in fewer perceived alternatives and greater investment. Additionally, I can conceive that one might receive more social support for a relationship when important others see that one is satisfied and happy in that relationship. Also, it is possible that someone who knows that their friends and family support their choice of partner, or someone who perceives few attractive alternatives, may feel more satisfied with what the current relationship provides. If the model incorporated such interconnections between the mechanisms, it would prove an even more valuable and practical framework for understanding and explaining commitment.

During the research, it was helpful to discuss commitment in LAT relationships along the lines of a theoretical model that acknowledges the role of investment, or the lack thereof. While cohabiting and married relationships involve significant investments that are public expressions of commitment (e.g. shared housing), LAT relationships typically involve fewer investments and are in a practical sense easier to exit. However, there are various forms of investment: intrinsic (e.g. time), extrinsic (e.g. a house), or planned for the future (e.g. to have children together). They all share the commonality that the investments are lost or decline in value if the relationship ends. My findings showed that intrinsic investments were generally high among LAT couples but that extrinsic or future investments were often avoided, especially by those with prior union experiences, to reduce the consequences of a separation. The few extrinsic investments that were in place, such as mutual friends, were felt to make little difference in terms of the commitment LATs experienced to their partner.

The central role that prior relationship experiences played in shaping LATs’ commitment to their partner could not be predicted or explained on the basis of the Investment Model. According to this framework, prior relationships indirectly influence commitment by forming a comparison for evaluating satisfaction. As such, unpleasant prior relationships are said to result in a low threshold which would likely increase one’s satisfaction with the current relationship and increase commitment, and even more so if this relationship is rewarding and without significant costs (Rusbult, 1983). However, rather than increasing commitment, prior unpleasant
relationship experiences reduced commitment to the new partner in the case of LATs. Having been in a long-lasting relationship before and particularly the experience of a prior dissolution often resulted in reserved emotions and limited commitment.

Kamp Dush and Amato (2005) viewed relationship status as on a continuum of increasing commitment, with casual dating at the low end and marriage at the high end. Although high and low commitment can be present in all types of relationships, my findings do support this idea of a continuum, with LAT relationships involving less commitment than co-residential relationships. This, at least, seemed to be LATs’ own perception: many of my interviewees in part chose to live-apart-together because they perceived the commitment involved to be less than in a co-residence arrangement. Many young people were not yet ready for the commitment of cohabitation and/or marriage, while for many older people with prior union experiences, LAT was a risk-avoidance strategy and a way to limit commitment.

The meaning of LAT relationships is often debated. LAT is a modern, non-institutionalised arrangement and some see it as evidence that lifelong partner commitment is losing strength and importance in modern society. Nevertheless, my findings show that commitment is an important aspect of LATs’ relationship experience (see also Carter, Duncan, Stoi-lova, & Phillips, 2015), albeit that this is often based predominantly on emotional attachment; there indeed seems to be only a limited belief and interest in life-long partnerships among LATs.

7.4.2 Migration and local family ties

My thesis also built on cost-benefit approaches and the concept of local ties to explain migration, or non-migration. Mincer (1978), while focusing on those family members who form a joint household, argued that a family would migrate if the sum of benefits exceeds the sum of costs for all members of the family combined. However, the increasing plurality and complexity of today’s families requires a broader notion of ‘the family’ and of those who are involved in the migration decision. My research findings demonstrate that migration, at the time of union formation and in complex family settings, takes place in a broader family context that extends beyond the household. An ex-partner, the new
partner and children living outside of the household clearly also influence migration decisions.

Migration is a costly endeavour, not just in terms of money, but also because of the “psychic costs” involved in migrating (Sjaastad, 1962). Here, an important psychic cost is losing one’s local ties: human, economic and social capital that cannot, or cannot easily, be relocated. Ties to a workplace or to a home are obvious examples of local ties. Following Mulder (2018), I regard non-resident family who live nearby, including non-resident children, as another type of local tie that increases the costs of migrating and the benefits of staying. Essentially, I assume that people usually value living close to their family. Migration is theorised to be very costly for those who have resident children, especially when these children are of school-age and thus have strong local ties of their own (Mincer, 1978).

7.5 Methodological reflections

7.5.1 Data

Uniquely, I used four different types and sources of data for my investigations, bridging the qualitative-quantitative divide: in-depth interviews (Chapter 2), large-scale survey data (Chapters 3 & 6) and population register data from Denmark (Chapter 4) and from the Netherlands (Chapters 5 & 6). With each set of data having its own strengths, combining the four allowed me a broader insight into the same topic from different angles. The interviews inspired my research and helped me interpret the results that I later found through statistical analyses. The survey data allowed me to study LAT relationships quantitatively, and these analyses added precision to the initial interview findings. Meanwhile, the high-quality population register data gave me the statistical power needed to carry out detailed, disaggregated analyses of complex families. Finally, I had the opportunity to match survey data to population register data and check the consistency between the two when it comes to children’s residence. Below, I reflect in more detail on these different datasets.

43 The term “local ties” is used as a synonym for location-specific capital (DaVanzo, 1981).
The semi-structured, in-depth interviews with LATs that I conducted for Chapter 2 offered an intimate insight into the sensitive, complex and emotional topic of partner commitment. My sense was that the interviews were very successful in eliciting open, truthful answers. Several participants afterwards reflected that they enjoyed participating, feeling comfortable and understood. I attribute this success in part to the conversational style and flexible structure of the interviews, and my decision to interview individuals rather than couples. Admittedly, interviewing both partners within a couple could offer interesting insights into the dynamics that shape a couple’s commitment. However, had I interviewed both partners, participants may have been hesitant to discuss their feelings as freely. Although my impression was that participants answered truthfully, and despite my following up on contradictions and doubts, it remains difficult to pinpoint and tackle issues of social desirability and reduce any cognitive dissonance in participants’ answers. This was taken into account in the cautious interpretation of the results.

The survey based on the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study used in Chapters 3 and 6 contains a wealth of detailed information that is rarely available in other datasets, including information about LAT relationships, prior unions, and the residential arrangements of separated parents and their children. The initial sample, in the first wave, produced 8,161 respondents. By the fourth wave, this number had dropped to 2,382, after follow-up interviews without sample refreshment (see Dykstra et al., 2005 for the codebook of the first wave). I identified a sub-sample of 589 women and 433 men who were in a LAT relationship at the time of the first wave, or who entered a LAT relationship sometime between the first and fourth wave. Given the rather small sample size, a lack of statistical power prevented strong tests of my hypotheses in Chapter 3. Instead, this study served an exploratory purpose. The small sample size also meant that I could not test for differences between resident, non-resident and part-time resident children in Chapter 3, even though this information was available in the data. Instead, I made use of this information in Chapter 6, linking the NKPS survey to the much larger Dutch population register.

Statistical power is rarely an issue when using register-based population data that include entire country populations. Register data are
available only for a handful of countries and I used Danish register data in Chapter 4 (see Eurostat & Statistics Denmark, 1995) and Dutch register data in Chapter 5 (System of social statistical datasets, see Bakker, van Rooijen, & van Toor, 2014). These datasets are very rich, of high quality and contain information on a wide range of socioeconomic characteristics (e.g. income, employment, education), while also offering detailed longitudinal information on geographical locations and family relationships and events (e.g. distances between family members, moving house, union formation). For my purposes, the large sample included in register-based population datasets enables one to study specific and smaller groups, such as repartnering single parents.

The Danish and Dutch population registers are very similar in the information they offer, although there are small differences in the measures used. An initial relevant difference is in the calculation of distances. The Dutch register provides x and y coordinates from which straight-line distances can be easily calculated. Using the Danish register, it proved more cumbersome to obtain distances and I eventually used the straight-line distance between the centroids of the parishes in which the addresses were situated. The use of straight-line distances is not ideal since travel distances would be more appropriate, but these were not available to us. Fortunately, both measures seem to be highly correlated (e.g. Boscoe, Henry, & Zdeb, 2012). A second difference between the two countries’ registers is that they use different methods to identify unmarried cohabitation. Both methods rely on a set of assumptions and are thus probably less accurate than surveys. In the Danish register, two people of the opposite sex, with an age difference less than 16 years, without any apparent family links between them, and living without other adults at the same address, qualify as a cohabiting couple. The Dutch register makes use of future event information to identify couples. Two people living at the same address are identified as a couple when, at some point in time (in the future or the past), they enter a marriage or a registered partnership, have a child together, move house together, or identify as a couple to the tax authorities. This method delivers reliable data (Harmsen & Israëls, 2003), but

44 Distance calculations were made on geodatabase Map10 (2017) as provided by the Danish Agency for Data Supply and Efficiency.
underestimates recent cohabitations due to the lack of information on future defining events\textsuperscript{45}.

Population register data still have some important limitations for my research purposes. First, information about households, families and partnerships is based on people’s registered address, which does not always provide an accurate and complete picture. For instance, it is impossible to identify LAT relationships since only co-residential relationships are included. Also, the start and end dates of these co-resident unions are determined by the date that a person officially changes their address (i.e. informs the municipality), which is not always accurate. For instance, in a year involving a move, some partners may be registered as each living at different addresses for a short period, which makes it seem as though they are separated. However, given the temporary nature of this address difference, it is more likely that the partners registered their new address on different dates, or perhaps that one partner moved ahead of the other. Given this possibility, I did not count couples as being separated if they lived at different addresses for less than 365 days. Additionally, registered addresses may well be less reliable in turbulent times around a divorce or separation. So, although recall bias is not an issue when using population register data, there are other sources of inaccuracy when it comes to the exact timing of union formation and dissolution.

Second, population register data do not report on the strength, quality or intensity of family relationships, or on post-separation parenting arrangements. Therefore, I used the geographical distance between family members and between parents and children as a proxy for the frequency of face-to-face contact between them in Chapters 4 and 5. Previous research supports the idea that geographic proximity is crucial for face-to-face contact with family (e.g. Grundy & Shelton, 2001), for the exchange of support (Knijn & Liefbroer, 2006; Mulder & van der Meer, 2009), and certainly also for co-parenting (Bakker & Mulder, 2013; 2013).

\textsuperscript{45} Documentation on the population register data provided by Statistics Netherlands is in the Dutch language. For more information on the registration of unmarried cohabitees, see https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/ons-diensten/maatwerk-en-microdata/microdata-zelf-onderzoek-doen/microdatabestanden/gbasamenwonersbus-periodes-van-samenwoning-in-de-brp.
Still, there will be parents who live close to non-resident children but who are hardly involved in their lives, and parents who live further away but are nonetheless involved on a very frequent basis. Living close to children or other family members may simply be the result of a long residential history in a location and need not reflect any value attached to local family ties.

Third, the system of address registration applied in the Netherlands, Denmark and other countries imposes the restriction that a person can only be registered as living at one address. This restriction greatly complicates research on children’s post-separation residence given that many children of separated parents share their time equally between two addresses, alternating between both their parents’ homes (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017; Statistics Netherlands, 2017). The registered address of such children will therefore not accurately reflect their residential situation. The same is true for other dual-location families, such as commuter partnerships. It would be a significant improvement to the address registration system if it would allow for such realities, at least from the perspective of researchers and citizens.

### 7.5.2 Analytical strategy

The interviews conducted for Chapter 2 were tape recorded, transcribed and then analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Deductive codes were derived from the theoretical framework and were key to addressing the research question. At the same time, inductive codes were derived from the data and allowed the data “to speak for themselves” (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). The inductive codes were of great value in identifying unanticipated themes, such as the central influence of relationship history.

Event-history techniques were used to study the transition from LAT to co-residence (Chapter 3) and migration events (Chapter 5). More specifically, I applied discrete-time event-history analysis to estimate the likelihood of these transitions/events occurring, employing logistic regression based on person-months (Chapter 3) or person-years (Chapter 5). Discrete-time models are adequate to approximate continuous-time models in these studies because the probabilities of experiencing the transition/event at discrete time points are small (Yamaguchi, 1991).
Time was measured in discrete intervals in all three quantitative studies, making the analyses considerably easier. However, the use of yearly data in Chapters 4 and 5 has some disadvantages. In effect, if a distance between someone’s addresses on 1 January of year \( t \) and year \( t+1 \) was identified, this was assumed to be the result of a single move, which might not be the reality. As a result, there may be an error in the calculated average distance of migration. Another consequence of the imprecise measure of the time of moving is that it increases uncertainty about the reason for moving/migrating. For example, it is possible that, during the year, someone migrated initially for employment reasons, then started a relationship, and then entered co-residence with this new partner. In this situation, the migration was not for co-residence reasons, while it is the assumption that I make in Chapter 4.

The analytical approach used to study migration for co-residence purposes (Chapter 4) was novel in several respects. First, the information about both partners’ mobility on initiating co-residence was captured in a single dependent variable: the female partner’s share of the total distance moved by both partners in the year of starting co-residence. Rather than modelling an individual-level outcome (such as an individual’s likelihood or distance of moving), a couple-level outcome is more logical and intuitive in this situation given that a couple decide together where they will start their joint household and, as a consequence, which partner(s) moves or migrates. Here, one partner’s likelihood of moving is directly related to the other partner’s likelihood of moving. Second, I uniquely adopted a multi-level cross-classified modelling approach (see Fielding & Goldstein, 2006), with couples geographically nested simultaneously within men’s and women’s municipality of origin prior to co-residence\(^{46}\). This technique allowed me to adequately account for both partners’ geographical contexts as sources of variation and clustering.

### 7.5.3 Definitions and measurements

One of the methodological questions that confronted me during this research was how to define and identify LAT relationships since this

\(^{46}\) In a similar way, Thomas et al. (2015) applied a multi-level cross-classified framework to simultaneously model origin and destination contextual variations in moving.
is a concept that is not as clear-cut as, for example, marriage. For the selection of my interview participants in Chapter 2, I adopted Haskey’s (2005) widely-used definition of LAT: those who see themselves, and are regarded as such by others, as an established long-term couple living in separate households. Central to this is the self-identification as partners forming a couple, which also distinguishes LAT from steady dating relationships. Similarly, the NKPS data used for Chapter 3 identify LATs as people who said they had a partner with whom they did not live. A difference in measurement between Chapters 2 and 3 is the threshold used for the minimum duration of a relationship. For my interviews, I recruited individuals who had been with their LAT partner for at least six months. The NKPS survey includes those in relationships of three months or more.

Similarly, internal migration is difficult to define and operationalise. The literature tends to concur that it is chiefly distance that distinguishes migration (i.e. long-distance moves) from residential mobility (i.e. short-distance moves). The degree of change and the consequences of a move depend largely on the distance involved. However, there is no general agreement on what constitutes a long distance – in part because this is strongly context-dependent and because the distance threshold will always be somewhat arbitrary. In the context of the Netherlands (Chapter 5), I studied moves of at least 50 km. This cut-off distance of 50 km is used across a range of countries (e.g. Boyle, Cooke, Halfacree, & Smith, 2001 for Great Britain and the USA; Clark & Lisowski, 2019 for Australia; Mulder & Malmberg, 2014 for Sweden). In the context of Denmark, I selected couples who lived at least 60 km apart prior to co-residence, meaning that at least one partner had to move a significant distance (i.e. migrate), over 30 km or more. Recognising the somewhat arbitrary nature of these chosen thresholds, I conducted sensitivity analyses using different distances. The fuzzy distinction between residential mobility and migration means that many of my findings on long-distance moves will apply to shorter moves as well (see also Coulter, Ham, & Findlay, 2016).
7.6 Directions for further research

An important recommendation for future studies is to move beyond the standard family typologies and tripartite model of relationships to better capture modern-day family and relationship practices. For instance, the use of the term ‘single parent’ is ambiguous. This term is often reserved for parents who have resident children and who live without a romantic partner. Yet, it seems restrictive to include only parents who have resident children under the umbrella of single parents. My research clearly shows the important role played by non-resident children, at least in parents’ moving behaviour. I therefore strongly encourage including information on non-resident children in family research, certainly in family migration research, and to distinguish between children living nearby and those further away. Moreover, a significant number of so-called ‘single’ parents will in fact be in a relationship, but living apart. It is becoming increasingly relevant to acknowledge and study LAT as a type of couple relationship. Unfortunately, the available data do not always reveal the nuances that I describe. Not all surveys record non-residential relationships to both children and partners. Likewise, population register data are restricted to information that can be retrieved from address registrations and other official registers, which do not accommodate LAT partners, although registers at least provide information on non-resident children by recording family relations. It is becoming increasingly important to move beyond the focus on residence (see also Kiernan, 2002) since the living arrangements of couples and families have become more diverse and complex, and often involve important ties across households.

That being said, there are a number of interesting avenues for future research. This dissertation covered some aspects of modern-day diversity in couples and families, but there are many other types of diversity, including ethnic diversity, whose study could provide valuable information for planning purposes. It would be interesting to see if migrant groups, and if so which migrant groups, make different behavioural choices in the process of union formation than natives and why. Some researchers

47 For this reason, ‘single’ in Chapter 5 refers to people without a resident partner, which is not an ideal definition.
have begun to explore this topic (see, for example, Huschek, Valk, & Liefbroer, 2011; Kulu & González-Ferrer, 2014; Wachter & de Valk, 2018), but many questions remain unanswered such as the meaning of LAT, the role played by children and prior relationships in repartnering and moving to co-residence among ethnic minority groups.

Sexual orientation is another form of diversity not covered by this dissertation. In particular the study of same-sex couples would further our knowledge on the diverse ways in which romantic relationships and unions form and transform. For instance, it would be interesting to explore the meaning of LAT among same-sex couples and compare this with two-sex couples. However, there are challenges to studying same-sex relationships (see Umberson, Thomeer, Kroeger, Lodge, & Xu, 2015), which is one of the reasons why I focussed on two-sex relationships in this dissertation. Few datasets are suited to the study of same-sex couples, or individuals in same-sex couples. In the NKPS survey, there are individuals in same-sex LAT couples but too few to form a statistical sample. Further, there is a high risk of including ‘false’ same-sex couples due to sex miscoding (see Banens & Le Penven, 2016 for more on this issue). In the Danish population register, same-sex couples are only identified as such if they have a registered partnership, are married or have a joint child; otherwise, two unrelated people of the same sex sharing a household are considered to be friends. Encouragingly, by retrospectively using information on future behaviours, the Dutch population register identifies a similar percentage of same-sex cohabiting couples as the Labour Force Survey (Enquête Beroepsbevolking) does. Nevertheless, I chose to focus on two-sex couples to have a more homogenous population. Further, Umberson et al. (2015) warn that the research questions and methods used to study two-sex couples should not be simply imposed on same-sex couples: rather, the study of same-sex relationship and union formation warrants its own study design.

Another possible direction for further research is to take a qualitative methods approach to answer some of the questions that arise from my findings, such as: how do couples negotiate their living arrangement?, how do couples bargain over where to live together? and how are migration decisions made in complex family settings? While my research used a mix of methods, none of the individual chapters adopt a mixed-methods approach. This creates openings for further research: in-depth interviews
would complement my quantitative research and add meaning, narrative and context to my findings.

In addition, it would be worth addressing some of my research questions where I used population register data with survey data. Using register data admittedly offers significant benefits, mostly in terms of the large numbers that allow the study of small groups. However, survey data can offer more detailed and accurate information on family ties: firstly, on actual post-separation residential arrangements for children, including shared residence; and, secondly, on the quality and intensity of contact between parents and non-resident children and other family members.

While register data provide unique research opportunities, surveys are increasingly indispensable for studying romantic relationships now that LAT and unmarried cohabitation have become the most common ways of starting life as a couple (see also Prioux, 2003). The current diversity of families places heavy demands on surveys, which need sufficiently large samples to allow detailed, disaggregated analyses (see also Sassler & Lichter, 2020). Here, while the NKPS provides detailed information, the sample proved insufficient to allow reliable use on this level of detail. As seen in Chapter 3, the numbers in specific subgroups quickly became too small for statistical analysis. Hence, some questions remain unanswered, calling for future studies to replicate and further my explorations using other large datasets or cross-national data collections, such as the Generations and Gender Survey. Sometimes, targeted sampling among specific populations will offer a solution. For example, the OKiN survey (Ouders en Kinderen in Nederland: Parents and Children in the Netherlands) focussed particularly on people who grew up in complex families (Kalmijn et al., 2018).

Another promising approach is to develop surveys for integration with population register data so that information from both sources can be combined. For instance, the Dutch register data can currently be linked to the NKPS survey (see Chapter 6), the Netherlands Housing Survey (WoON)48 and a few other surveys. For efficient integration, surveys should be designed to ease linking with register data, in other words

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48 WoonOnderzoek Nederland is a large-scale representative national survey in the Netherlands that gathers information on people’s position in the housing market and their housing needs (Statistics Netherlands, 2022).
considered before starting the questionnaire design and data collection. The register data can add to or even remove the need for some survey questions, help specify target populations and, in later stages, provide measurement checks and imputation for non-response items. As such, the use of registers has the potential to reduce survey data collection costs and measurement errors and further to lower the burden on respondents by decreasing the length of questionnaires and by serving as an alternative or additional data source on otherwise sensitive topics such as income (see Törmälehto, 2008 for more on the integration of surveys and administrative data).

Last, it would be valuable to investigate how my findings for the Netherlands and for Denmark apply in other contexts – contexts with different welfare regimes, childcare practices, gender balances and laws regulating family relationships. Welfare in the Netherlands and in Denmark is largely institutionalised, and benefit levels are high. Are single parents more likely to enter into a new co-residential union in a country where people rely more on the family than on the state as backup? The Netherlands has a rather traditional gender-normative climate: women tend to be children’s primary caregivers, including when parents are separated. What role do children play in parents’ migration decisions in contexts where the post-separation care for children is arranged differently? Comparative analyses on the country level would add to our understanding of the influence of context and circumstance. In any case, my research in the Netherlands and Denmark shows that prior relationship experiences and children play a role in several steps and aspects of the union formation process, including partner commitment, the choice to live apart versus together, the decision where to live as a couple, and spatial mobility.

References

Conclusions and discussion


