

Civil and religious marriage in France: why do opinions and practices diverge across cohorts?

France Prioux (INED) and Arnaud Régnier-Loilier (INED)¹

Long abstract

Objectives, sources and method

This study is based on a comparison between statistics on civil and religious marriage in France and opinions on marriage recorded in the first wave of the French Generations and Gender survey (Étude des relations familiales et intergénérationnelles, Erfi) conducted in 2005. Observing a large discrepancy between the opinions recorded in 2005 and the past behaviour of the same cohorts, we look for an explanation by analysing the link between individuals' opinions and their sociodemographic characteristics (age, educational level, religiosity, nationality, conjugal situation and history, number of children, etc.) with the help of a logistic regression. We hypothesize that individuals' opinions about marriage are liable to change in response to their own conjugal experience. This hypothesis is confirmed by the model and by linking the changes in respondents' opinions between the first two survey waves (2005 and 2008) to the family events they experienced in the interval.

Main findings

In France, marriage is in decline. While more than 92% of women of the 1930-1945 cohorts had married at least once by age 50 – and the proportion is only slightly lower among men –, the figure is estimated to 65% for women born in 1975. Moreover, fewer and fewer marriages are celebrated religiously: almost 80% of women born between 1930 and 1940 were married in the Catholic church, versus less than 30% of women born around 1975.

Using data from the first wave of the French GGS survey of 2005, we focus on the opinions of marriage in general and of religious weddings expressed by the different cohorts and compare them with the changes in behaviour observed across these same cohorts. We observe that the decline in marriage is not associated with a similar decline in favourable opinions. Among the oldest cohorts, who are practically all married, the proportion who report that marriage is not an outdated institution is only slightly higher than among the intermediate cohorts (69% vs. 65%). Among the youngest cohorts, favourable opinions of marriage increase slightly (68%), while the statistics show that the institution is still in steady decline. Likewise, opinions in favour of a religious wedding are not supported by the statistics: the proportion decreases sharply from the 1930 cohort (65% of favourable opinions), falling to a low with the 1960-1965 cohorts (35%) before rebounding slightly to 40% among the 1980-1985 cohorts. The decline in favourable opinions thus concerns the cohorts who opted massively for a religious wedding, and the subsequent rebound is not confirmed by behaviours.

Beyond the link between religiosity and marriage (the most religious individuals are most strongly attached to marriage in general, and to a religious wedding), we will seek to characterize

¹ prioux@ined.fr ; arnaud.regnier-loilier@ined.fr

the persons with a positive opinion of civil and religious marriage to shed light on this paradoxical divergence between opinion and behaviour. Two models were constructed. The first (Table 1, model 1) estimates the probability, all other things being equal, of "strongly disagreeing" or "disagreeing" with the idea that marriage is an outdated institution versus a different response;² the second estimates the probability of "strongly agreeing" or "agreeing" with the idea that marriage should be celebrated religiously (model 2).

Table 1. Estimated probabilities (%) of thinking that marriage is not an outdated institution (model 1) / that it is important to have a religious wedding (model 2)

		MODEL 1 Marriage not outdated		MODEL 2 Religious marriage important	
		men	women	men	women
EDUCATION	<i>Lower secondary</i>	69 <i>ref.</i>	65 <i>ref.</i>	23 <i>ref.</i>	27 <i>ref.</i>
	High-school diploma (baccalauréat)	72	70 *	17 *	19 *
	2 years in higher education	71	70	18	16 *
	3+ years in higher education	78 *	72 *	16 *	13 *
AGE in 2005 (year of birth)	<i>Below 30 (1976-1987)</i>	73	79 *	33 *	43 *
	30-39 (1966-1975)	70	71 *	28	31
	<i>40-49 (1956-1965)</i>	69 <i>ref.</i>	65 <i>ref.</i>	23 <i>ref.</i>	27 <i>ref.</i>
	50-59 (1946-1945)	64	63	30 *	35 *
	60-69 (1936-1945)	68	60	38 *	43 *
	70-79 (1926-1935)	69	66	40 *	50 *
NUMBER OF CHILDREN	<i>None</i>	73	67	21	26
	<i>At least one</i>	69 <i>ref.</i>	65 <i>ref.</i>	23 <i>ref.</i>	27 <i>ref.</i>
PARENTS SEPARATED	<i>Not separated</i>	69 <i>ref.</i>	65 <i>ref.</i>	23 <i>ref.</i>	27 <i>ref.</i>
	Separated	70	61	19 *	26
	Not known	73	67	24	28
NATIONALITY	<i>French</i>	69 <i>ref.</i>	65 <i>ref.</i>	23 <i>ref.</i>	27 <i>ref.</i>
	Europe	68	62	26	30
	Other	63	64	24	51 *
RELIGION	<i>No religion</i>	67	61	9 *	12 *
	<i>Non-practising</i>	69 <i>ref.</i>	65 <i>ref.</i>	23 <i>ref.</i>	27 <i>ref.</i>
	Occasional practice	79 *	74 *	40 *	46 *
	Regular practice	88 *	86 *	63 *	67 *
MARITAL SITUATION	<i>Ever-married</i>	69 <i>ref.</i>	65 <i>ref.</i>	23 <i>ref.</i>	27 <i>ref.</i>
	Never-married	43 *	45 *	21	24
CONJUGAL HISTORY	<i>No separation</i>	69 <i>ref.</i>	65 <i>ref.</i>	23 <i>ref.</i>	27 <i>ref.</i>
	At least one separation	61 *	56 *	18 *	23 *
MARRIAGE IS OUTDATED	<i>Agree</i>			26	26
	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>			23 <i>ref.</i>	27 <i>ref.</i>
	<i>Disagree</i>			45 *	47 *

Source: Erfi-GGSI survey 2005 (INED-INSEE).

Population: Men and women aged 18-79 living in private households.

Legend: Italics: Reference person; * factors significant at 1% level.

Interpretation (example, Model 1, men): A man with all reference characteristics (lines in italic: lower-secondary educational level, aged 40-49, etc.) has a 69% probability of "strongly disagreeing" or "disagreeing" with the idea that marriage is an outdated institution. For a man with the same characteristics but with 3+ years in higher education, the probability is 78%, a statistically significant difference at the 1% level (*). The difference between these two proportions measures the effect of educational level on opinions, all other things being equal.

² "neither agree nor disagree" "agree" "strongly agree".

Alongside religious practice, which is confirmed to be an important factor shaping individuals' opinion on marriage, religious marriage in particular, other characteristics emerge:

- educational level (which has an opposite effect for civil marriage and religious marriage);
- age (or cohort): the oldest, but also the youngest (below age 30) are more attached to marriage in general (especially women), and to religious marriage, than the intermediate cohorts;
- marital situation (the never-married have a more negative opinion of marriage) and conjugal history (experience of a marital break-up reduces the likelihood of a positive opinion about marriage in general and about religious marriage).

By contrast, there is no significant link between opinions on marriage and experiencing the separation of one's parents, and likewise for being a parent, or being of foreign nationality (all other things being equal).

Changes in opinions between 2005 and 2008

The changes in opinions observed between 2005 and 2008 can be examined in relation to the family events which occurred over the same period. While individual behaviours are guided by systems of values,³ our aim here is to see whether opinions can be shaped by the occurrence of certain events – desired or otherwise. We focus exclusively on conjugal events and marital situations by distinguishing between five situations: the person was married in 2005 and still is; the person got married between 2005 and 2008; the person separated from their partner during this period; the person was in a couple but not married and is still not; other cases (unattached persons, etc.). Among these situations, two result in contrasting changes of opinion concerning the institution of marriage:⁴ persons who get married between the two survey waves tend to move towards the opinion that marriage is not an outdated institution; conversely, those who experience a break-up during this period (with or without divorce⁵) tend to move in the opposite direction. For the three other categories, changes of opinion in either direction tend to balance each other out. However, getting married or splitting up between the two survey waves has no significant influence on changes of opinion concerning the importance of religious marriage.

By taking account of a set of characteristics "all other things being equal", and notably the respondents' positioning in the first wave in order to control for bias linked to the construction of the indicator, and by separating men's and women's responses, the importance of conjugal events on changes of opinion is confirmed. The birth of a child, on the other hand, has no effect either on opinions about the institution of marriage or about the importance of religious marriage.

Among other factors taken into account, frequent religious practice reduces the likelihood of developing a negative opinion of marriage in general or of religious marriage. Last, while the cohort influences opinions on religious marriage (Table 1), we also observe a significant effect on the change of opinion between survey waves, but for women only. The youngest cohorts are less attached to religious marriage, while the oldest are less likely to have changed their mind in this direction.

³ We know, for example, that the most religious people more frequently marry (Régnier-Loilier and Prioux, 2009).

⁴ The differences observed are statistically significant (confidence intervals calculated at the 10% level).

⁵ As the number of persons who separated between the two survey waves was low, we cannot distinguish between those who were married and those who were not.

Conclusion

Opinions on the institution of marriage seem to depend quite strongly on past or recent conjugal experience. Both for the opinions reported in 2005 and their change between 2005 and 2008, experience of a separation gives respondents a more negative opinion of marriage. This may explain (in part) the apparent contradiction between the fact that the vast majority of members of the older cohorts had married and their opinion on marriage in 2005. And while young women appear to be warming to marriage once again, their opinion may change in the future, notably if they experience a failed marriage themselves.

References (selection)

- Alfred Dittgen, « Les mariages religieux en France. Comparaison avec les mariages civils », in *La nuptialité : évolution récente en France et dans les pays développés*, INED-PUF, Congrès et Colloques, n°7, p. 137-157.
- Arnaud Régnier-Loilier et France Prioux, « Does religious practice influence family behaviours? » *Population and Societies*, n°447, July-August, 2008, 4 p.
http://www.ined.fr/fichier/t_publication/1366/publi_pdf2_pesa447.pdf
- Arnaud Régnier-Loilier et France Prioux, « Does religious practice affect fertility in France? », PAA 2008 annual meeting, New Orleans, April 17-19.
- Laurent Toulemon, "Cohabitation is here to stay", *Population, An English Selection*, 1997, 9, pp. 11-46.