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## Parental Residential and Partnering Transitions and the Initiation of Adolescent Romantic Relationships

*This study focused on the possible links between parental residential and partnering transitions (a parent's move out of the household, introduction of a new maternal and paternal partner) and the initiation of romantic relationships in adolescence. Using data from a prospective cohort study of Dutch adolescents (the TRacking Adolescents' Individual Lives Survey; N = 1,513), recurrent event discrete-time models with random effects were estimated, controlling for the initial family structure and quality of family climate. The results demonstrated that when all 3 events were considered, only the initiation of a new romantic relationship by the mother was associated with an increase in the odds of initiating a romantic relationship for the adolescent.*

In an era of multiple and unstable relationships, early romantic bonds may be pivotal to our

understanding of adult intimate relations. Adolescence sets the stage for later competencies and statuses during the transition into adulthood (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Research has shown that a continuity exists between adolescent romantic relations and the timing and quality of adult unions (Madsen & Collins, 2011; Raley, Crissey, & Muller, 2007). Yet researchers have argued that “the antecedents of adolescent romance remain poorly understood” (Cavanagh, Crissey, & Raley, 2008, p. 698).

Previous research indicates that the relationship formation patterns in one generation are linked to those in the next. For example, research in the United States has found that adults whose parents divorce are more likely to experience divorce themselves (Wolfinger, 2005). This connection might arise because family structure and (in)stability while growing up shapes early romantic experiences by socializing children to engage in distinct relationship formation behaviors. Cavanagh and colleagues (2008) found that as the number of family structure changes increased, the likelihood of adolescents being involved in a romantic relationship and the number of relationships also increased.

In the current study we went beyond existing research to examine not only the link between coresidential family changes but also how parents' non-coresidential romantic relationships are related to adolescents' initiation of romantic relationships. Our analysis adopted a dynamic

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time-varying approach and used data from a prospective cohort study of Dutch adolescents to provide insights into the mechanisms that connect parents' residential and partnering transitions with adolescent romantic relationship formation.

#### THE DUTCH CONTEXT

Divorce rates in the Netherlands remain lower than in the United States (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012), and whereas about 8% of live births in 2009 in the Netherlands were to a single mother (not married to or living with a partner; Van Huis & Loozen, 2010), that number was 26.9% for the United States in 2008 (Dye, 2010). Dutch adult relationships often take the form of (legalized) nonmarital cohabitation either as a stage before or as a replacement of marriage (Poortman & Mills, 2012). The Netherlands also has a large proportion of women engaged in part-time employment (Wielers & Raven, 2012), with women arranging their employment schedules around their family (Mills & Täht, 2010). Only a small percentage of Dutch single mothers work full time (Portegijs, Cloin, Ooms, & Eggink, 2006), whereas about half of all U.S. custodial parents (the parent with whom the children live) work full time (Grall, 2009). Despite these differences in employment, due to different welfare regime constellations, child poverty in single-parent families was twice as high in the United States in 2004 compared to the Netherlands (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011).

Contraceptive use among Dutch teenagers is among the highest in Europe (93.3%; Godeau et al., 2008), which has been linked to the meaning attached to sexuality and romance by adolescents and their parents. In a comparative qualitative study, Schalet (2011) found that whereas in the United States adolescent sexuality is viewed by parents as an individual force in need of control, in the Netherlands it is seen as a normal activity in the context of an intimate relationship. This work also noted that, "unlike their American counterparts, who are often skeptical about teenagers' capacities to fall in love, [Dutch parents] assume that even those in their early teens do so" (Schalet, 2011, p. 17), and thus they accept the partner of their adolescent as "a (temporary) member of the family" (Schalet, 2011, p. 64). In the Dutch family context, issues

of sexuality and romance "can be discussed, rationally planned, and experienced in harmony with . . . the social fabric of the household" (Schalet, 2011, p. 50).

#### PARENTAL RESIDENTIAL AND PARTNERING TRANSITIONS AND ADOLESCENT DATING

We are guided by the concept of *linked lives*, which states that events in the lives of significant others shape the transitions in one's own life (Elder, 1985). In other words, we assume that events in parents' lives can be directly "linked" to transitions in the adolescent's life. Outside the examination of the significance of cumulative family instability (Cavanagh et al., 2008), other research has mostly focused on the fact that adolescents from divorced families are more likely to have dating experience than those with continuously married parents (e.g., Ivanova, Mills, & Veenstra, 2011). It is important to note, however, that divorce is more than a single event, and it is likely the transitions surrounding it that are driving the observed associations between divorce and adolescent romance (H. S. Kim, 2011; Potter, 2010). In this study, we focused on two key transitions tied to family restructuring: (a) a biological parent's move out of the household and (b) the repartnering of a parent (Hines, 1997). Several theoretical mechanisms link these parental transitions to changes in adolescent lives, including stress, changes in parenting practices and behaviors, and parental socialization.

According to *stress theory*, changes in the family structure require a reorganization of family roles that can impair the quality of parental care and the experience of the home as a nurturing environment (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Hill, Yeung, & Duncan, 2001). The stressful atmosphere can then serve as a "push" to look elsewhere for substitutes for the lacking emotional warmth (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998). In line with this argument, all of the parental transitions should be linked with higher adolescent propensity to engage in romantic relationships.

Another mechanism behind the link between the parental residential transitions and adolescent dating is a potential decrease in parental monitoring. Reduction in the number of adults in the household is thought to decrease social control (Hill et al., 2001). The transition from a two-parent to a one-parent household has been

linked to lower levels of parental monitoring in the U.S. context (J. E. Kim, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1999), and low parental monitoring has been associated with an increased likelihood of dating (Friedlander, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2007). Therefore, we anticipated that adolescents will have a higher propensity to date after one biological parent has moved out.

Finally, the initiation of a new relationship by a parent might affect adolescent dating through socialization. Single and divorced parents are themselves more likely to engage in romantic relationships and have been shown to hold more permissive sexual attitudes than parents with an intact marriage, which could in turn model their children's openness to dating and sexuality (Thornton & Camburn, 1987; Whitbeck, Simons, & Kao, 1994). In this study, we considered new maternal and paternal partners separately. The majority of Dutch children remain with their mother after a parental separation (de Graaf, 2008) and are thus more readily exposed to her dating behaviors. We hypothesized that the initiation of a new romantic relation by either parent will be associated with a higher adolescent propensity to date but that this link will be stronger in the case of a new maternal partner.

In summary, our goal was to examine the link between specific parental transitions and the initiation of adolescent romantic relations. The effect of family transitions on adolescent development might be moderated by gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Amato, 2010). Because of sample size issues, we opted for running pooled analyses and controlling for these characteristics. We also accounted for family composition and the quality of family climate at the start of observation as a control for the "baseline" home environment.

## METHOD

### *Participants and Procedure*

We used data from the TRacking Adolescents' Individual Lives Survey, a prospective cohort study among adolescents in the general Dutch population. At the time of data collection, the participants lived in five municipalities, including both urban and rural areas in the north part of the Netherlands. The five municipalities were asked to provide the names and addresses of all children born between October 1, 1989, and September 30, 1990 (two municipalities),

or October 1, 1990, and September 30, 1991 (three municipalities), resulting in 3,483 names. Simultaneously, the primary schools in these municipalities were requested to allow the administration of questionnaires in classrooms. School participation was a prerequisite for eligible adolescents and their parents to be approached. Of the existing 135 primary schools, 90.4% of the schools agreed to participate. The final step of the selection procedure was to secure parental consent. Of all children and parents approached for participation, 76.0% gave their consent, which resulted in a sample of 2,230 participants. A detailed description of the survey can be found in Huisman et al. (2008).

For the research reported in this article we used data from the event history calendar (EHC) interviews, which took place during the third wave (2005–2007). A total of 1,513 adolescents filled out the EHCs (67.9% of the initial sample). Nonparticipants were more likely to be boys,  $\chi^2(2,230) = 31.58, p < .05$ , Cramer's  $\phi^2 = .12$ ; came from families with fathers with lower educational attainment,  $\chi^2(1,874) = 37.83, p < .01$ , Cramer's  $\phi^2 = .14$ ; and were older,  $t(2,228) = 2.40, p < .05$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.11$ . The interviews took place in the participants' homes and were about 45 minutes long. Adolescents were asked to recall whether certain events had taken place in the previous 5 years (since the entry into adolescence, at the beginning of data collection). Of the sample of 1,513 adolescents, 1,442 (95.3%) were interviewed regarding the total period of 5 years, with 71 (4.7%) reporting about a slightly shorter period (4 years). When adolescents answered positively to an interviewer's question ("Have your parents divorced in this period?" "Have you started a romantic relationship in this period?"), the months in which the event started and ended were noted. The average age of the participants at the time of the interview was 16.25 years ( $SD = 0.67$ , range: 14.75–18.08), and the average age at the start of observation was 11.30 ( $SD = 0.65$ , range: 9.83–13.08).

### *Measures*

*Initiation of adolescent romantic relationships.* Adolescents reported the month and year when they started and ended a romantic relationship (in Dutch, *verkering*, a word mainly used in adolescence to denote a steady romantic relationship). We used this information (reported at a mean age of 16.25) to represent the start

and end dates of the romantic relations. Our dependent variable was a binary indicator taking the value of 1 in the month when a new relationship started and 0 for the months when there was no relationship.

*Parental residential and partnering transitions.*

The parental residential and partnering transitions were measured using the adolescent reported timing of the following three events: (a) a biological parent moved out ( $n = 112$  during the observation period), (b) the father had a new romantic partner ( $n = 120$  during the observation period), and (c) the mother had a new romantic partner ( $n = 125$  during the observation period). The data for the last two events were derived from the question, "Did your father/mother have a new romantic partner in this period and if so, when did this relationship start?" The interviewers were instructed that this new partner had to be someone who was officially introduced to the adolescent as the parent's "new romantic partner." Similar to the dependent variable, these three parental transitions were time-varying binary indicators taking the value of 1 the month they occurred (and remaining so for the rest of the observation period) and 0 in the preceeding months.

Although we did not consider the date of parental divorce in our work, an additional check showed that in over 50% of the reported parental divorces, the timing of parental separation coincided with the date of a biological parent's residential move. We therefore considered residential moves to be more salient to adolescents than the date of divorce.

*Family structure at the beginning of observation.*

The family composition at the start of observation was reported by the adolescents (i.e., "Whom were you living with in the same house at the beginning of this period?"). Because of the sample size, we combined these answers into three categories: (a) two biological parents living together ( $n = 1,192$ ), (b) a biological parent and parental partner (both legally recognized stepparents and cohabiting partners; mother and partner,  $n = 101$ ; father and partner,  $n = 14$ ), and (c) single-mother ( $n = 177$ ) and single-father families ( $n = 20$ ). Seven adolescents came from other types of family (e.g., surrogate or adoptive parents) and were thus excluded. We had no information about the family composition for two adolescents. We did not focus exclusively

on stepparent families (i.e., a family of one remarried biological parent) but rather on families in which a biological parent was living with a partner. Research in the Netherlands has shown that cohabitation has now become rather normative, and only a small portion of the population has negative attitudes toward this partnership alternative (Esveldt, Beets, Henkens, Liefbroer, & Moors, 2001).

*Family climate.* We used the parent-reported General Functioning scale of the McMaster Family Assessment Device (Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983) from the first wave to control for the baseline quality of the family climate. The participating parent indicated how well 12 statements described the family (e.g., "We avoid talking about our worries and fears," "We cannot rely on each other"). The items were reverse coded so that a high score represented a healthy family climate (range: 1–4,  $\alpha = .85$ ). Data were available for 1,427 youth (94.3% of sample). The measure was mean centered in the analyses.

*Adolescent and family characteristics.* Adolescent characteristics included *gender*, *age*, and *ethnicity*. We controlled for ethnicity, including a dichotomous variable of whether respondents had a native Dutch ( $n = 1,342$ ) or other background (Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, Antillean, Indonesian, other;  $n = 171$ ). We also controlled for the *father's highest educational level* as a proxy for the family's socioeconomic status. This measure was combined into three categories: (a) those with low educational levels of elementary or lower tracks of secondary education ( $n = 373$ ; referred to as *low education*), (b) higher tracks of secondary education ( $n = 414$ ; referred to as *middle education*), and (c) senior vocational education or university education ( $n = 510$ ; referred to as *high education*). Analyses performed with maternal education showed no substantial changes to the results.

*Analytical Strategy*

We adopted an event history approach and estimated recurrent-event discrete-time event history models (Mills, 2011; Steele, 2011) to examine the association between the timing of the parental transitions and entry into a romantic relationship by the adolescent. In discrete-time models, the dependent variable is the probability of the event happening during

the specified monthly interval ( $t$ ), conditional on the fact that it did not happen before time  $t$  (Allison, 1982). We estimated recurrent-event models because adolescents could report more than one romantic relationship. Because the duration of these spells could be correlated due to unobserved individual-specific factors, we estimated our recurrent-event discrete-time logit models with person-level random effects (Mills, 2011; Steele, 2011). Possible duration dependency was accounted for by using 10 interval dummies that denoted the amount of time the adolescent had been without a relationship in the specific month of observation. We chose this flexible approach because it does not require us to make assumptions about the shape of the hazard. The adolescent's age was time varying across the episodes (i.e., updated at the start of each "at risk for dating" episode).

The data were organized in a person-period format in which each row corresponded to a time period of 1 month. For the transition to the first reported romantic relationship, the risk period was the time between the start of observation until entry into the first romantic relationship (or right-censoring by the interview). The risk period in the subsequent episodes started from the month the previous relationship dissolved until entry into the next relationship (or right-censoring). Twenty adolescents reported that their first relationship started before the beginning of observation. We included a time-varying control variable that took a value of 1 if the adolescent had dating experience at the start of the "at risk for dating" episode and 0 otherwise. The 20 aforementioned adolescents were considered "daters" at the start of their first "at risk for dating" episode in the observation window. We restricted our analyses to the first three dating relationships because few adolescents reported more than three relationships. Analyses with the full number of up to seven relationships did not produce different results.

As elaborated at the beginning of this article, we controlled for the family composition and the quality of the family climate at the start of the observation period as well as the adolescent's gender, age, and non-Dutch ethnic background. In all models, fathers' educational levels were entered as cascading dummy variables (Walter, Feinstein, & Wells, 1987). This means that each dummy variable shows the change between categories and not the change between the category of interest and the reference category.

The first contrast in the analysis indicated the effect of having a father with higher-than-low versus low education, and the second contrast indicated the effect of having a father with high versus middle education.

## RESULTS

### *Descriptive Analysis*

A total of 936 adolescents (61.9% of the EHC sample) reported that their first relationship started within the observation period, and 24 reported that it had started before the start of observation. Similar to earlier research (Cavanagh et al., 2008), girls were more likely than boys to report experience with romantic relationships,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,513) = 16.94, p < .01$ , and older teens (at the beginning of observation) were more likely to report having at least one relationship than younger teens,  $t(1,511) = -4.77, p < .01$ . The average number of romantic relationships within the observation period was 1.12 ( $SD = 1.18$ ).

As illustrated in Table 1, most adolescents lived with two biological parents at the beginning of the data collection (79.3%) and came from households that reported a healthy family climate. The majority of adolescents did not experience any of the parental transitions of interest ( $n = 1,280, 84.6\%$ ). Of the remaining 233 adolescents, more than half ( $n = 135$ ) experienced only one of the parental transitions, and 28 adolescents experienced all three parental transitions during the observation period. In addition to the fact that we were not interested in examining cumulative family instability, these small groups also precluded us from investigating the association between various combinations of the parent-related events (e.g., a parent moving out *and* the start of a new romantic relationship by the mother,  $n = 46$ ) and adolescent romantic relationships. Another issue to consider was whether these parental transitions mostly took place within, for example, the single-parent families at the beginning of observation. As demonstrated in Table 2, that was not the case. Table 2 also shows that the small  $n$  in some cells did not allow us to test whether certain transitions were more strongly associated with adolescent romance for one type of family transition over the other.

We now turn to the findings from our recurrent-event discrete-time models for the

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Variables in the Recurrent-Event Discrete-Time Models (N = 1,513)

Variables	% of EHC sample	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Number of romantic relations reported by adolescents				
0	36.6	553		
1	32.7	494		
2	19.4	294		
3	7.3	110		
4	2.2	33		
5	1.3	20		
6	0.5	8		
7	0.1	1		
Parental transitions during observation				
Biological parent moved out	7.4	112		
Father started a new romantic relationship	7.9	120		
Mother started a new romantic relationship	8.3	125		
Family structure at beginning of observation				
Two biological parents	79.3	1,192		
Biological parent and parental partner	7.7	115		
Single parent	13.1	197		
Other type	0.5	7		
Adolescent and family characteristics				
Girl	54.9	830		
Age at start of observation			10.90	0.61
Age at interview			16.25	0.67
Non-Dutch ethnicity	11.3	171		
Father elementary/low secondary education (low)	24.7	373		
Father higher secondary education (middle)	27.4	414		
Father senior vocational/university (high)	33.7	510		
Family climate <sup>a</sup>			3.24	0.36

Note: EHC = event history calendar.

<sup>a</sup>Range: 1–4; low scores indicate a dysfunctional family climate.

Table 2. Count of Parental Transitions Experienced by the Adolescent During the Observation Period, Split by Family Structure at the Beginning of Observation

Family structure at start of observation	Parental transition experienced during observation					
	Biological parent moved out		Mother started a relationship		Father started a relationship	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Two biological parents	108	1,084	52	1,140	52	1,140
A biological parent and a partner	2	113	13	102	17	98
Single parent	2	194	60	137	50	147

initiation of a romantic relationship (see Table 3). We had complete information for 1,238 adolescents, which contributed to a total of 2,640 “at risk for dating” episodes and 71,781 person-month observations. Model 1 included only the full set of controls, without the

parental transitions of interest. Consistent with the descriptive statistics above, being a girl was associated with a 53.7%,  $(\exp[.43] - 1) \times 100$ , increase in the odds of initiating a dating episode, and as adolescents grew older their odds of initiating a(nother) relationship also increased.

Table 3. Parameter Estimates of Recurrent-Event Discrete-Time Models With Person-Level Random Effects of Adolescents' Initiation of a Romantic Relationship (N Person-Months = 71,781; n Adolescents = 1,238)

Predictor	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Parental transitions during observation (time-varying covariate [TVC])										
Biological parent moved out of the home			0.37*	0.15					0.19	0.17
Father started a new relationship					0.25	0.16			0.05	0.17
Mother started a new relationship							0.55**	0.17	0.44*	0.19
Family structure at start of observation (ref. = living with two biological parents)										
Biological parent and parental partner	0.38**	0.14	0.40**	0.14	0.22	0.17	-0.10	0.20	-0.02	0.23
Single parent	-0.08	0.21	-0.06	0.21	-0.20	0.23	-0.41	0.24	-0.36	0.25
Adolescent and family characteristics										
The adolescent is a dater at start of the spell (TVC)	0.62**	0.17	0.60**	0.17	0.61**	0.17	0.58**	0.17	0.58**	0.17
Female (ref. = male)	0.43**	0.08	0.43**	0.08	0.43**	.08	0.44**	0.08	0.44**	0.08
Age of the adolescent at start of the spell (TVC)	0.48**	0.05	0.47**	0.05	0.48**	0.05	0.48**	0.05	0.48**	0.05
Non-Dutch ethnic background (ref. = native Dutch)	0.15	0.12	0.15	0.12	0.16	0.12	0.15	0.12	0.15	0.12
Educational level of the father										
Middle and high education (vs. low)	-0.22*	0.09	-0.21*	0.09	-0.21*	0.09	-0.21*	0.09	-0.21*	0.09
High education (vs. middle)	-0.27**	0.09	-0.26**	0.09	-0.27**	0.09	-0.26**	0.09	-0.26**	0.09
Family climate (low score: dysfunctional family climate)	0.03	0.10	0.04	0.10	0.04	0.10	0.03	0.10	0.04	0.10
Time without a romantic relationship (ref. 6 months or less)										
6 and 12 months	0.03	0.11	0.03	0.11	0.03	0.11	0.04	0.11	0.03	0.11
12 and 18 months	0.32*	0.13	0.31*	0.13	0.32*	0.13	0.32*	0.13	0.31*	0.13
18 and 24 months	0.69**	0.15	0.67**	0.15	0.69**	0.15	0.68**	0.15	0.68**	0.15
24 and 30 months	0.87**	0.16	0.86**	0.16	0.87**	0.16	0.86**	0.16	0.86**	0.16
30 and 36 months	1.43**	0.16	1.41**	0.16	1.43**	0.16	1.42**	0.16	1.41**	0.16
36 and 42 months	1.72**	0.17	1.70**	0.17	1.72**	0.17	1.71**	0.17	1.70**	0.17
42 and 48 months	2.00**	0.18	1.98**	0.18	1.99**	0.18	1.99**	0.18	1.98**	0.18
48 and 54 months	2.39**	0.18	2.36**	0.18	2.38**	0.18	2.38**	0.18	2.37**	0.18
More than 54 months	2.59**	0.20	2.57**	0.20	2.59**	0.20	2.59**	0.20	2.58**	0.20
Constant	-11.07**	0.59	-11.04**	0.58	-11.07**	.59	-11.11**	0.59	-11.08**	0.59
Adolescent-level random effect SD	0.76**	0.09	0.75**	0.09	0.76**	0.09	0.77**	0.09	0.77**	0.09
$\rho$	.15**	.03	.15**	.03	.15**	.03	.15**	.03	.15**	.03

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Those with dating experience at the start of the current time had 1.86 ( $\exp[.62]$ ) higher odds of starting another relationship. Adolescents' ethnic background and the quality of the family climate were not associated with the start of dating unions. Having a father with higher rather than lower education was related to a 19.7% decrease, ( $\exp[-0.22] - 1$ )  $\times$  100, in the odds of entering a romantic relationship, whereas having a father with higher as opposed to a middle-level education was associated with another 23.7%, ( $\exp[-0.27] - 1$ )  $\times$  100, decrease in these odds. These findings remained stable irrespective of which parental transitions were included.

The findings about the family composition at the start of observation were robust only in the model that excluded the parental transitions (Model 1) and the model in which only the parental move out of the household was included (Model 2). In these models we observed that living with one biological parent and the parent's coresidential partner at the beginning of observation was related to higher odds of starting a romantic relationship compared to coming from a family with two biological parents. This finding, however, was not significant once we accounted for the experience of parental repartnering. Models 2, 3, and 4 in Table 3 demonstrate the estimated effects of each transition. As can be seen in Table 3, the experience of a biological parent moving out was linked to a 44.8%, ( $\exp[0.37] - 1$ )  $\times$  100, increase in the odds of starting a relationship, whereas maternal repartnering was linked to a 73.3%, ( $\exp[0.55] - 1$ )  $\times$  100, increase in those odds. However, when all three transitions were considered (Model 5), only the experience of maternal repartnering was linked to significantly higher odds of entering a(nother) romantic relation for the adolescent, increasing them by 55.3%, ( $\exp[0.44] - 1$ )  $\times$  100, over and above the other possible transitions. If one looks at the bottom panel of Table 3, one sees that the adolescent-level variance component ( $\rho$ ) and the adolescent-level random effect standard deviation were significant (i.e., there was significant unobserved heterogeneity between adolescents).

## DISCUSSION

This study extends our knowledge of the precursors of adolescent romantic relationships by focusing on the link between specific parental transitions and the initiation of these

relationships. We were guided by the concept of linked lives (Elder, 1985), which argues that substantial changes in the lives of parents are directly linked to transitions in adolescent lives. Instead of focusing on children's experience of living within a specific family structure or the count of changes to that structure, we used the detailed timing of both parents' residential and partnering transitions and connected them to the dates of entry and exit into romantic relationships for adolescents.

As previously stated, all three of the parental transitions of interest (biological parent's move out of the household and the introduction of new parental partners) require a reorganization of family roles that can be linked to a deterioration in the quality of parental care and support, which in turn can "push" adolescents to look elsewhere for the emotional warmth that likely is lacking in the parental household (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998; Hill et al., 2001). We found that when all three of the parental transitions were considered, only the initiation of a romantic relationship by the mother was linked to an increase in adolescent likelihood to enter a romantic relationship. We did not find a similar association with the start of a new relationship by the father. This is not necessarily surprising because about 85% of Dutch children remain with their mother after parental separation (de Graaf, 2008) and are thus more likely to be exposed to the mother's than the father's romantic behaviors. This finding is in line with earlier work showing that parental behaviors and attitudes can serve as models for adolescents' sexual behaviors (Whitbeck et al., 1994). In a context that promotes open parent-child communication about issues related to romance and sexuality (Schalet, 2011), these parental socialization effects might be especially relevant.

The precise mechanism behind this finding remains unclear. Besides potential socialization and modeling effects, it could also be that once the mother initiates a romantic relationship, she begins to spend less time with her children. As mentioned before, lower levels of parental monitoring have been associated with a higher likelihood of adolescent dating (Friedlander et al., 2007). Yet in a family-centric context, where not only adolescent but also, potentially, adult romantic relations are incorporated into the household, thus allowing Dutch parents to maintain "control through connection" (Schalet, 2011, p. 20), we are more inclined to interpret



our finding as indicative of parental socialization rather than lack of monitoring.

We did not find a robust link between a biological parent's exit from the household and an adolescent's initiation of romantic relationships. When we examined a single transition at a time, the departure of a biological parent from the household was associated with higher odds of adolescent dating. Previous work has already shown that one parent leaving the household is often accompanied by a reduction in monitoring (J. E. Kim et al., 1999) and that, in turn, has been linked to a higher likelihood of adolescents having dating experience (Friedlander et al., 2007). Although Dutch sole-parent households face a different context (e.g., fewer working hours) than their counterparts in the United States, which likely allows them to spend more time with their maturing adolescents, we still found that a parental exit from the household was associated with higher odds of dating. The finding, however, was not robust when we accounted for all parental transitions. As others have stated, a parental union dissolution is much more than just a single event, and it is likely the transitions surrounding it that are highly consequential (H. S. Kim, 2011; Potter, 2010). Our results suggest that the most prominent event, as far as adolescent dating was concerned, was maternal repartnering.

When interpreting these findings, certain limitations should be kept in mind. First, we focused on the limited 5-year observation period of the EHCs. We contend, however, that we were able to capture a crucial transitional period—the entry into adolescence—when youth might be even more susceptible to the effects of parental transitions (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). This observation window also meant that the number of events the adolescents experienced was rather restricted and precluded us from investigating whether the meaning of these transitions was the same across genders. Previous works have reported mixed findings about possible gender differences in the effect of parental relational instability (Amato, 2010), yet we were unable to investigate this issue further. Because of the limited number of transitions we also did not test for interactions between parental transitions and the family structure at the start of observation. Although we controlled for the quality of the relational climate at home at the start of observation, we cannot say whether the

family context conditioned the meaning of the transitions.

Although we were able to clearly chart the timing of events, we cannot draw conclusions about the quality of adolescent romantic relationships; however, previous research on the association between family instability and the potentially violent nature of adolescent romantic relations has found no evidence of such links (Cavanagh et al., 2008). Finally, there are many unobserved factors that can affect an adolescent's transition to a romantic relationship (e.g., physical development, temperament; Ivanova, Veenstra, & Mills, 2012). These, however, were beyond the scope of the current study.

This study moved beyond the focus on divorce or living within a given family structure and established a clearer link between specific parental and adolescent (romantic) transitions. Our findings confirm life course researchers' "linked lives" assertion that important changes in parents' lives are bound to have a ripple effect on the life courses of their offspring. It remains to be seen whether the family circumstances surrounding the start of these romantic relationships have a longer lasting impact on how the adolescents actually experience the romantic bonds.

#### NOTE

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