Explaining individual ages at first marriage in a 18th century rural market economy

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Abstract
Using a dataset of 1,700 ages at first marriage for Roman Catholics born in the Groningen Ommelanden (The Netherlands) during the period 1721-1800 explanatory variables for the specific age at marriage have been searched for. The 18th and early 19th century Groningen Ommelanden fitted perfectly into Hajnal's Western European marriage pattern with very high ages at marriage and a high celibacy. Average and median age at marriage were 2-3 years earlier for males and females born 1721-1770 as compared to those born 1776-1800. In nearly all groups, the age at marriage fell to a considerable extent in this period. Other variables had far less explanatory value. In this prospering market-oriented and specialised society, no proof is found for the niche hypothesis, which suggests that people postponed marriage until they acquired a position suitable to support a family. Birth order, parental family size, occupation and social class could explain only a very small part of the large differences in age at marriages observed. Most of these differences seem to have been the result of personal decisions, which were not being grasped by the economic and social indicators used.

Introduction

Some people marry young and others relatively late. One of the characteristics of Hajnals Western-European marriage pattern is that huge differences existed in individual ages at marriage. For an example, see the data on the Groningen Ommelanden (Graph 1). A high standard deviation suggests that there was a lot of room for individuals to decide what the date of marriage would be. There were not many coercive legal and social-cultural rules about the exact age one should marry (for these norms and rules see: Van Poppel 1992: 29-116).

Average ages at marriage generally tend to change slowly over time. Researchers are inclined to relate these changes to general factors. However, one has to keep in mind that a fall in the average age at marriage was the result of the decision of a very significant part of the youngsters to marry at an earlier age. A crucial question therefore is: what factors made these young men and women decide to conclude a marriage at a much younger age?

Graph 1: Age at first marriage, birth cohorts Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800 (percentage)
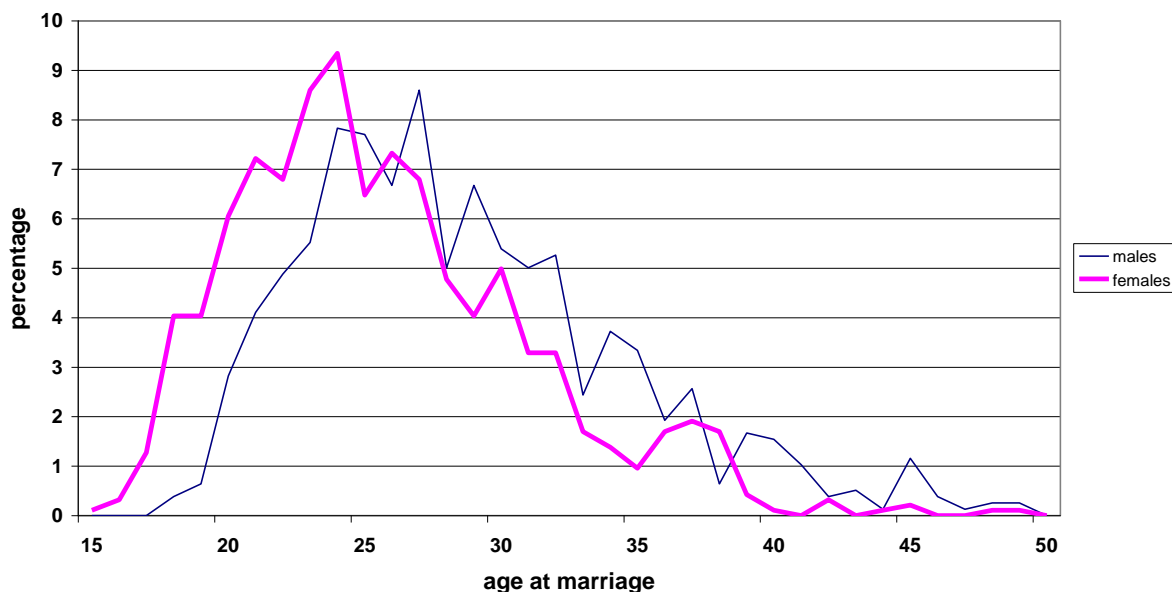
In this paper I assume that getting married is a more or less rational decision taken by two individuals (bride and groom) who realise the consequences of this decision (compare: Van Poppel 1992: 169-170). They both take the advantages and disadvantages (costs and benefits) into account. First, a small remark has to be made on the assumption that only bride and groom are involved. Of course, others (the parents) could be quite influential in the decision-making process, however, the marriage partners take the ultimate decision in early modern Western society. Even in the case of arranged marriages, in theory there is the possibility to refuse, to run away or to commit suicide. Presumably, however, completely arranged marriages have been very rare in 18th and 19th century Western Europe.

Being married has advantages and disadvantages in several respects: economically, socially, biologically, sexually and emotionally. The decision to marry indicates that present and future advantages of being married are believed to be higher than disadvantages.

Economically in pre-1900 circumstances, a marriage is supposed to mean an enormous change in personal life. Most important was the general tendency of newly wed to form an independent household in Western Europe (so-called neo-locality). In Western Europe, unmarried boys and girls mainly lived in the households of their parents or of an employer (lifecycle servants) until well into the 20th century. Live-in servants were generally employed on annual contracts, and only had small risks of unemployment, at least if they did their work in a satisfying way. Wages rose with the age of servants, to reach peaks in their twenties, making it possible to save some money (Paping 2005). Boys and girls remaining at home could work in the family firm (a farm or shop) which also provided an insurance against economic uncertainty. On the other hand, the start of a new household involved great economic risks, but also offered large economic opportunities. For success, one needed the necessary resources to invest to secure a suitable position (farm, workshop or shop). If the firm was a success, one could rise on the social ladder, which was nearly impossible as an unmarried servant. For some social groups (wives of labourers and artisans) a clear disadvantage of marriage was the difficulty to find economically rewarding work, because they could no longer work as a live-in maid.

Socially, the position of independent heads of households presumably had a larger prestige than that of unmarried live-in servants, sons or daughters. However, it has to be pointed out that marrying was not a prerequisite for starting an independent household. Older unmarried men also started households of their own, for older unmarried women this seems to have been more rare, but not completely unusual. Because of neo-locality, marrying meant independence of parents, or of employer. However, especially for women it could also mean loss of independence, because of the

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legal and cultural norm of obedience to the husband. The biological, sexual and emotional advantages seem rather clear-cut, their importance, however, depend largely on individual preferences.

In this paper, I intend to find factors explaining individual ages at marriage. Can we discern factors, which explain why some boys and girls married young, while others postponed marriage until an older age. I will concentrate on economic and social factors, and on factors related to the composition of the parental household.

One of the most influential explanations for ages at marriage is normally attributed to Hajnal (1965). It states that young men and women in Western Europe postponed marriage untill they secured a position (niche), good enough to support a family. This niche-hypothesis (Fertig 2005) has two variants.

The *"family interpretation"* of the niche hypothesis considers the obtaining a niche as a link in a family chain. A position (generally a farm) is handed over from one generation to the next. Men and women had to wait with marrying untill they could inherit a position from their father, father-in-law, or sometimes from other relatives. Only when the old (parental) generation died or retired, the new generation was able to marry. In this way, high ages at marriage and a high incidence of celibacy operate as positive Malthusian checks on population growth.

In the *"broad interpretation"* of the niche hypothesis the position or niche does not have to be inherited, it can be bought as well. Again, brides and grooms are supposed to have waited with marrying till they had obtained (by buying or inheriting) this position, which had been freed by the death or retirement of the former occupants of the niche. Again, this behaviour worked as a positive Malthusian check, limiting the number of households to the number of positions available in society.

Related to the niche hypothesis, but much more general, is the **"***economic explanation***"** which emphasizes that boys and girls waited with their matrimony till they were capable to support a family in the long run (Hofstee 1954, calls this the "agrarian-handicraft marriage pattern").[1] In good times the age at marriage falls, while in bad times the age at marriage rises. While the niche hypothesis nearly excludes population growth, the general economic explanation does not. In good times, population will rise due to early marriages and an accompanying rising general fertility, while in bad times population will fall because of postponement of marriages. Good times can be defined as periods with a high standard-of-living, expressed in higher real wages or a higher agricultural productivity (or surplus) per capita.

The dataset used here contains 779 male and 942 female ages at first marriage, and a lot of information on the economic and social background of the marriage partners and their parents, on the birth order in the family, the number of siblings and on the date of death of the parents. The data relate to a family reconstruction project concerning all Roman Catholics born between 1721 and 1800 in the Groningen Ommelanden (Appendix A). The Groningen Ommelanden was a wealthy market-oriented agricultural economy, with large farms, labourers and a far-fledged occupational specialisation in services and industry. The general question in this article concerns explanations for the specific ages at marriage found in this database using all kind of indicators.

Development in the age at first marriage

In the second half of the 18th century, population in large parts of Western Europe started to rise more quickly. This rise in population can be partly attributed to a rise in fertility possibly related to a fall in the average age at marriage in the last decades of the 18th century. In addition, a fall in mortality seemed to have played a role. This general development also took place in the Groningen Ommelanden in the second half of the 18th century. General ages at marriage were not constant at all in the period under consideration.

Graph 2 shows that there was a clear fall in average and median age of both males and females. Two distinct cohorts can be discerned for both males and females, on the one hand those born before 1770 and on the other those from 1776 onwards (with 1771/1775 as a bridging period). Differences were not extremely large but significant. With the exception of the low median age at first

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[1] In Dutch: "Het agrarisch-ambachtelijk huwelijkspatroon".

marriage for females born between 1751 and 1755, all figures before 1770 were clearly higher than the highest figures between 1776 and 1800. Average age for males born between 1721 and 1770 was 31.0, the median age being 29.4 (N = 417). Average age for females born between 1721 and 1770 was 27.4, the median age being 26.5 (N = 476). Average age for males born between 1776 and 1800 was 27.9 and the median age was 26.7 (N = 313). Average age of females born between 1776 and 1800 was 25.1 and the median age was 24.2 (N = 399). For both males and females the age at marriage again showed a slow upward tendency for the cohort born between 1796 and 1800, a rise which seemed to have continued in the decades afterward but not to the previous level (Paping and Collenteur, 2004: 89-90).

Graph 2: Average and median age at first marriage Groningen Ommelanden, birth cohorts (1726-1800)
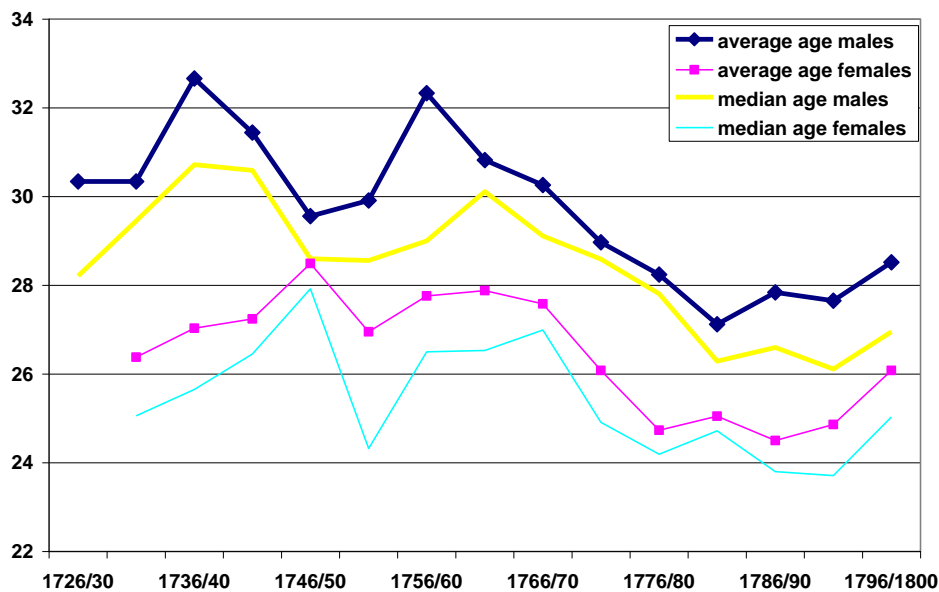
Therefore, within a decade (1771-1780) the general age at marriage fell with at least two years for both males and females. Inasmuch as the median and the average moved together this seemed to have been a development, which was related to all kind of marriages. Early marriages, but also marriages at a relatively older age, all seem to have been concluded somewhat earlier than before. The relatively older grooms and brides were less old, while the relatively young grooms and brides became even younger. However, especially marriages at a very old age had become very rare. In the cohort 1721-1770, eleven males married for the first time after the age of 50, in the cohort 1776-1800 such marriages were completely absent. In the cohort 1721-1770 eleven females married for the first time being 40 years or older, however, for the cohort 1776-1800 only one such case was found.[2] These figures suggest that the marriage market became nearly completely closed for bachelors and spinsters of medium age and older. As a consequence the standard deviation for the age at first marriage for males fell considerably from 7.6 in 1721/1770 to only 5.7 in 1776/1800, for females the fall was slightly less: from 6.1 to 5.0.

Although quite extraordinary compared to the general pattern, it is intriguing to investigate which men and women concluded these late marriages. Surprisingly, there were huge differences between males and females. Nine of the eleven males marrying after the age of 50 were farmers sons, all males came from the medium and higher ranks of society. Some of them experienced downward social mobility. Nevertheless, these males remained suitable candidates on the marriage market despite

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[2] The disappearance of these kinds of marriages accounted for a fall of the average age of marriage of males of about three quarter, and for females of nearly half a year.

their age because of the resources they had at their disposal. In four of the eleven cases, these men were able to succeed on their parent's farm.

Females marrying aged 40 and over had completely other characteristics, six were labourers daughters, only three came from the medium and higher ranks. Nearly all of them experienced upward social mobility. This suggest that at least for this small group of females postponing marriage, saving and waiting for the right candidate was a successful strategy directed to rising welfare. However, two of them were rich farmer's daughters who controlled their parental farm and seem to have married young fortune seeking husbands, which is more in line with the characteristics of most of the males marrying late.

It is yet unexplained why both groups completely disappeared somewhere in the 19th century. More than half of the reported late marriages were concluded during the French period 1795-1814 (in which there seemed to have been a much higher tendency to marry). This was especially the case for females (8 out of 11 took place in the period 1796-1811), where hardly no marriages of women aged 40 and over concluded after 1811 were found. Possibly, late first marriages also had been rare before the French period; however, they were not non-existent.

In the case of calculating average ages at marriage, using birth cohorts, the problem is that the marriages considered can fall in different periods. A possible solution is to rearrange marriages by marriage date. However, the fall in the age at marriage in the birth cohort 1721-1770 compared to 1776-1800 definitely took place in the French period, and this was exactly the period that a lot of the very late marriages were concluded, thus partly obscuring the effect of the fall in the general age of marriage of the younger cohorts from 1795 onwards. As shown by table 1, no important decrease in the age at first marriage for both males and females is discernible before 1810, contrary to the graph. The statistical fall in the average and median age at first marriage was more a cohort effect than a period effect.

Table 1: Estimated average and median age at marriage of Roman-Catholic males and female born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1781-1820 (marriage years)

	Males				Females			
	average	median	stand.dev.	N	average	median	stand.dev.	N
1781/1785	31.0	28.6	7.1	56	26.6	26.2	5.4	51
1786/1790	29.9	30,0	7.0	51	27.2	25.8	5.9	51
1791/1795	29.4	27,5	6.3	54	26.3	26.0	5.2	72
1796/1800	29.0	28.1	8.6	48	26.9	25.3	7.0	76
1801/1805	29.8	28.1	7.4	71	26.7	25.6	6.8	90
1806/1810	29.5	28.4	7.2	63	26.7	25.2	6.5	70
1811/1815	27.4	26.2	6.6	73	23.8	23.6	4.1	85
1816/1820	27.3	26.1	6.1	53	24.0	23.0	5.2	66

A related question is whether the fall in marriage age in the birth cohort 1776-1800 was only related to specific groups, or that it was a general development in the whole society. For this reason, we will use the subdivision 1721-1770 and 1776-1800 throughout the rest of the paper.

Social and economic structure

Both interpretations of the niche hypothesis as well as the economic explanation for the developments in age at first marriage suggest that the kind of employment (position) - as the important means of livelihood to support the new household - played an important role. In large parts of continental Europe the countryside is completely dominated by peasants (small farms mainly directed to production for self-subsistence, only partly generating surpluses to pay taxes and rents), comprising the majority of the population. Occupational differentiation and specialisation was only of very limited importance (smith, miller, and shopkeeper). However, the Dutch coastal area, of which the Groningen Ommelanden was part, was a completely different society.

The Groningen Ommelanden in the north of the Netherlands knew a very specific social structure already dating from the 16th century. Due to specialisation, some 40% of the inhabitants had their main occupation outside agriculture. The agricultural sector consisted of landless labourers and quite wealthy middle-class farmers, mainly producing for the national and international market. As mentioned, population started to grow from 1750 onwards, and this growth accelerated around 1785. In 1830 more than half as many inhabitants were living in this region as compared to 1750. Population growth was accompanied by heavy proletarianisation. The number of farms being scattered all over the area was quite stable, while the number of farm labourer families was rising quickly. The share of the other groups remained constant, although their numbers rose, too (Paping 1995).

Among the farmers large differences existed, which mainly had to do with the amount of land in use, although before 1780 the amount of land, which one really owned, also was of importance. However, the users themselves controlled only 10% of the land. Some 40% was in the hand of other inhabitants of the clay area, partly nobles, but also rich farmers and merchants. Local and urban institutions, the provincial government, and patricians from the city of Groningen made up for the other half of the land.

So 90% of the land was let to the farmers, mostly on long-term basis according to a specific system. The local system of "beklemming" implied that the farmer owned the farm building, while the land rented was "clinked" to the farmstead. In general, every six years the farmer rented the land once more, the rent being raised or lowered according to the economic circumstances. However, due to legal verdicts, it became increasingly difficult for the landowner to remove the farmers from the land. The landowner had to buy the farmstead from the farmer for a good price and had to pay a high compensation for investments. Many farms consisted of one large indivisible "beklemming", others comprised two till five or more pieces. However, the nucleus of most farms was made up by a relatively large and indivisible piece of land.

During the unfavourable first half of the 18th century, most of the land rents became fixed. However, when the agricultural prices again began to rise in the second half of the 18th century, owners found it increasingly difficult to find legal ways to raise the rents once again. From 1770 till 1790 for most of the land contracts were concluded between owners and users which fixed the rent of the land forever, and gave the user (in return for a considerable amount of money) the eternal right to depose of the right to use of the land, in every way he or she wanted. In this way, the land users, also because of the considerable price rises, became the actual owners of the land in the beginning of the 19th century. The position of the original landowners was reduced to holders of risk less eternal bonds. However, the division of a "beklemming" remained impossible without the approval of (and a large payment to) the landowners. Understandably, the changes in the land market had some impact on the social structure in the Groningen clay area. However, already in 1730 farmers formed the top of the social stratification (Paping 2007).

In this paper we use a social structure taking into account the occupation of the head of household and the amount of land the household uses (Paping 2007) to classify all the couples socially. The general idea behind this classification uses the possibility to derive an impression of how much money is needed for investment from the kind of occupation. For some occupations one is obliged to invest large amounts of money (millers for a mill, merchants for trade capital) and for some no money at all is needed (tailors and labourers). Contrary to the Hisclass classification (Van Leeuwen and Maas 2005), the general idea behind this social stratification is that social position was based not only on the capabilities a certain position required, but also on the amount of financial investments necessary to perform this position in an adequate way. By taking capital investments into account the stratification suits a market-oriented rural society like the Groningen Ommelanden very well.

A social stratification of heads of households for the Groningen countryside in the 18th and first half of the 19th century
A.   1. Large farmers (30 hectare and over), land owners, nobles.
      2. Large salesmen, higher officials, large factory owners, physicians, millers etc. controlling more than 5 hectare.
B.   1. Medium-ranged farmers (15 to 30 hectare).

2. Middle ranged salesmen, large shopkeepers and inn-keepers, physicians, millers, small factory owners, priests, medium-ranged officials, ship-captains, medium-ranged officials; artisans and others controlling more than 3 hectare.

C. 1. Small farmers (5 to 15 hectare).

2. Artisans with a workshop (bakers, smiths, cart wrights, glaziers, coppersmiths, silversmiths, shoemakers), trading business or owning a piece of land, small shopkeepers and inn-keepers, master of a barge, lower officials.

D. 1. Crofters and farm labourers controlling 1 to 5 hectare, milkmen, gardeners.

2. Artisans without a real workshop (tailors, carpenters, seasonal butcher), weavers, pedlars, commission agents, carriers without land, veterinarians, policemen.

E. 1. Farm labourers.

2. Lower skilled subordinate workers in handicrafts and services: servants, paupers, soldiers.

The influence of occupational background

One would expect that farmers had a good reason to postpone marriages. With the rising population from 1750 onwards, farms became scarce, families in the Groningen Ommelanden were not inclined to divide farms, partly also hampered by the legal indivisibility of a lot of the farms. For the children of farmers the niche hypothesis indeed seemed of large importance; however the question is if they acted accordingly by raising their age at marriage.

For labourers the problems were smaller. The number of labourer houses in the Groningen villages was not fixed at all and in accordance with the increase in population rose quickly from the fourth quarter of the eighteenth century onwards. If they wanted an independent household, the newly-wed couple needed money to buy or build a house, inasmuch as the market of rented houses was scarcely developed until the beginning of the 19th century in Groningen. The necessary funds were relatively small and part of it could easily be borrowed from a rich farmer, renter or merchant. For these reasons it seemed to have been less necessary for labourers to postpone marriages.

For the other occupations in services and industry, it was attractive to take over the shop or workshop of someone else. However, many enterprises were newly installed from the fourth quarter of the century onwards. Due to population growth and the flourishing agriculture (due to rising food prices) there was enough demand for these new firms. Starting a new enterprise or taking over an old one, in both cases it was necessary to assemble sufficient capabilities and investments beforehand.

In tables 2 and 3 age at first marriage is related to the occupation of the parents. The idea is that boys and girls will have a preference to obtain the same position as their parents, but also one could think that within specific economic-social groups specific traditions concerning the average age at marriage existed. Surprisingly, there were only tiny differences between sons of farmers, middle class and labourers. All married at a relatively high age, the spread was a bit higher within the group farmers sons with relatively more very young and very old marriages. Sons of labourers also married late, however the fall in the average age at first marriage was largest in this group. Around the turn of the century sons of labourers married on average at age 25 (a fall of nearly 5 years). Whatever the general fall in average age at marriage caused, it was more influential for these labourer sons than for other social groups. This fall can be interpreted as a sign of what the Dutch scientist Hofstee (1954) for the 19th century has called a proletarian marriage pattern, but there are some reasons not to do so. Labourers born in the Groningen clay area born between 1830 and 1872 married on average at age 26.0, and the pattern does not show up under the female labourers.

Table 2: Parental occupations and age at first marriage, R.C. males born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
Farmers	31.3	27.7	8.6	174	27.7	26.3	6.2	94
Self-employed industry & services	31.8	30.5	7.0	152	28.2	27.3	5.3	166

Labourers	30.0	29.2	5.9	91	25.4	24.6	4.3	53
Total	31.0	29.4	7.6	417	27.9	26.7	5.7	323

Farmer daughters were postponing marriage less than other social groups; they married relatively young, while labourer daughters married relatively late. The differences were rather small, but persistent over time, in each group average age at marriage of brides fell with nearly two and a half year. Daughters of farm labourers married relatively late, which possibly had something to do with their diminishing earning capacity when marrying, married female farm labourers were only able to find work a few months each year, while unmarried female farm labourers mostly had annual contracts as farm maids. In contrast to their brothers, the fall in average age at marriage for daughters of farm labourers born between 1776 and 1800 was not extraordinary.

Table 3: Parental occupation and age at first marriage, R.C. females born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	Average	median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
Farmers	26.8	25.6	6.4	213	24.3	23.1	5.3	119
Self-employed industry & services	27.7	26.5	5.7	166	25.4	24.6	5.0	199
Labourers	28.2	27.0	6.0	97	25.8	25.2	4.7	82
Total	27.4	26.5	6.1	476	25.1	24.2	5.0	400

Because of the relatively large social mobility (Paping 2007) occupations of fathers differ substantially from those of sons or sons-in-law. However, for the males the social differences in table 4 were still surprisingly small and less than Van Poppel (1992: 149-165) observes for the 19th century Netherlands. This 19th century Dutch pattern with male farmers marrying at an older age than middle class and male labourers marrying at the youngest age, in the Groningen Ommelanden already is visible to some degree visible in the birth cohort 1776-1800 (table 4).

Table 4: Occupations and age at first marriage, R.C. males born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	Average	Median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
Farmers	30.9	29.0	8.4	146	28.7	27.8	6.3	70
Self-employed industry & services	31.3	29.5	7.8	139	28.0	26.8	5.3	140
Labourers	30.3	29.5	6.1	104	27.5	25.7	6.0	79
Migrated	31.9	31.0	8.1	28	27.1	25.2	5.2	24
Total	31.0	29.4	7.6	417	27.9	26.7	5.7	323

Table 4 shows that the large fall in average age at first marriage for labourers sons only partly returns in the average of the labourers, inasmuch as men falling from other groups to the level of farm labourers were marrying much later. Table 5 indicates that it were especially the farmer's daughters marrying farmers who married relatively young. This pattern can be observed widely in Europe, in Belm in Westfalia in 1741-1860 for example wives of large farmers married on average 2.3 years earlier than wives of cottagers and labourers (Schlumbohm 1994: 100). Average age differences between males and females of large farmers were 4.7 years in Belm, exactly the same as the figures for farmers in the Groningen Ommelanden. Van Poppel (1992: 171) and Schlumbohm suggest that large farmers had a preference for relatively young brides because these brides were possibly more obedient, the height of the female inheritance or dowry was unrelated to age and the large farmers had the economic opportunity to concede to a general (sexual) preference for younger brides.

Table 5: Occupation and age at first marriage, R.C. females born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	Average	Median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
Farmers	26.2	24.6	6.5	140	24.0	22.8	5.3	70
Self-employed industry & services	27.9	27.3	6.0	188	25.0	24.4	4.7	171
Labourers	27.8	26.9	4.9	94	25.9	25.1	4.7	114
Migrated	28.6	26.5	6.5	54	25.7	24.7	6.4	46
Total	27.4	26.5	6.1	476	25.1	24.2	5.0	400

The most important conclusion, however, still has to be that the differences between the occupational groups were rather small and that all groups experienced a fall in average age at marriage at the end of the 18th century in the Groningen Ommelanden. Except for the farmers who married slightly younger wives, no social effects are discernible, and even this low marriage age for farmers wives is difficult to connect to the niche hypothesis. It has to be remarked that the data collected by Van Poppel (1992: 149-165) for several parts of the Netherlands suggests that occupational differences became larger in the 19th century.

The influence of wealth

If securing a good and socially acceptable position before marriage (the niche hypothesis) was an important reason for postponing marriages one would expect that late marriages were most important in social groups where good positions (livelihoods) were scarce and where saving and waiting for an inheritance would increase the chances to obtain a good position. Previously in this paper a social stratification was presented which linked social class closely to necessary investments (or wealth). Did rich people have a different marriage pattern from poor people?

Table 6: Parental social-economic class and age at first marriage, R.C. males born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
A	30.2	29.0	7.9	88	27.1	25.2	6.0	70
B	32.4	29.7	9.4	87	30.2	28.1	6.5	51
C	31.2	29.7	7.6	78	27.7	27.0	5.0	62
D	30.8	30.1	6.5	98	28.6	28.6	5.6	87
E	30.0	29.2	6.0	66	25.4	24.6	4.4	43
Total	31.0	29.4	7.6	417	27.9	26.7	5.7	323

Table 7: Parental social-economic class and age at first marriage, R.C. females born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
A	25.1	23.9	5.4	103	23.4	21.8	5.2	61
B	28.1	27.4	6.8	100	24.0	23.3	4.9	51
C	28.0	26.6	5.7	101	25.7	24.9	5.0	111
D	27.3	26.3	5.9	95	25.6	24.9	5.0	112
E	28.9	27.5	6.1	77	26.1	25.2	4.7	65
Total	27.4	26.5	6.1	476	25.1	24.2	5.0	400

In table 6 and 7 the parental social class is related to ages at first marriage. Differences between the social or wealth classes for both males and females were rather small agaain. Three groups stand out.

The daughters descending from the richest class married much earlier than any other group. Combining this information with a previous conclusion, confirms the idea that especially in the group of large farmers relatively young marriages of females were quite common. Daughters of the second richest group also started to marry relatively young around 1800, possibly a sign of the growing welfare for this group (consisting mainly of medium-ranged farmers) due to rising agricultural prices in the French period. The sons of the second richest group also show a peculiar pattern. They waited longer before marrying than any other group, and the difference became even larger for the group born between 1776 and 1800, the only male group with an average age at first marriage above the age of 30. Social mobility tables (Paping 2007) indicate that the chances on upward and downward social mobility were very large within this group, with only one quarter remaining in the same class. May be it was this insecurity which stimulated the postponement of marriages. The sons of the poorest class, which married very young if born between 1776 and 1800, form a third diverging group. This, however, is not a surprise while this group consisted mainly of labourers, for whom the same pattern can be discerned.

Table 8: Social-economic class after marriage and age at first marriage, R.C. males born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
A	29.6	28.1	7.9	79	28.4	26.7	6.2	49
B	32.7	32.2	7.3	62	28.2	27.8	6.2	41
C	32.3	29.9	9.7	85	28.4	27.2	5.0	66
D	29.4	29.2	5.4	83	27.5	26.7	5.7	65
E	30.8	29.5	6.6	80	27.6	25.7	6.1	68
Migrated	31.9	31.0	8.1	28	27.1	25.2	5.2	24
Total	31.0	29.4	7.6	417	27.9	26.7	5.7	323

Table9: Social-economic class after marriage and age at first marriage, R.C. females born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
A	25.9	24.5	6.2	75	22.1	21.6	4.0	38
B	26.5	25.5	7.4	66	25.3	24.9	6.0	39
C	27.7	27.3	5.9	99	25.2	24.0	4.9	82
D	28.1	27.1	5.8	109	25.2	24.9	4.4	99
E	27.5	27.0	4.7	73	25.9	24.9	4.7	94
Migrated	28.6	26.5	6.5	54	25.7	24.7	6.4	46
Total	27.4	26.5	6.1	476	25.1	24.2	5.0	400

The social class after marriage for the brides and grooms themselves is also related to the age at first marriage. The results in tables 8 and 9 resemble those in table 6 and 7. The wives of the richest part of the population (mainly large farmers controlling more than 30 hectares) were younger than those in all other groups, and this difference grew to large proportions (more than 3 years) around 1800. Differences between the other groups were very small. The wives in the second richest group do not stand out by marrying younger (remind that because of the large social mobility of class B the majority did not descend from this class). Differences between males were small and statistically insignificant for the cohort born between 1776 and 1800. For the earlier cohort, although all the males were marrying late on average, differences were larger. Large farmers (A) and indigent artisans (D) had the lowest average age at marriage, while the male ages at marriage of the classes B and C were very high (32-33 years). A possible explanation is that males had to postpone marriage relatively long to secure such relatively good positions. However, this does not explain why this effect completely disappears around 1800.

The age at marriage as a factor of success

Just like elsewhere in the Netherlands (Van Poppel 1992: 63-75), there were many complaints about poor and indigent labourers marrying too early in the province of Groningen around the middle of the 19th century.[3] Majors of municipalities suggested that this was an important explanation for individual poverty. Boys and girls marrying young were unable to save enough money to secure a good economic position after marriage as is also suggested by the economic explanation for late marriages. If this is true, a high age at marriage should be a significant factor in the chances on upward and downward social mobility. People marrying young would have a higher chance on downward mobility and a lower chance on upward mobility. Or, the other way around: people experiencing upward mobility will marry later than people experiencing downward mobility. Although the logic is rather clear-cut, the figures (tables 10 and 11) do not support the argument at all. For the earlier period men rising one class married slightly younger than the rest. However, for the later cohort the same group was marrying on average at the highest age. In general, differences in age at first marriage between socially and economically successful and unsuccessful grooms were again rather small.

Table 10: Upward and downward social mobility and the age at first marriage in the Groningen Ommelanden, males born 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	Average	median	st.dev.	N
Fall 2-4 classes	31,2	30,0	6,9	50	28,7	27,1	7,0	30
Fall 1 class	31,4	28,8	9,2	69	27,3	26,7	5,3	67
Equal	31,0	29,4	8,0	182	27,8	26,3	6,1	145
Rise 1 class	29,5	28,8	5,1	58	28,9	28,5	4,8	37
Rise 2-4 classes	31,6	31,1	6,5	30	28,9	28,3	4,3	10
Migrated	31,9	31,0	8,1	28	27,1	25,2	5,2	24

For brides also, it can not be concluded that downward social mobility and young marriages were coming together. It might even be the case that the rising risk of downward mobility stimulated some women to postpone marriage. On the other hand, the few women who were strongly upwardly mobile were relatively very old in both periods. Mainly these were women originating from labourer families or families of indigent artisans, who married around the age of 30. Therefore, for a small group of women postponing marriage and waiting for an attractive husband to come along worked out successfully. Examples were labourer's daughters marrying shoemakers and merchants. An extreme example was a daughter of a tailor who was for a long time the maid of a very rich and old bachelor farmer, whom she married in the end at the age of 49. However, it has to be stressed that the number of these successful cases were quite small, and postponing marriage too long increased the risk of ending up as a spinster.

Table 11: Upward and downward social mobility and the age at first marriage in the Groningen Ommelanden, females

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
Fall 2-4 classes	27,9	27,8	5,3	68	26,9	25,3	5,9	40

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[3] Groninger Archieven, Municipality reports, 1851-1865, chapters on poor relief.

Fall 1 class	26,8	25,5	6,0	77	24,9	24,5	4,7	89
Equal	26,6	25,8	6,0	181	24,2	23,7	4,3	165
Rise 1 class	28,2	26,6	6,5	72	25,9	25,2	4,8	52
Rise 2-4 classes	29,5	28,3	6,5	24	29,9	31,0	7,0	8
Migrated	28,6	26,5	6,5	54	25,7	24,7	6,4	46

To sum up: with the exception of some very old women, people marrying late were not more successful than people marrying early were. A possible explanation is rather straightforward; men and women who were threatened by a fall on the social ladder were possibly also inclined to postpone marriage to avoid this fall, but not always with success.

The influence of family circumstances

If as the family interpretation of the niche hypothesis states, waiting for an inheritance of a position or niche was important for the late Western European marriages, one would expect that birth order would be of importance for the average age at marriage. However, table 12 shows that first sons did not marry much earlier or later than other sons do. The few boys with three or more older brothers married on average even younger than all the others.

Table 12: Birth order and age at first marriage, R.C. males born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	Median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
First son	30.9	29.5	8.1	240	27.8	26.8	5.4	175
Second son	30.9	29.5	7.1	103	28.1	26.4	6.0	86
Third son	32.2	31.1	6.4	33	29.3	27.6	6.3	26
Later son	29.2	27.4	6.3	18	26.5	25.5	6.0	17

NB: Only children marrying or surviving till the age of 30 are taken into account.

Table 13 shows the same results for females. One small effect only is discernible: women with three or more elder sisters tended to marry later, suggesting lower marriage chances. The numbers, however, are very small.

Table 13: Birth order and age at first marriage, R.C. females born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	Average	median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
First daughter	27.4	26.3	6.4	253	25.2	24.2	5.3	203
Second daughter	26.6	26.1	4.9	123	24.8	24.1	4.5	114
Third daughter	27.8	27.1	4.8	45	25.2	25.0	4.7	45
Later daughter	29.4	28.7	5.3	21	26.5	26.5	5.8	20

NB: Only children marrying or surviving till the age of 30 are taken into account.

The same test was done taking into account the birth order of all the children (not in the tables), but again this indicator had no explanatory value. Family size or birth order was unrelated to age at first marriage, which is completely opposite to the niche hypothesis, if one supposes that older children had more chances to obtain the family firm than younger ones.

The niche hypothesis also suggests that the number of siblings will have a detrimental effect on average age at marriage, because the chances to obtain a position through inheritance diminish, because the inheritance had to be shared with more people. In rural Groningen, sons and daughters mostly inherited the same portion in the 18th and 19th century. Often, one of the children took over the parental household and paid appropriate sum of money to his or her brothers or sisters. However, in many cases the household was broken up and most of the assets were sold, while it was also not uncommon to pass the household and the assets to the new partner of one of the parents for a certain amount of money. However, contrary to the niche hypothesis, table 14 and 15 show that the number of siblings (and the size of the inheritance) was not of great importance at all. Sons and daughters being an only child married a bit younger, but the differences again were small and not very convincing. For females born between 1721 and 1770 there seems to be an effect with the average age at marriage rising from 26.1-26.4 with no or one sibling to 29.0 with four siblings. However females with five or more siblings again married on average at the relatively low age of 26.5.

Table 14: Number of siblings and age at first marriage, R.C. males born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
Only child	29.4	27.6	5.9	55	27.4	27.2	3.7	28
One brother or sister	30.3	28.3	6.8	80	27.5	26.1	5.6	44
Two brothers or sisters	31.4	30.8	7.6	90	29.4	27.9	6.7	59
Three brothers or sisters	30.7	29.5	7.4	63	27.7	26.6	5.9	65
Four brothers or sisters	32.9	31.0	8.9	66	27.3	25.9	5.2	51
Five or more brothers and sisters	30.7	27.4	9.4	40	27.8	26.6	5.6	47

NB: Only children marrying or surviving till the age of 30 are taken into account.

Again, there is not much proof of the niche hypothesis in the data. The clearest effect in all groups is as always the fall in the age at marriage and its spread around 1800, by to 2 to 3 years.

Table 15: Number of siblings and age at first marriage, R.C. females born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	Average	median	st.dev.	N	average	Median	st.dev.	N
Only child	26.4	25.1	5.5	47	23.5	22.9	4.8	36
One brother or sister	26.2	25.8	5.6	86	25.2	23.6	6.6	53
Two brothers or sisters	27.2	26.3	5.9	126	24.7	23.6	4.7	92
Three brothers or sisters	28.4	27.7	6.2	70	25.7	4.9	4.6	92
Four brothers or sisters	29.0	27.8	6.1	72	25.2	24.2	4.9	61
Five or more brothers and sisters	26.5	26.2	5.1	41	26.0	26.3	4.9	47

NB: Only children marrying or surviving till the age of 30 are taken into account.

Age at first marriage and the death of the parents

If people had to postpone their marriage until a niche came available, one would expect to find a clear relation between the moment of marrying and the possibility succession. Directly, the death of a father or a surviving mother frees a stable position for one of their children. Indirectly, the division of the parental inheritance raised the possibilities for newly wed couples to secure a attractive position (farm, shop, house). Concluding, one would expect that a considerable number of marriages were concluded shortly after the death of the father or the last surviving parent.

Graph 3: Death of last parent in years before or after marriage, Birth Cohort Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800
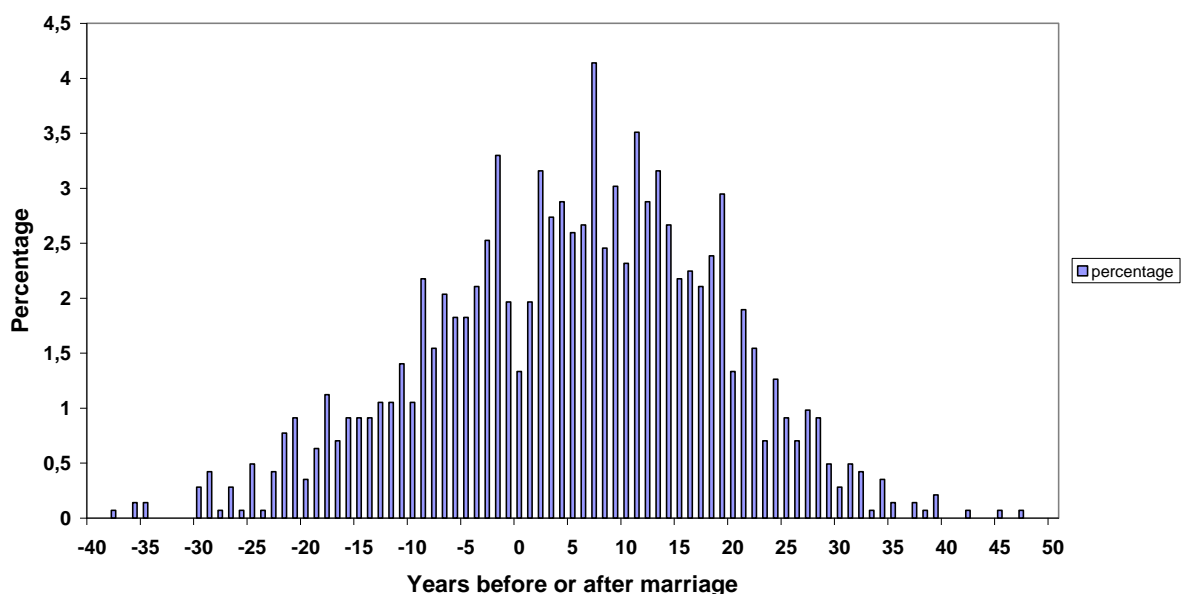
Graph 3 shows only a small peak in marriages concluded one or two years after the death of the last surviving parent. It concerns about 1 to 2% of all the marriages, so taking into account that a partner was involved, too, a maximum of 2 to 4% of the marriages were stimulated by the death of the last surviving parent (the effect of the death of the father was less). The 48 males marrying within three years after the death of the last parent (generally the mother), had an extremely high average age at marriage of 32.5, more than one quarter of them (13) succeeded on the parental household. Clearly, for some of these 48, the death of the last parent at last made a marriage possible. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of marriage after the death of one of the parents was too unimportant to shape the general marriage pattern. So again, we do not find much proof that people postponed their marriage until the moment the parents gave up their position by death.

Of course, the data do not preclude that retirement could a role. However, retirement was not a very common phenomenon in the Groningen Ommelanden. Most elderly people held to their property till a very high age and did not give way to their children, of whom two third married when one of the parents was still alive. The remaining one third consists also partly of children who became orphan at a low age.

Table 16: the death of the father and age at first marriage, R.C. females born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	average	Median	st.dev.	N
Till the age of 20	31.0	29.6	7.7	149	27.9	26.6	6.4	99
Between 20 and 40	31.2	29.4	7.7	116	28.0	26.6	5.4	154

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	average	median	st.dev.	N				
After the age of 40	32.1	30.8	9.0	53	28.0	27.3	5.8	51
Unknown				99				9

Table 17: the death of the father and age at first marriage, R.C. females born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	average	Median	st.dev.	N
Till the age of 20	26.8	26.3	5.7	164	25.4	24.1	5.7	143
Between 20 and 40	27.8	27.0	5.9	128	25.1	24.2	4.7	183
After the age of 40	27.2	26.0	5.5	44	25.1	24.5	4.5	52
Unknown				140				22

Klep (2005) has proposed as an explanation of the Western European marriage pattern the idea that parents tried to postpone the marriage of their children (parental constraint), because in this way they could longer reap the benefits of their children. Married children had to take care of their own household and because of neo-locality, the parents lost their influence completely. If this really would have been the case, boys and girls losing their father before the age of 20 would marry much younger than the ones who still had a father alive. However, in table 16 and 17 it is shown that the moment of death of the father did not influence the average age at marriage at all.

Table 18: the death of the mother and age at first marriage, R.C. males born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
Till the age of 20	29.9	29.6	5.8	111	27.0	26.1	4.7	79
Between 20 and 40	29.9	29.0	6.0	109	28.5	26.8	6.0	143
After the age of 40	34.3	30.8	11.2	84	27.6	27.1	5.7	79
Unknown				113				12

Table 19: the death of the mother and age at first marriage, R.C. females born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	average	median	st.dev.	N
Till the age of 20	27.1	26.3	6.5	125	25.3	24.1	5.4	114
Between 20 and 40	27.5	26.7	5.4	126	25.4	24.6	5.2	187
After the age of 40	26.3	24.9	4.9	67	25.6	24.9	5.2	78
Unknown				158				21

In tables 18 and 19 the influence of the death of the mother is taken into account. Mothers were more often the last surviving parent. Again the differences are very small with, however, one exception. Sons with surviving mothers married relatively very late in the period 1721-1770, on average at the age of 34. A surviving mother seems to have been a serious hindrance for sons to marry in this period. Surprisingly, the effect completely disappears for the cohort 1776-1800. A closer look suggests at least some relation with the disappearance of very late male ages at marriage. Most of the men getting married after the age of 50, mentioned before in this paper, had mothers living for a very long time. An example is Sponsie Ariens, whose mother was an extremely rich farmer surviving two husbands and dying when he was nearly 45. Sponsie inherited in the end the large farm, but afterwards became a rentier using some land. Aged 63, he married his maid in 1796.

Table 20: the age of becoming orphan and age at first marriage, R.C. males born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770		1776/1800	

	average	median	st.dev.	N	Average	Median	st.dev.	N
Till the age of 20	30.5	30.0	5.8	59	27.6	26.3	5.6	31
Between 20 and 40	30.0	38.5	6.4	131	28.3	26.7	5.8	171
After the age of 40	33.5	30.8	10.2	122	27.4	26.8	5.3	103
Unknown				105				8

Table 21: the age of becoming orphan and age at first marriage, R.C. females born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800.

	1721/1770				1776/1800			
	average	median	st.dev.	N	average	Median	st.dev.	N
Till the age of 20	27.1	26.5	6.2	66	25.1	24.1	5.2	51
Between 20 and 40	27.4	26.5	6.0	152	25.2	24.1	5.0	223
After the age of 40	26.9	25.3	5.2	100	25.0	24.6	4.5	111
Unknown				158				15

Klep's explanation of late Western European marriages having something to do with the need of parents to control their children is again not confirmed by the results in tables 20 and 21. Orphans did not marry at a young age relatively, so the parents did not block marriages in the Groningen Ommelanden. This result is not surprising, because children at the age of 25 were legally seen as independent from their parents. In contracts, considering a remarrying parent with young children the age of 18 is normally stated as the moment when the surviving parent lost control. From that moment on the surviving parent had to pay the normal rent on the money (the inheritance of the deceased parent) he/she borrowed from his or her children. It was not unusual for children when dividing paternal inheritances to claim an annual wage from their parents from the age of 18 onwards. In 19th century accounts on servants, parents only show up when the servants were in their teens, collecting their wages, the older servants concluded the contracts themselves and expended their wages as they liked it (on cloths, jewellery and fairs). So, parents were not able to derive much benefit from the earnings of their older children, and these benefits can not have been a reason to hinder early marriages.

Possible approaches for further investigation

The broad interpretation of the niche hypothesis can also be tested by correlating mortality figures around the marriage year with the age at marriage. A series of mortality figures exist from 1730 onwards (although the 18th century figures are less accurate than the 19th century figures). The hypothesis to be tested is if the age at marriage was low in years of high mortality, or in years following high mortality, and was high around years of low mortality.

The economic explanation of high ages at marriage can be tested by correlating age at marriage with the economic circumstances around the marriage year. Figures are available on real wages of labourers and carpenters in the Groningen clay area from 1770 onwards (Paping 1995). The economic explanation of high ages at marriage implies that average age at marriage of labourers and middle class is low (or falls) around years with a high standard-of-living. Although I did not perform this test, I expect an opposite result, taking into account the fall in age at marriage in the expensive French period. A range of bad years provoked earlier marriages, because postponing marriages in order to increase savings would be useless. In this way the general fall in age at marriage by 1800 could be explained economically (Paping and Collenteur 2004). With low real wages and very high prices of land, farms, houses and workshops in the French period it became nearly impossible to accumulate enough funds by saving to buy these kind of assets. There was less reason to postpone marriage; if one did not have the necessary resources already at a relative young age (by inheritance or by financial credibility related to expected inheritances), it made no sense to hope to acquire them at a later date.

Although results at the moment are not very promising, it might be that more explanations can be found as some of the indicators used are being combined, for example occupation and number of siblings. For farmers children the number of siblings is possibly of more importance than for artisans, whose capabilities. Furthermore, more rigoureus statistical testing can show statistically significant results, however, hopes to find clear-cut explanations for age at marriage from this kind of analysis must not be put too high, taking into account the calculated averages in this paper.

Furthermore, the incidence of celibacy can be taken into account. We know the details of more than 100 celibates, however, it is especially this group on which the information in the database is incomplete and possibly not representative. For proper statistical analysis, the number of celibates in the database is too small.

Where marriages really planned?

Both niche hypothesis and the economic explanation for late marriages depends on the implicit assumption that a wedding was a well-planned and organised act. Bride and groom collected resources, or waited until they hada good position and then, and only then, they married. In reality we do not find many instances of these planned marriages. In the Groningen clay area it was for example very rare for a couple to buy a farm or house when being engaged. One such exceptional case is when in December 1776 the 29-year-old labourers son Cornelis Harms and the 24 year old shopkeepers daughter Clara Alberts bought a labourers house in Warfhuizen for 207 guilders, to be delivered around their wedding date in May 1777.

In table 22 an overview is given of what newly-wed couples settling in Kloosterburen (a village in the north of Groningen) did after marriage. One thing is clear, quite a lot of couples had made no arrangements before marrying. Most life stories suggest that only after a couple married the problem of the household was tackled. Only men and women marrying widows or widowers had no problem, they moved into the existing household. Some couples managed to buy a house shortly after marriage. The limited importance of age is made clear by the marriage of Jan Pieters de Haan (son of a very tiny farmer) and Remke Pieters Bottema (a labourers daughter, being pregnant for more than 3 months) who married aged 22 and 21 and bought a labourers house two weeks after the wedding. The labourer Berent Lammerts Bot and his wife Trijnje Tonnis (an innkeeper's daughter) were 29 and 26 at their matrimony, still three years passed before they were able to buy a house and start a household of their own.

Table 22: Life after marriage (1791-1800) of Roman Catholic couples, settling at first in Kloosterburen (Groningen)

Labourers	Birth man	Birth woman	Mar-riage	*Place where they settled in the ten years after marriage*
Jan P. de Haan	1769	1770	1791	Forced marriage; bought house after two months
Renje J. Bot	1765	1765	1792	Forced marriage, bought house after 14 days
Renje R. Kamer	1756	1766	1793	Rented a house or lived in a poorhouse
Klaas Berents	1763	1766	1793	Forced marriage, possibly quickly bought newly-build house
Jelis J. Bot	1754	1766	1794	Widower with house sold; 1797 bought house, where they presumably already lived
Luurt S. Halsema	1770	1757	1794	Quickly build a house on land of his childless uncle (a farmer)
Albert J. Scholtens	1750	1769	1795	Widower in his house
Berent L. Bot	1765	1768	1795	Rented a house or lived with his brother or parents; 1798 bought house.
Derk L. Mug	1762	1765	1795	Possibly quickly bought newly-build house
Jan J. Bottema	1770	1774	1796	Forced marriage; presumably lived with his parents; 1798 bought newly-build house
Martinus J. Durmer	1766	1775	1796	Lived with his father; 1803 inherited the house
Sikke J. Bloem	1769	1772	1797	Forced marriage; lived in a poorhouse; 1805 bought this poorhouse
Jan D. van der Leegte	1762	1772	1797	Possibly lived with her mother; 1805 bought her house (condition mother could stay); 1808 (after mothers death) rented a house
Willem J. Bot	1769	1774	1798	Forced marriage, presumably lived with his mother, c1800 bought house; 1809 bought tiny farm with 4 hectare elsewhere
Hindrik A. Scholtens	1779	1777	1799	Forced marriage; lived with his father (Hindrik died soon)

Jan Berents	1770	1775	1799	Possibly lived with his brother (Jan and his wife died soon)
Tjaard H. Duninga	1755	1773	1799	Widower in his house, 1804 moved to other house
Tjaard J. Bottema	1774	1778	1799	Possibly lived with his mother or other family; 1807 bought house
Farmers				
Hindrik M. Wijnema	1763	1768	1792	Widower, farm already sold; lived with her father (small farm and shoemaking); 1796 bought large farm
Willem J. Iema	1761	1766	1792	Lived on small farm with her father, inherited this farm in 1806
Ubbe Reinders	1770	1773	1793	He (orphan in 1792) bought large farm 3 months before marriage from brother
Eisse J. Halsema	1770	1771	1794	Forced marriage; labourer rented tiny farm from his sister; 1800 bought large farm elsewhere; 1803 bought fathers large farm from inheritance
Harm. J. Boerema	1765	1770	1798	Lived with his father (small farm and shoemaking); 1804 bought farm elsewhere
Geert F. Eikens	1770	1737	1799	Widow on her small farm
Remt S. Halsema	1773	1780	1800	On his parents farm; parents retired in other house
Artisans and shopkeepers				
Harm H. Timmer	1758	1771	1795	Widower, in his house (carpenter); c1798 newly-build house and some land; 1809 moved to her parents large farm (inheritance) elsewhere
Jan Berents	1770	1752	1797	Owned or bought house; 1798 bought house; 1799 returned to first house; 1801 bought expensive house; 1803 bought cheap house; 1805 broke (shoemaker)
Joh. Scheifferling	?	?	1797	Unknown, moved elsewhere in 1800 (presumably an artisan)
Hindrik G. Abels	1771	1770	1798	Widow in her house (tailor)
Hijbel J. Pel	1775	1773	1798	Bought house 1799; 1801 bought house; 1804 bought house (small shopkeeper)
Renje J. de Boer	1763	1776	1798	Forced marriage, rented a house, 1800 moved elsewhere (carpenter)
Willem J. Stok	1770	1761	1799	Unclear, possibly lived with one of his or her brothers (tailor, after his death in 1805 pauper)
Jan J. Jansen	1754	1777	1799	Widower in his house (rich shopkeeper-salesman)
Cornelis C. Huizinga	1776	1775	1799	Forced marriage, lived presumably with her father, 1805 bought house (carpenter)

Only farmers seem to have taken steps often to secure a farm. However, again in numerous cases the newly-wed couple stayed on the farm of one of the parents, sometimes to take it over in the long run, some times to buy a farm elsewhere within a few years. The "family interpretation" of the niche hypothesis suggests that succession was important. In a different paper I have shown that succession was only one of the possibilities to dispose of farms in the Groningen Ommelanden (Paping 2007), about one third of the farms were sold, one third went to a son or daughter and one third was taken over by the widow or widower with his of her new partner. Succession was not very important at all in this region, only 13% of all the children had the possibility to take over the household of the parents shortly after marriage. The majority of the couples had to buy or build a house to prevent them from living in one of the parental households for too long a period. The nuclear household was the standard in this society like elsewhere in Western Europe, and three-generation-households were mainly a short term solution for life-cycle problems (newly-wed without a house yet, and incapacitated old aged). Concluding, the micro stories on the Groningen Ommelanden suggest that marriage was in most instances unrelated to the securing of a position (farm, workshop, household) beforehand. They do not present much proof for the niche hypothesis as a general explanation for specific ages at marriage. Succession on parental niches was not the explanation for the high ages at marriage in the Groningen Ommelanden, because only a minority of the couples succeeded their parents after marriage.

Unfortunately, by rejecting the niche hypothesis we end up without any explanation for specific ages at marriage. Is it perhaps attractive to return to some explanation like Shorter (1975) who suggested that the rise of romantic love around 1800 lowered average ages at marriage? For the Groningen Roman Catholics we indeed see a sharp rise in forced marriages and illegitimate births from 1790 onwards which fits into Shorters general ideas. However, Shorters' highly disputed thesis can only explain why average ages at marriage fell around 1800, it does not really present a reliable explanation why males and females married so late earlier that century.

Conclusion

The analysis of about 1,700 ages at first marriage for Roman Catholics born in the Groningen Ommelanden between 1721 and 1800 showed that it was extremely difficult to find general indicators, which explain the large differences in individual ages at marriage. One factor was of prime importance, and that was the elapse of time. Time explains the large difference in age at first marriage between males and females born between 1721 an 1770 and males and females born in the period 1776-1800. Males married something like three years earlier, while females married considerably more than two years earlier. Median age at first marriage fell correspondingly, and the spread in ages at first marriage decreased significantly; for males with nearly two years and for females with more than 1 year. Differences in age at first marriage between the sexes diminished slightly.

Remarkably, the fall in the age at first marriage showed up in all the subdivisions made. Therefore, the fall in the age at first marriage was a very general development, somehow connected to rising opportunities or inclinations to marry during the so-called French period (1795-1814). A minor part of the fall in the age at first marriage can be explained by the near disappearance of very late marriages (males older than 50, and females older than 40) which had a large influence on the average. However, this is not the whole story, because considerably more people married at a younger age also. Two possible explanations have been put forward: 1. An economic one: because of the high prices of houses and farms during the French period saving during their twenties became less fruitful, so this reason to postpone marriage disappeared. 2. Shorters rise of romantic love in the uncertain French period would have stimulated lower ages at marriage.

The niche theory as an explanation for Hajnals Western European marriage pattern of high ages at marriage, suggesting that people waited with marrying until they had obtained a secure position (niche) to support a family, had to be rejected. In the Groningen Ommelanden succession of the parents after marriage took place only in a minority of cases. Early and late ages at first marriage were only to a very limited amount related to welfare (or social-economic class), to occupation, to social success, to birth order and to the number of siblings. Only small groups showed diverging patterns. Large farmers for example married relatively young girls. Labourer sons married very early, but only around 1800. Women who were upwardly mobile married on average very late.

Also no proof was found for Klep's idea that parents tried to constrain marriages, being still able to claim economic benefits of their unmarried children when they were in their twenties. Boys and girls becoming orphan before their twenties did not marry much younger than others did. In addition, there is evidence that Groningen children were seen as economically independent from the age of 18 onwards, which is not in accordance with Klep's suggestion.

Explaining individual ages at marriages proved very hard. Not many clear patterns have been found. Possibly this is due to the fact that weddings in the Western European past were far less planned than is mostly assumed by historians. Groningen couples first married and only afterwards searched for a definitive household. Non-economic factors might have played a large role in the chosing of the wedding-date. That is also the reason why couples migrated so often in the first few years after marriage (Paping 2004). The seemingly economically unplanned nature of a lot of specific weddings makes individual ages at marriage difficult to explain. A completely new approach to explaining the high ages at marriage in Hajnal's Western European marriage pattern seems to be required.

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Appendix A: The database

In the period 1986-1988, a family reconstruction was made for the five Roman Catholic parishes in the so-called 'Ommelanden' (literally surroundings) of Groningen (Paping 1988). Roman Catholics formed some 5% of the total population of about 50,000 around 1800. In the last two decennia, this database continuously was improved using information from all kinds of sources, especially taxation records, civil proceedings, and notarial acts.[4]

In first instance there were only three Roman Catholic parishes in this region: Bedum (registration of baptisms starts in 1680, marriages in 1728), Den Hoorn (starts in 1727) and Uithuizen (starts in 1730). All these parishes comprise a large number of villages. New parishes were split off in 1751 (Appingedam) and 1763 (Aduard). Preserved Roman Catholic death registration (only persons older than about 12-16 year) was starting only in 1802 in Den Hoorn. In the parish of Bedum only burial registers, survive from 1797 onwards. However, more general death records for example for the village of Bedum (from about 1775 onwards) and the village of Eenrum (from 1755 onwards) exist too. From 1806 onwards general death records exists for every village. Marriages were also obliged tot be concluded in the Dutch reformed church. Because of this double registration, nearly every marriage can be found. Children were mostly baptised the day of birth or a day later, so that most children born alive are indeed in the Roman Catholic baptism records. From 1811 onwards, the registration office offers a complete civil registration of births, deaths and marriages. In the older forms of registration underregistration, seems to have been very limited.

In conclusion: baptisms are nearly complete from 1731 onwards, for the period 1721-1730 about half of the them are missing and some dates have to be estimated quite roughly, registration of marriages was also nearly complete, only the death records are incomplete before 1806. However, with the help of additional sources the year of decease can be estimated roughly for many people.

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[4] This database was used before in: Paping and Collenteur (2004); Paping (2007).

Now, for the parents of more than 80% of the cohort members (Roman Catholics born between 1721 and 1800) relatively secure information on the date of death is available.

Table A.1 The quality of the database of Roman Catholics born in the Groningen Ommelanden, 1721-1800

	Males	Females	Total
Total	980	1,114	2,094
Marriage dates	829	994	1,823
Age at first marriage	779	934	1,713
Unmarried	107	83	190
Age when mother died	769	846	1,615
Age when father died	786	864	1,650
Age when became fully orphan	784	868	1,652
Number of surviving brothers and sisters	910	1,035	1,945

Now, the original database comprises information on 2,094 Roman Catholics born between 1721 and 1800 in the Groningen Ommelanden, who married or reached the age of 30. From the majority of the other registrations in the baptism register it is sure that they died before the age of 30. However, the database is not perfect, possibly some 50-100 Roman Catholics more will have reached the age of 30, but until now we did not trace them in the sources. This group consists presumably mostly of people remaining unmarried (which are relatively hard to trace), emigrants moving out of the Ommelanden, and people marrying non-Catholics. A little bit comparable are the 67 persons from which we know that they survived till the age of 30, but we miss data about their later life.

The database on Roman Catholics has definitive advantages, inasmuch as a region of 1.000 square kilometres comprising some 150 small and larger villages is considered using only a few parish registers. People had to move large distances to leave the region, and fortunately, most of them show up in the parish registers of the nearby large city of Groningen. For 18th and 19th century, the quality of the data in the database is very good. Another advantage is that nearly all the occupations are known, and by using additional sources information on the amount of property (mainly land) is nearly always available, which makes it relatively easy to place them in a specific social class.

In the text we only use the cases with complete knowledge on the specific topic. For some families we do know how many children married and/or reached the age of 30, while we do not know the year of decease of the parents, and sometimes it is the other way around. This is the reason that the number of cases involved changes with every question.

Something has to be said about the representativeness of the Roman Catholics for the total population of the Groningen Clay area. Considering occupations, they definitively were not representative. Farmers and especially larger farmers were somewhat overrepresented, inasmuch as these groups could afford to stick to the old faith. On the other hand, because of the same reason the share of farm labourers was extraordinarily low. However, indigent artisans were well represented under the Roman Catholics, which can be explained simply. Many of the weavers, tailors and carpenters were poor immigrants from Germany or their descendants, and on the other side of the Dutch-German frontier (Westfalia) mainly Roman Catholics were living. A relatively large group within the Roman Catholics were first, second or third generation immigrants, which, however, seemed to have been quite well integrated considering the mixed marriages. Surprisingly few labourers were coming from Germany.