Marriage and Other Social Unions: A Study of Marriage Alternatives and Cultural Trends in the Netherlands

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Marriage and Other Social Unions: A Study of Marriage Alternatives and Cultural Trends in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This Independent Study Project investigates marriage and varying marriage alternatives available in the Netherlands and how societal norms and cultural taboos have affected these arrangements over the past fifty years. The high levels of acceptance in the Netherlands are used as a framework to explain the toleration of differing lifestyle and relationship choices, such as registered partnership, informal cohabitation, and same-sex marriage rights. Information was collected by conducting seven interviews with Dutch adults from different backgrounds with diverse views of and experiences with marriage and marriage alternatives. Secondary data on marriage rates in the Netherlands since 1960 were also used to determine historical trends.

The focus of the research was to determine how society views the institution of marriage and whether changes in cultural norms have affected rates of marriage. It is concluded that while there is no significant evidence proving the reason for the decrease in marriages, it is assumed that a more progressive, liberal view of society has allowed for these marriage alternatives to exist.
Introduction

In the United States marriage is viewed as a vital stepping-stone on the path to achieve the American Dream. From a young age, children are exposed to the rhetoric that once you fall in love you should get married, have a family, and live happily ever after. Unfortunately, the access to marriage is limited to specific groups in American society creating a hierarchy of normativity. This is not the case in the Netherlands where marriage rates have been on a sharp decline since the beginning of the 1970s (CBS Statline). Marriage is separated from love and those who decide against marriage are not stigmatized for their decision. In recent years, the government has also legalized numerous marriage alternatives such as registered partnership, informal cohabitation, and the opening up of marriage rights to same-sex couples. These alternatives to normative views of marriage have created an inclusive system in which individual couples can determine what is best for their personal relationships.

This topic is of great interest to me since I am dissatisfied at how the institution of marriage is viewed in the United States. I want to determine what about Dutch society allows for not only the creation of such innovative alternatives to marriage but also the acceptance of those who choose them over marriage. This study will incorporate accurate testimonials from Dutch citizens explaining their decisions to get married or not and how society has viewed them for it. While little research has been done on this subject in the past I think it is important to determine not only what these marriage alternatives actually do, but also what factors in Dutch society have allowed for their creation.

The primary research question then becomes, what are the alternatives to marriage available in the Netherlands and what are the explanations for their prevalence over traditional marriage? More specifically, is there a general level of acceptance in Dutch society for those
choosing these alternatives and if so, what factors allow for this tolerance? By answering these questions this study can hopefully be used as a comparison with American society in an attempt to determine why these alternatives have not been generally enacted thus far. Also to inspire further research into the factors that allow for the continued acceptance of the institution of marriage in the United States. Lastly, this paper will explore how Dutch society allows for such acceptance of personal lifestyle choices.
Marriage is a vital determinant of the attitudes, morals, and social norms of a society. The Netherlands is a country known for perceived high levels of tolerance and progressive social views. However with major changes in the current political environment skeptics question whether this liberal utopia will continue. Studying trends in marriage rates will help to determine what impact the changing cultural norms have had. While there have been studies on marriage in the Netherlands conducted in the past, few assessed the impact societal norms have had. Most pre-existing literature discusses current alternatives to marriage as well as the history of marriage in the Netherlands.

One topic that was continuously discussed in many of the sources was the increase in cohabitation of Dutch people in the last fifty years. Dorien Manting covers this topic in her essay, *The Changing Meaning of Cohabitation and Marriage*. “Cohabitation in the Netherlands began to emerge in the 1970s. It started as a deviant and alternative way of living as a manifestation of a refusal of the conventional bourgeois marriage which was accused of being hypocritical” (53). Manting begins her essay by explaining the history of cohabitation in the Netherlands and the way in which it was initiated into society at the time. She also describes how the changing ideals and norms in Dutch society have affected marriage rates. “For women, the perception of marriage as a means of gaining economic security and independence from their parents has weakened because of their labor market participation. Marriage has lost its place as a prerequisite for an intimate sexual relationship” (54).

Her study focuses on specific aspects of a person’s life, which she labels “individual life course experiences.” These include such factors as religion, level of education, age, and size and location of hometown. She then correlates these life course experiences to whether they are
currently, or have in the past, cohabitated with a partner or been married. Lastly, she analyzed her results to determine how these factors, most notably different age cohorts, affect cohabitation and marriage rates. Later in the essay Manting states, “Cohabitation started as a protest against bourgeois marriage but changed into a means of gradual movement into a union whereas direct marriage changed from being normal to being deviant behavior” (63). Manting contends that cohabitation was originally used as a demonstration against the outdated institution of marriage but has now become a normal, non-stigmatized marriage alternative used by many diverse members of the Dutch population.

The shift in relationship structures from the traditional marriage to more modern marriage alternatives was discussed in *Cohabitation and Marriage: Transitional Pattern, Different Lifestyle, or Just Another Legal Form* by Jan Trost. Trost’s article discusses the history of marriage alternatives throughout Europe, with much attention on the Netherlands. He begins by defining cohabitation, or rather discussing the considerable confusion surrounding the term, “to add to the confusion, there are numerous terms for this global concept (for example: living together, quasi marriage, trial marriage, shacking up, semi-marriage, and consensual union)” (5). Jan includes data from numerous countries in Europe but stresses the fact that there is insufficient data available on cohabitation since it is not a statistic tracked by most governments.

Later in the article he raises the issue of whether cohabitation can be seen as deviance or a social institution. “Twenty years ago non-marital cohabitation was deviant, especially when we take into consideration the ideal norms. Now there are no ideal norms forbidding premarital sexual intercourse (expect among some tiny groups)” (10). He is making a claim that the progressive, tolerant approach to sexuality in modern-day Dutch culture has greatly affected one’s desire to get married. It is no longer taboo to live with a partner out of wedlock and
therefore fewer people make the decision to get married. Lastly, Trost discusses the future of marriage, “If marriage rates continue to decrease, we will eventually face a situation in which no one marries and the social and legal institution of marriage will thus disappear” (10). This is a very interesting point, albeit a bit extreme.

While marriage continues to exist in the Netherlands, thriving in certain communities, research has been conducted on whether the institution still has a place in modern Dutch society. The article, *Marriage: From Cornerstone to Outdated Institution?* by Andres de Jong and Arie de Graaf, discusses how social and economic changes in the Netherlands have affected marriage rates. “Up until the 1960s living together was synonymous with being married. Over 90 percent of the population married and the chance of divorce was small” (37). This is an important historical statistic since the 1960s were a time of mobilization and shifting of cultural ideals throughout Western Europe. Technology and advanced health-care also played a role, “the introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1963 in combination with the abolition of a legal impediment to sell contraceptives to young persons in 1970 resulted in a sharp fall in the number of so-called forced marriages” (39). The authors also contend that the women’s rights movement occurring at this time had a significant impact on marriage norms. “A shortage of labor… paved the way for women to participate in the labor market. Gradually the orientation of women shifted away from the family towards the outside world” (38).

The importance of religion in the marriage debate was brought up in numerous texts. Dorien Manting discusses this in another one of her articles, *The Timing of Marriage of Cohabitating Women in the Netherlands*. She states, “The decreasing impact of the church on daily life is associated with decreasing values of marriage. However, it is expected that church members will still value marriage more than individuals with no religious denomination” (5).
The Netherlands is often viewed as a progressive, tolerant country but Manting makes the claim that certain devout religious communities will continue to make their mission preserving the sanctity of marriage. However, Manting also states that while marriage rates are not decreasing as rapidly in these religious communities, cohabitation rates are on the rise. “A major proportion of the younger women in the Netherlands anticipate a cohabitational phase before marriage somewhere in the future or have already married after a period of cohabitation” (1). Manting is making the point that marriage and cohabitation are not mutually exclusive and that it is becoming a cultural norm to live with a partner before you decide to get married.

Later in the essay, Manting brings up various social trends affecting Dutch women that she believes have affected marriage rates, specifically: education, labor force participation, fertility, and age cohort membership. She uses these variables in her study to determine if the age at which women choose to get married varies by age cohort. She determines that “there is no indication whatsoever that the differential impact of religion, working status, or pregnancy… have diminished across the birth cohorts” (12). This study found that there is little variation between the birth cohorts but differences are accounted for by other variables. “Thus the group of women who experience the highest rates of marriage remains the same within all birth cohorts” (16). This study is vital because its findings contradict findings from many other sources on this topic. Unfortunately, this text focused solely on marriage and cohabitation rates of women in the Netherlands, completely leaving out the behaviors of Dutch men.

Another article that discusses the link between religion and marriage in the Netherlands is *Going Dutch* by Stanley Kurtz. In this article, the author discusses the decrease of marriage in the Netherlands and the role the movement to open up marriage rights played in its downfall. Kurtz says, “A careful look at the decade-long campaign for same-sex marriage in the
Netherlands shows that one of its principal themes was the effort to dislodge the conviction that parenthood and marriage are intrinsically linked” (1). The fight for gay marriage in the Netherlands was unique because by opening up marriage rights to everyone the idea of what constitutes a family was significantly altered. Kurtz then goes on to analyze certain aspects of Dutch society and the potential effects they could have on marriage rates. “When a new social movement presents itself to a Dutchman, he typically says in effect: Do as you please, but I’ll go on as before. This tolerance for what is culturally alien is a legacy from a world build on religion” (1). In this passage the author is making a claim that the religious traditions instilled in Dutch society allow for a more tolerant atmosphere for those who choose to live alternative lifestyles.

However, while Kurtz states that this progressive attitude stems from a religious foundation he later brings up the emphasis placed on secularization. “No Western society has secularized more radically or rapidly than Holland. The cultural revolution of the 1960s weakened the churches… Today, nearly three-quarters of the Dutch under 35 claim no religious affiliation” (1). Kurtz continues to discuss how traditional Dutch norms and the history of tolerance were introduced in the debate to open up marriage rights in the early 2000s. The movement to legalize same-sex marriage began in the early 1990s, with failed attempts to legalize through the courts. It was finally passed in late 2000 via legislation in Parliament. Although multiple gay rights and feminist organizations were opposed to its passage, Kurtz argues that eventually most understood the implications legalizing same-sex marriage would have on deconstructing the traditional institution of marriage. He says, “All participants in the debate- the gay community as well as the political left, center, and right- took gay marriage to
signify the replacement of marriage by a flexible and morally neutral range of relationship options” (3).

Alternatives to marriage and untraditional relationship options were discussed in much of the pre-existing literature on this topic. In Wendy M. Schrama’s essay, *Registered Partnership in the Netherlands*, she examines the Dutch Registered Partnership Act. She begins the essay by explaining the legislation, “The Act has been incorporated into Book 7 of the Civil Code, which deals with family law” (1). Schrama also finds it important to note that while other Nordic countries have passed similar legislation, the Netherlands is the only country that allows opposite-sex partners to also obtain a registered partnership. The author also discusses informal co-habitation and how societal changes in the Netherlands altered cultural norms, “from the 1960s onwards extra-marital cohabitation became more socially acceptable and more people of all social classes began to live together without marrying and children were born from these relationships” (1). The removal of stigma placed on unmarried cohabiters, especially when children were involved, allowed for the future passage of the Dutch Registered Partnership Act.

Custody and others issues which affect children are important priorities to the Dutch government who put the safety of minors above all else, even equality. Schrama explains that there is an important exception to the principle of equal treatment of registered partners, “a male registered partner is not automatically presumed to be the father of a child born from a partnership whereas in a marriage the spouse is” (2). While this addition to the act does limit the rights of some, there was no backlash to its inclusion in the new legislation. The bulk of the article includes the author discussing specifics of the act and explaining how it was eventually passed through parliament, which will be included in the history section of this ISP. Schrama concludes the article by stating, “the government included heterosexual couples to emphasize
equality between marriage and registered partnership. It should not be perceived as a second-class marriage” (5). This is an important clarification to make since members of the International community as well as the Dutch often misunderstand the significance and importance of registered partnership.

Pre-existing literature on the topic of marriage in the Netherlands has explored many different facets of the issue- mainly attempting to determine which factors (age, education, religion, etc.) influence one’s decision to marry. Unfortunately, many of these studies are quite contradictory to one another proving that it is extremely difficult to determine why someone makes a specific life choice. These studies were useful in helping me formulate questions for my interviews but I was unable to determine which study collected the most accurate data. Therefore, I have made the focus of my study more on explaining these different marriage alternatives in a more concrete way while determining what factors in Dutch society allow for these alternatives to be accepted without stigmatization.
Assumptions

The reason I have chosen to write my Independent Student Project on marriage in the Netherlands stems from my personal beliefs and issues with the institution of marriage in place in the United States. Because of this I feel there are numerous assumptions and biases that I have brought to my research and interviews. First of all, the fact that I am a woman, gender, and sexuality studies student at a predominantly liberal university creates an innate appreciation for the more accepting view of marriage in the Netherlands. Before coming to Amsterdam, I believed it was Mecca of tolerance, which could have altered how I interpreted certain statistics and responses. By assuming that most people are generally more liberal than people in the United States, I initiated my research with the believe that I would not come across many Conservative Dutch people or conservative views on Dutch society, which was certainly not the case.

Secondly, as an American student with a weak grasp of the Dutch language, I was forced to conduct all of my interviews in English. Because of this, certain interviewees might not have been able to fully explain their thoughts or experiences because English is not their first language. Also, there are certain times during the interviews in which I was not exactly clear on the point they were trying to make because they had slight flaws in their English making those points inadmissible in my paper.

Another and possibly most problematic bias was my pool of interviewees. Unfortunately, as a student from abroad with few resources and connections to Dutch society my interviews were mostly with friends of my advisor or other host parents on the program. Also, all of my interviews were conducted with people living in Amsterdam. These factors all create a significant bias in that I was not able to accurately portray the general opinion of Dutch society.
Instead my interviewees tended to be highly educated, wealthier people who viewed marriage in a much different way than people from other classes or regions of the Netherlands. Unfortunately, this was inevitable since finding interviewees proved to be difficult and by being aware of these biases I know that my study cannot be used as a proper generalization of Dutch society.
Methodology

For this study I have conducted seven qualitative, open-ended interviews. The interviews were all semi-structured using a personally developed interview guide (appendix). The questions were all generally similar throughout the interviews although some were altered based on specific factors such as marital or relationship status or sexual orientation of the participants. The interviews were a mix between oral history and opinion interviews. Participants were asked about their individual experiences as well as their personal views on societal norms and cultural ideals that they have observed in Dutch society.

The participants ranged in age: the youngest being 18 and the oldest being over 60. They also had varying experiences in marriage and marriage alternatives. Two were previous married but divorced, one of whom was in a same-sex marriage. One is presently married but was previously opposed to marriage. Two are currently single- never having been married or registered in any other marriage alternative. The remaining two are currently engaged in an informal cohabitation. The participants for this study were recruited through my advisor, host parents, and the SIT staff. Participants were reached either by phone or e-mail. I attempted to contact other possible participants but many either did not respond or were unable to be interviewed because of time constraints. In order to keep the interviewees in this study anonymous, they are labeled throughout the analysis section as participant 1-7.

Interviews generally lasted between 30 minutes to an hour and a half and took place in varying locations: the SIT office, the participant’s home, and a local café. The interviews were recorded on my computer and then transcribed in order to ensure accuracy of the quotations. In conducting these interviews I attempted to make the participants feel comfortable talking about such a personal topic. I generally began with what their personal experience with marriage was
and then asked in-depth questions involving Dutch societal norms. I followed up their answers with clarifying questions to make the interview seem more like a conversation.

Another method that I used in this study was a content analysis of legislation surrounding marriage and marriage alternatives passed in the Dutch Parliament. By reading the actual laws on this topic I was able to accurately determine what rights are given to those who are married or registered for a marriage alternative in the Netherlands. I also used secondary sources that have collected data on marriage rates over the past fifty years. This data was available from the Dutch government via the Centraal Bureau voor Statistiek (CBS). CBS collects statistics on population and other figures in the Netherlands and organizes them by topic as well as year. They have collected marriage rates in the Netherlands since the late 1800s so it was a very useful source for my study.
Findings/Analysis

To best explain the findings of this study, the analysis portion of this paper is organized in the following way. First, the history of marriage in the Netherlands will be explained using current data on marriage rates as well as historical trends. Next, alternatives to marriage such as registered partnerships and informal cohabitation will be discussed. It is also important to note that same-sex marriage will be included in this subsection even though same-sex marriage is not actually a marriage alternative but rather an extension of pre-existing marriage rights for same-sex couples. The second aspect of the analysis portion of this study will include factors in Dutch society that have allowed for these marriage alternatives to exist. This section will also include possible reasons for the decrease in marriage rates in the Netherlands.

Background of Marriage in the Netherlands

Marriage rates have been steadily declining in the Netherlands since 1975 and current rates are the lowest they have been since 1945. In 2009, 73,477 marriages were performed—a significant decrease from the peak in 1970 when 124,000 marriages were registered in the Netherlands. After 1970, the number of marriages dropped dramatically to 78,000 in 1983. There was a slight increase in 1990 but since 1999 the number of marriages has been in decline (CBS statline). These current statistics are troublesome to scholars studying marriage, fearing that marriage is at risk of extinction. “If marriage rates continue to decrease, we will eventually face a situation in which no one marries and the social and legal institution of marriage will thus disappear” (Trost 10). That is one of the main reasons behind conducting this study, to determine whether marriage is truly becoming obsolete in the Netherlands and if so, what factors are causing this phenomenon.
It is important to clarify what exactly the term marriage refers to. “As a legal institution marriage can be characterized as a form of partnership between two persons that is created by a formal act of registration and that results in a number of legal consequences (Waaldijk 3). While this formal description of marriage accurately defines the legal term, there are many other factors to take into account when discussing this controversial institution. Participant 1 is a gay man who has been married and divorced since 2001, when same-sex marriage was legalized in the Netherlands. When asked about the meaning of marriage and how it is viewed in Dutch society he replied, “I think that when we talk about marriage we always confuse two issues: love and marriage. Marriage, as I’ve experienced, is a binding contract between two individuals who love each other. Love first and then a contract later.” This idea of separating love from the institution of marriage is a very modern concept in Dutch society. Later in the interview Participant 1 explains in detail the history of marriage in the Netherlands.

People haven been falling in love over the centuries but marriage, as we know it now, is something that has risen in the 19th century. Before only people of a certain class would get married, when there were possessions involved. So marriage was always only something in the nobility, in the merchant trade, in the elite class because there were interests at stake. The lower class didn’t get married up until the 19th century. This is a very interesting point to make since marriage is often viewed as an institution that has been around since the beginning of time, and therefore its sanctity should be respected. However, this is obviously not the case.

After the turn of the 19th century, marriage became the norm for most Dutch citizens and this continued without question until the 1960s. One study states that rates of marriage decreased across age cohorts significantly in the span of 10 years. Cohort 1950-1954 has a 1.74 times higher risk of marriage than average while cohort 1960-1964 has a 0.86 times lower risk of
marriage than average (Manting 58). These statistics are confirmed by data on marriage registrations published in numerous sources. “Up until the 1960s living together was synonymous with being married. Over 90 percent of the population married and the chance of divorce was small” (Jong 37). The notion that cohabitation was viewed as marriage has changed significantly in Dutch society. In fact, many view this cohabitation period as a time to explore their relationship in a more intimate way before they decide to settle down. During my interview with Participant 2, we discussed this topic in detail. She is a Dutch woman who has been married and divorced once and is currently in a six-year relationship. She said, “most people will not get married right away, unless they think it is absolute true love and go from there. But most people will live together for 4 or 5 years before they decide to get married.”

This trial period of living together prior to marriage seems to be a common practice in modern Dutch society. This concept was brought up in the majority of my interviews with most participants claiming how big a step moving in together actually is. “Most people will live together, be in a relationship, feel the water, see what people are really like before they give up everything to that person. They will have sex before they will share a couch, and a table, and a kitchen” (Participant 1). However it is important to note that this mentality towards relationships has not always been the societal norm. Prior to the 1960s, sexuality was not discussed as freely in the Netherlands and the idea of cohabitation prior to marriage was considered taboo by many. “Cohabitation started as a protest against bourgeois marriage but changed into a means of gradual movement into a union, whereas direct marriage changed from being normal to being deviant behavior” (Manting 63). This shift in cultural ideology and morality was a key point for many of the participants in this study.
Participant 3, a Dutch man who has been involved in an informal cohabitation with the same woman for 39 years discusses this time in Dutch history. “It was the 60s and the 70s, that was the time that we grew independent. I had been very active in the student movement, was radical in all spheres of life. A very traditional way of organizing a relationship did not go hand in hand with our very radical views. It was not only our own way of looking at it.” While this mentality was not the norm for all Dutch people during this time, it was definitely generational. Many students and members of social movements during this period expressed their disapproval of established institutions, which eventually led to change in Dutch society at large. “From the 1960s onwards extra-marital cohabitation became more socially acceptable and more people of all social classes began to live together without marrying” (Scharma 1). This societal acceptance of cohabitation was a phenomenon occurring throughout Europe. At this time many European countries began making legal alternatives available to unmarried partners in informal cohabitation (Waaldijk 3).

However, one of the motivating factors behind the passage of this legislation was the increase in progressive social movements sweeping Europe. During this time the radical student’s movement, women’s liberation, and many other movements were prevalent in the Netherlands. As mentioned earlier, Participant 3 was an active member of the radical students movement as well as the Communist party. His partner, Participant 4 was also a participant in this study. Growing up in the Netherlands during this time, she was also involved in social movements, most notably the women’s liberation movement. She describes this period, “when we were students I think we were part of a movement that was discussing a lot of institutions, not just marriage, but universities and consciousness and harmony. On average it was part of the democratic movement- the emancipation of women.” While there was not a separate movement
for the de-institution of marriage it is considered a bi-product of the progressive discourse occurring at this time. Another participant in this study, Participant 5, was also an active member of these social movements. Additionally, she is the only currently married person in this study. She has been married to her husband Gerard for ten years but they have been together for twenty-five. When asked about why her and Gerard waited so long to get married she answered, “We thought it was a bit too ordinary, a bit too traditional. We didn’t want that. Back then we were very leftist. We were not very radical, but quite leftist. So we were against all the right-ish, normal institutions.”

Support continued to grow for these liberal social movements and by the early 1980s societal norms regarding gender and social practices were altered completely. In the early 1970s, only one in ten people aged 20-24 lived together before getting married. In the late 1990s, three-quarters of young people cohabitated before marrying (Hoorn 30). It had become the norm to live together before you got married and therefore marriage continued to decline at alarming rates. “At the beginning of the 1980s cohabitating couples had a greater urge for independence in their relationships, were more critical towards the quality of their relationships and were less convinced that their relationships would succeed in being a permanent, life-long commitment” (Manting 53). This idea that love lasts forever was seen as outdated and many couples knew that the probability of them staying together for eternity was slim. Participant 3 agreed very much with this point saying, “My concern with marriage in general is that you look at it through the same framework as two people being together for the whole of their lives and the risk of being locked in one relationship and that is not my ideal of organizing your own social network.” This a common viewpoint that appeared throughout the interviews conducted in this study. Marriage
involves a life-long commitment to another person, which many Dutch people are aware enough to realize they are not willing to make. Therefore, alternatives to marriage came into place.

**Registered Partnerships**

With increasing rates of cohabitation and decreasing rates of marriage, the Dutch government was pressured to enact legislation offering these couples a way to receive benefits and support without getting married. The first marriage alternative to be offered to Dutch citizens was the registered partnership. “Since 1989 several European countries have introduced registered partnership, a legal institution that is more or less analogous to marriage, resulting in some or almost all of the legal consequences of marriage” (Waaldijk 3). However, the Netherlands is one of three countries that allow same-sex as well as opposite-sex couples to register their partnership. In 1990 the First Kortman committee was set-up to advise the government on marriage alternative options. In 1991 the committee presented a report in which the creation of two different types of possible registrations were recommended. The first would be with the local municipal administration and would mainly have public law effects. The second would be in the civil status register and would bring about the same effects as marriage. In 1993, the Government rejected the proposed municipal registration but adopted the form of registration in the civil status register. At that time the government voted to exclude partners of the opposite sex from the legislation. Eventually this decision was overturned granting the option to register a partnership to all Dutch citizens, excluding those who are not permitted to marry because they are too closely related (Scharma 1).

“The act has been incorporated into Book 7 of the civil code, which deals with family law…It simply makes applicable most of the Marriage Act” (Scharma 2). In a strictly legal sense a registered partnership is almost identical to a marriage including the procedures that need to be
followed for starting or ending the partnership. In fact, ninety-six percent of the rights given to marriages are also given to registered partnerships (Waaldijk 42). Unfortunately, none of the participants in the study were involved in a registered partnership so no one could offer first hand experience of registering for one. However, Participant 5 had discovered by accident the role taxes play. “I just found out that fiscally it doesn’t make a difference at all if you are married or if you sign this legal document. Because I saw on my tax papers that it said, unmarried and I thought wait, wait, wait there is a mistake and it has been a mistake for all these years, and what does that mean?” Participant 5 explained that she went on to call her tax auditor who confirmed that her relationship with her husband had been mistakenly labeled as a registered partnership but that there was no difference between the two, as far as taxes were concerned.

Another similarity between marriage and a registered partnership is the ceremony. The ceremony itself is as close to marriage as possible. It takes place in the town hall in the presence of witness and must be conducted by the registrar. However, there is one difference between the two regulations. Registered partners may celebrate a religious ceremony before the civil ceremony takes place, while spouses may not (Scharma 1). This is not to say that a registered partnership may be entered in a church, “partnership registration is done by the same public authorities as those competent to do marriages” (Waaldijk 39).

During the interviews, participants not currently engaged in relationships were asked if they would consider registering a partnership. Participant 6, an eighteen year-old Dutch high school student said that he “would consider registering a partnership,” however; he was not keen on the idea of a long-term relationship. Participant 1 had a different response, “Well if I have been with a person for a long period of time and we had taken care of each other, I could register as a Partnership, which qualifies him for pension rights, or if you would raise a child together.
That would certainly be something I would consider.” While the option to register a partnership seems to be well received in Dutch society, it is not utilized as often as originally predicted. In 2009 there were only 9,597 partnerships registered in the Netherlands, 9,002 of them by opposite-sex couples (CBS statline). A potential reason for this low rate could be the many other alternatives to marriage offered to Dutch citizens.

Same-Sex Marriage: The Opening up of Marriage Rights

Same-sex marriage became legal on April 1 2001. During the first nine months 1075 female couples and 1339 male couples got married (CBS statline). For the purpose of this study, same-sex marriage is referred to as a marriage alternative, however that is not an accurate depiction of the legal rights given to same-sex couples in the Netherlands. In fact, the Netherlands did not create a new law strictly allowing same-sex marriage but rather the government amended a pre-existing law to include same-sex couples. The amendment was to article 30 of Book 1 of the Civil Code. The new article 30(1) reads as follows: “A marriage can be contracted by two persons of different sex or of the same sex” (Waaldijk 572). This is a vital distinction to make because it confirms that same-sex marriage was not actually legalized in the Netherlands but rather pre-existing marriage law was opened up to include same-sex couples. However, there is not complete equality for same-sex married couples, four percent of the legal benefits of opposite-sex marriage in the Netherlands do not apply to same-sex marriage (Waaldijk 41). This four percent difference mainly focuses on the more specific legislation surrounding right to adoption and other custody issues.

The debate surrounding the decision to open up marriage rights was quite heated in the Netherlands with opposition from Conservative right-wing groups as well as some LGBT rights organizations. “Again and again, voices from across the political spectrum argued that gay
marriage signifies the demotion or abolition of marriage as the socially preferred setting for parenthood” (Kurtz 3). Participants in the study were asked what they thought of opening up marriage rights and most thought that it was a good thing. Participant 1, the only gay man in the study gave the following response when asked about the controversy surrounding same-sex marriage, “How can you prove the holiness of a marriage? It is up to the individuals who make a marriage work, like how honest will they be to each other and that is a very personal issue. You can get married in a church, be together for 75 years, is that sanctity? Is that holiness? People can still become very unhappy.” Participant 1 went on to discuss his own marriage and the fact that he felt marriage should be an option for everyone regardless of the political connotations surrounding it.

Members of the LGBT community opposed to marriage felt that rather than attempting to assimilate to hetero-normative ideals, the focus should be on destroying the institution of marriage. This was also an opinion for other progressive organizations. “During the 2000 Parliamentary debates Green Party Spokesman Femke Halsema said it was only when considered superficially that the drive for same-sex marriage appeared to contradict the feminist quest for the abolition of marriage” (Kurtz 3). Participants in this study also agreed with that accord, that same-sex marriage is ultimately beneficial to society. Participant 3 said on this topic,

I think that the same-sex marriage, at least in the Netherlands, has strengthened the idea of marriage since it has become some sort of new norm. I know of a few people who have long-lasting relationships; also same-sex people who are not married anymore. I think it has something to do with the position of gay people within society. A lot of people view it as recognition as being the same value in society as heterosexual people.

This argument often came-up during the initial debates, arguing that by legalizing marriage for all people, the depiction and message behind marriage would be changed for the
better. “Dutch lesbian intellectual Xandra Schutte emphasized, ‘gays would be trendsetters in removing the connection between marriage and parenthood, thereby pushing society toward a more flexible conception of relationships’” (Kurtz 3). This notion that opening-up marriage rights only expands the potential options for relationships was echoed in the interviews in the study. Participant 4 said in response to the controversy surrounding the amendment, “I have noticed that there is a strong undercurrent of people that are trying to find a continuous relationship and not running around all the time. Marriage is a way of expressing that.” Most participants in the study felt that marriage should at least be an option for everyone and that discrimination should not exist when it comes to legal rights.

*Informal Cohabitation*

In addition to registered partnerships and same-sex marriage, there is one other marriage alternative that was regularly brought up during the interviews, informal cohabitation. “Considerable confusion exists as to what the concept of cohabitation could or should mean. To add to the confusion, there are numerous terms for this global concept, for example: living together, quasi marriage, trial marriage, shacking up, semi-marriage and consensual union” (Trost 5). One couple that participated in the interview is currently engaged in an informal cohabitation. Participant 3 says of his relationship with Participant 4,

> We have, Participant 4 and I, are living together for 39 years now and we have a contract in which we deal with, organize our relationship. We have a testament, a will, which is important in your relationship to your kids. We have arranged everything formally with the same effects, as when we would have been married except we are not married.

The informal cohabitation arrangement basically states that a couple acknowledge that they are living together, often drafting a will or other type of contract that lays out necessary legal consequences. The first example of informal cohabitation dates back to 1975 in the policy
guidelines for immigration. Cohabitation was recognized for the first time in 1979 for the purposes of rent law and in 1981 for the purposes of inheritance law (Waaldijk 138). Participant 4 also discussed her contract with Participant 3, “In our contract in says something that we will supply for each other if the other becomes unable to earn a living. It goes pretty far as responsibilities to each other are concerned. It’s not a marriage but it is taking responsibility.”

Cohabitation has become an increasingly popular alternative to marriage since the 1960s and is considered a definite factor in the decreasing marriage rates throughout Western Europe. However, in the Netherlands, cohabitation is often used as a trial period before marriage. Four out of five cohabiting women aged 18-24 expect to get married in the near future. Among cohabitating women aged 30-34, the percentage of women who intend to live together without getting married is about equal to that of women who want to marry. And three quarters of cohabiting women aged 35-39 want to continue the existing relationship and do not want to get married” (Hoorn 33). These data show that the chance of getting married after a period of cohabitation is dependent upon age cohort. However, this was not proven in my study. There was an even split between participants who wanted to marry after a period of cohabitation and those who wanted to continue cohabiting without getting married. Participant 5 commented on her decision to get married, “It was a mixture of the feeling of trust, this is going to stay and convenience for official documents. We already had an official document of course, concerning how we live together and the house, some kind of a testament but we wanted to update that.” She made the decision to marry her husband Gerard after 15 years together, when she was in her late thirties/early forties.

Participant 2 also stated that she would probably marry her current boyfriend of six years, “in time.” Throughout the interviews there was a recurring theme of not wanting to rush into
Most participants discussed marriage in very open terms, “I would consider that in the future” or “that is a definite possibility” were remarks made by Participant 6 and Participant 7 a 21-year-old Dutch student. However, this concept of cohabitation prior to marriage seemed like an obvious if not inevitable occurrence in most of the participants’ lives. “A major proportion of the younger generation in the Netherlands anticipate a cohabitational phase before marriage somewhere in the future or have already married after a period of cohabitation” (Manting 11). It is evident that the increasing rates of cohabitation during the 1960s and 1970s have de-stigmatized the idea of couples living together before marriage, making it a societal norm for later generations.

A main complication when discussing informal cohabitation is the many variations and examples occurring in the Netherlands. “The absence of specific procedure for getting into informal cohabitation is also reflected in the absence of specific legislative rules on how to get out of it” (Waaldijk 40). That is why in 2001 Parliament revised the Parental Leave Act, extending some of the rights given to married couples and registered partners to unregistered cohabitators. In fact, 86% of the legal rights given to married couples are also given to different-sex cohabitators and 81% for same-sex cohabitators (Kurtz 3). Most of the rights given to informal cohabitation have to do with taxes, social security, and housing allocation. A law was also passed prohibiting discrimination based on cohabitation rather than marriage with respect to housing, insurance, spousal benefits and other services. The primary remaining differences between marriage and informal cohabitation relate to paternity, alimony, interstate inheritance, surname, property, and debts (Waaldijk 40). Participant 4 and Participant 3 utilize the benefits given to informal cohabitators and like that they are given these rights without having to give up their beliefs against marriage. Participant 4 said on this topic, “Some people don’t get married because
it is better tax wise. Participant 3 and I don’t enter the tax as separate households but some do and they pay fewer taxes because they have a better tax rate then if they were living together. Sometimes there are very practical reasons not to get married.” The legal invention of informal cohabitation as well as the other marriage alternatives allow for Dutch citizens to decide which option is best for their relationship and family. Therefore a key aspect of this study was researching what factors in Dutch society allow for these alternatives to not only exist, but to be accepted without stigmatization.

**Women’s Liberation**

As discussed earlier, during the 1960s and 1970s the Women’s Liberation movement was extremely prominent in the Netherlands. This movement in addition to other progressive social movements gaining popularity at that time were successful in shifting cultural norms and ideas of the role women play in Dutch society. Participant 4 was active in the women’s movement and said about its effect on gender roles in the Netherlands, “That has changed a lot- a lot of women work and they have children. I think the position of women has changed a lot thereby marriage doesn’t have the same consequences as it used to have in the end of the 50s.” Another key turning point in the equality of women was the introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1963 in combination with “the abolition of a legal impediment to sell contraceptives to young people in 1970 resulted in a sharp fall in the number of so-called forced marriages” (Jong 39). Participant 4 also discussed this topic in her interview, “the accessibility of birth control, I think that influenced marriage a lot too. Because before that you could get pregnant and to make sure that you wouldn’t end up with a child by yourself you get married to avoid all this awful shame unmarried mothers would have. Then of course accessibility of abortion helped a lot too. This was all a part of the women’s movement in the 60s.”
The liberation of women in the Netherlands also significantly impacted the rates of education of women and their participation in the workforce. Since women were able to support themselves financially there was no longer a need to get married young and depend upon their husband for support. The growing importance of education began to delay marital timing throughout the Netherlands; people who did choose to get married often did so later after they had reached their desired levels of education and position in the workforce. “Highly educated young adults are supposed to value independence and autonomy more than young adults with low educational attainment do, leading to a later timing of marriage” (Manting 3). Participant 3 agreed with this sentiment stating, “Probably that is still true but that has to do with the fact that people with higher education stress individuality and multiple relationships with multiple groups of people and they would stress defining the importance of their relationship.” However, there were dissenting opinions on this topic by participants in this study, some felt that factors such as education or religion did not impact marriage rates. Participant 1 commented, “Stupid people get married, intelligent people get married, romantic people get married, and non-romantic people get married. My experience is a lot of different types of people get married. It is a very personal decision whether they want to do that.”

An increase of women participating in the workforce occurred during the flourishing economy in which a shortage of labor “paved the way from women to participate in the labor market. Gradually the orientation of women shifted away from the family towards the outside world” (Jong 38). Participant 4 brought up this concept claiming, “I didn’t want to get married because if you were a married woman you were out- your position was just erased. That was the dominant culture so you could do much better not being married than married as a woman. If you had children it was even worse, you were considered solely a mother. That has changed a lot- a
lot of women work and they have children.” However, the ability to make your own money also allowed women to enter relationships of their choosing without their parents’ consent.

Participant 2 retells the story of her first relationship and the fact that her parents did not want her to live with her boyfriend without being married. She finally made a compromise with her parents. “They said ok, you can live together when you make 6,000 Euros, which is an enormous amount when you’re like 18. But I managed to do so, because I worked as a journalist. They had no clue of my salary.” The Women’s Liberation movement in the Netherlands created many opportunities for Dutch women - especially in the education and economic sector. This independence allowed women to make their own choices regarding relationships, vastly altering marriage rates.

**Secularization**

The Netherlands is often praised for its ability to accurately separate religion from state affairs. However, it is less common knowledge that until the early 20th century, a policy of ‘pillarization’ took place. Dutch society was divided into three pillars: Protestant, Catholic and Social-Democratic and each pillar had their own social institutions (newspapers, schools, trade unions, hospitals, etc.) “Working together, the elites of the three pillars kept conflict at bay by setting principle aside and adopting an attitude of pragmatic toleration” (Kurtz 1). However, this system began to break down during the 1960s, forever changing the political environment in the Netherlands. “No Western society has secularized more radically or rapidly than Holland. The cultural revolution of the 1960s weakened the churches… Today, nearly three-quarters of the Dutch under 35 claim no religious affiliation” (Kurtz 1).

Marriage law has also been affected by the secularization of the Netherlands. Those who wish to get married do so in a civil ceremony, in the town hall, and then, if they choose to, have a
religious ceremony on their own. However, the government does not honor a religious ceremony alone as a lawful marriage. This theme was brought up in many of the interviews. Participant 1 commented, “My experience is that in the United States emphasis is much more on religion than the lawful binding part. I think it is up to the individual to experience it. If they want to deepen their relationship by adding those religious elements to a ceremony, if it is deepening their faith, then I am all for it. But, it is not a necessity.” The decreasing impact of the church on daily life is often associated with decreasing marriage rates. However, it is still expected that religious people value marriage more than individuals with no religious denomination. Participant 2 agrees with this stating, “Some people are very focused on marriage and say you must have the church with it and the program of the day and others will say, okay well I want to go to city hall and the church because my background needs it. Others will say I don’t need a church; I just want to get married.” It seems that most participants in this study view the religious ceremony as a personal choice— a complete necessity for some and rather unimportant to others.

However, there were varying opinions held by participants about the effect religion actually has on marriage rates. Participant 5 describes the Bible belt and other religious regions in the Netherlands as “a different world” than secular Amsterdam. Claiming that in many of these rural villages where everyone is religious “it would be impossible to really live together without being married.” Therefore, in some religious parts of the Netherlands marriage is considered the only option for serious relationships. However, Participant 3 had a dissenting hypothesis claiming that “People feel much less bound by ties to religion anymore so what was true in our generation when we fought these traditional ties is no longer necessary for young people. They can decide much more independently about being married or not.” He believes that
the secularization present in the Netherlands separates marriage from religion so adequately that marriage is no longer seen as a religious institution.

While this hypothesis has not been tested, to my knowledge, it seems most view secularization in the Netherlands as a positive aspect of Dutch society, and a driving force behind its reputation of acceptance. However, the history of pillarisation is also a key component of Dutch history. “When a new social movement presents itself to a Dutchmen, he typically says, in effect: ‘Do as you please, but I’ll go as before.’ This tolerance for what is culturally alien is a legacy from a world built on religion” (Kurtz 1). This sentiment seems to accurately depict how the Dutch view themselves. Participant 4 described the Dutch mentality in a very similar way, “I think the Netherlands nowadays is variety. Okay you want to get married, go ahead- you are gay and don’t want to get married so don’t. But, don’t bother me with your problem that you want marriage to be extinct. I want to get married so it is your problem.” The secularization in the Netherlands has significantly impacted the levels of tolerance and acceptance held by the Dutch, which allow for the existence of marriage alternatives and the ability for people to make their own choices regarding personal relationships without fear of judgment.

Family Structure

The final recurring theme in this study is this notion of family structure in the Netherlands. In the United States there is a strong focus on the normative, traditional nuclear family, which is not the case in most parts of the Netherlands. Since there is less of a cultural norm defining family, Dutch people are able to make independent choices about their relationships. “Having duly considered and rejected the essential tie between marriage and parenthood, the Dutch started to abandon their inertial traditionalism and began to experiment with parental cohabitation in record numbers” (Kurtz 3). This tolerated independence is a
determinate factor in the existence of marriage alternatives in the Netherlands. This topic was brought up by many of the participants in this study. Participant 3 said, “So the image of marriage that we fought was the traditional way of organizing a relationship. Men head of the family, women supporting or being at home most of the time… That is the traditional view of family and that has definitely changed.” It can also be argued that the movement to eradicate the institution of marriage allowed for the societal acceptance of what constitutes a family.

“In addition to the traditional family of a man and a woman who are married and have children, the term ‘family’ is used to describe other primary living arrangements in which the care and upbringing of the child takes place” (Vlaard 635). This is an interesting claim that was backed up in many of the interviews. Participant 5 felt that with decreasing marriage rates the idea of what constitutes a family has become more inclusive. “What I do think has changed with the decreasing marriage rates is that the idea of what your- okay this might be Amsterdam thinking, or big city thinking, but in my world, family has extended to friends that are around for 10, 15 years; they are a part of my family.” It seems that many Dutch people have begun to reject the traditionalist approach to family, no longer focusing solely on blood relations. Participant 3 agreed with this notion but went even further claiming that family ties have become less important in Dutch society. “If you look at families now and compare them with families forty years ago- people stuck with their families a lot more then. The family ties are much looser than they were twenty, thirty, forty years ago… People are more practical, more by themselves. This is about individualization.” The fact that there are much fewer traditional marriages occurring in the Netherlands greatly affects this since people are no longer choosing to be as strongly tied to others as they were in the past. Data collected on size of private households in the Netherlands found that in 2010 there were 2,669,516 one-person households, 2,181,514 multiple person
households without children, and 2,535,114 multiple person households with children (CBS statline).

An interesting aspect of the interviews was the emphasis placed on the importance of a healthy home environment for children in Dutch families. When discussing the significance having children placed on her relationship with Participant 3, Participant 4 said, “Since we had kids it is different than before we had kids. Before we had kids Participant 3 and I were two separate individuals, we had separate housing. We lived on different floors in one house. We had much more our own friends and that is why I say if you have kids you turn into a family. You just need both parents to take care of the kids.” Participant 3 seemed to agree with this thought also bringing up how important their extended family was to their children’s upbringing. “When Wander and Evelein became 18 we organized a party for the extended family. It takes a village to raise a child. There were all sorts of people who were part of their growing up. And the extended family was the important group. It was beautiful.”

While the average number of children has decreased in the Netherlands there is still a strong link between marriage and children. Only one in ten marriages remain childless in the end (Jong 49). In fact, it can be hypothesized that many Dutch couples get married only once they start having children, they feel that having children is a binding process so why not sign a binding contract. Participant 2 discussed this in her interview, “Some things are arranged really easy [when you are married], like when you have kids; which is why marriage is a lot easier. You don’t have to go to a Judge and formally arrange custody for each child.” Unfortunately, custody of children is a complicated issue in most marriage alternatives. As same-sex marriage is concerned, same sex married couples cannot adopt children internationally and a non-biological lesbian parent only gets ‘parental authority’ for a child born to her female spouse, not automatic
parental rights. In order to receive full parental rights the non-biological parent must formally adopt the child (Belkin). Participant 1 discussed this debate asserting that the legislation around this topic is problematic. “It is always an issue when children are involved. Lesbian women do get children and their partner is often involved in raising them, so they must have certain rights. And also gay men have children by previous marriages, or even in a gay relationship they can get children.” Many participants felt that while it is important to look after the interests of Dutch citizens they felt it is not the job of the government to interfere in how people shape their family life. This mentality has allowed for many of the advances in normative family structures in the Netherlands. Many Dutch people consider the idea of the nuclear, traditional family to be outdated, which creates a positive, accepting environment for those who wish to live alternative lifestyles.
Conclusions

The aim of this study was to use personal interviews and secondary data to research possible alternatives to marriage in the Netherlands as well as determine what factors in Dutch society allow for these alternatives to exist. I believe this study successfully completed that goal. Registered partnerships, the opening-up of marriage rights, and informal cohabitation were created to provide Dutch citizens with other options than hetero-normative marriage.

Historically, the institution of marriage was criticized for furthering outdated views on relationships and gender in the Netherlands. Students and members of liberal social movements began to protest marriage by refusing to take part in the institution and instead entering into informal cohabitations. Eventually this mentality spread, causing a significant decrease in marriage rates in the Netherlands from the 1970s onwards. Marriage was no longer seen as the only relationship option and informal cohabitation began to be accepted as a cultural norm.

However, equality was not given to those choosing marriage alternatives until the 1990s with the passage of the Registered Partnership Act in Parliament, which granted nearly equal rights to same and opposite-sex couples who wanted to register their relationships without being formally married. In 2001, marriage rights were opened for same-sex couples, legalizing marriage for all Dutch citizens. Lastly, The Parental Leave Act was passed in 2001, which gives informally cohabitating couples some of the same rights as registered partners and married couples. They also have the option of creating legal contracts depicting the particulars of their relationships without registering their relationship in any formal way. These marriage alternatives are noted as the main cause for the decreasing marriage rates in the Netherlands and have shifted societal norms to remove any stigma from couples living together without being married.
External factors within Dutch society have allowed for this de-stigmatization and removal of cultural ideals about marriage that still exist in many countries, namely the United States. The Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 1970s played a key role in changing normative gender roles in Dutch society. Women were receiving higher levels of education and the number of women in the workforce was increasing at alarming rates. These changes in the role of women in society affected marriage rates, with many women feeling free from being forced to give up their independence by getting married. Also, the secularization that swept the Netherlands during the Cultural Revolution broke the tie between the church and the state. The removal of religion from marriage changed many peoples perception of the institution and they no longer felt obligated to get married because of religious pressure. Lastly, the changing views of Dutch family structure allowed for the existence of alternative paths to family formation. It is no longer seen as taboo for people to have and raise children without being married. These three factors as well as the historical debate surrounding the institution have successfully altered cultural norms, creating an open discourse on marriage alternatives in the Netherlands.
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Appendix A: Interview Guide

The following is the outline of questions used in the interviews in this study:

1) What is your personal experience with marriage?

2) Do you think marriage is becoming obsolete in the Netherlands?

3) What is your general view on opening up marriage rights to same-sex couples?

4) Do you believe getting married is a necessity for some Dutch people?

5) How do you think secularization in the Netherlands affects marriage rates?

6) Do you think decreasing marriage rates have altered the traditional path to family formation?

7) Would you consider marriage alternatives to be similar to marriage? Are they viewed in similar ways in Dutch society?

8) Do you think certain factors such as religion, level of education; wealth, etc. are determinate of if someone will get married/ register for a marriage alternative?

9) Do you think not being married effects normative gender roles in the Netherlands?