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Parents' attitudes to their children's partner choice: a century of change

Milan Bouchet-Valat* and Sébastien Grobon**

How has the parents' role in their children's choice of partner evolved since the early 20th century in France? Analysing three surveys conducted over the last 60 years, Milan Bouchet-Valat and Sébastien Grobon retrace the rise of love marriages and the expansion of partner searches at the expense of matches supervised by the family. While parents are more tolerant of their children's choice of partner than they were 50 years ago, their more liberal attitude follows a long period of mounting tension that culminated around 1968.

Choosing a life partner has evolved considerably in the last hundred years. While their intervention would be unacceptable today, parents were closely involved until at least the mid-20th century [1]. Since then, individual freedom of expression within the family has increased considerably, with an acceleration of the trend from the 1960s and 1970s [2, 3]. How has this change in social norms unfolded?

Three surveys on union formation conducted by INED in 1959, 1983–1984, and 2013–2014 included a comparable series of questions [4, 5, 6] (Box). The respondents' answers shed light on parental attitudes towards their unions. The first survey in 1959 was limited to married couples, while the other two included cohabiting non-marital unions. These surveys thus provide information on how families have viewed these unions and, indirectly, exerted their influence, over the last hundred years. Responses to other questions on the criteria governing partner choice revealed the trade-offs between family social-reproduction strategies and the importance individuals attached to other dimensions, such as physical attraction or shared tastes.

* Institut national d'études démographiques (INED)

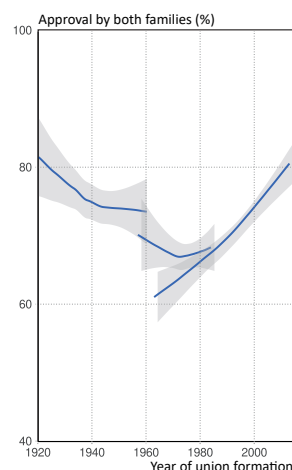
** Direction de l'Animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques (Dares) et Centre d'économie de la Sorbonne (CES)

(1) While the overall trend remains clear, there is a divergence between the two more recent surveys for the 1960s and 1970s. This may be due to separations, recall effects, or differences in question wording (Box).

Parental approval: a U-shaped pattern of change

The proportion of unions approved by parents and parents-in-law follows a U-shaped curve. Starting at a high level of 81% in 1919, it fell 12 points to a low in 1970 before returning to its original high by 2014 (Figure 1). The 1960s turning point is clearly visible and appears consistent with the other changes that affected the family over the 20th century.⁽¹⁾

Figure 1. Proportion of unions approved by both families, by union formation cohort (1919–2014)



Note: Grey areas indicate the 95% confidence intervals. Coverage: Intact unions at the time of the survey. Sources: Choice of Spouse survey (INED, 1959) [4], Union Formation survey (INED, 1983–1984) [5], and Individual and Partnership Trajectories survey (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014) [6].

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This U-shaped pattern may reflect a generational change. In outline, young adults who married for love against their parents' wishes in the first period (1919–1970) may have been more tolerant of their own children's wishes when they became parents themselves in the second period (1970–2014). Faced with the perpetuation of the pre-war model, children born at the end of the Second World War accused their parents of inconsistency and even of hypocrisy [2]. These tensions, which culminated in the upheavals of May 1968 and the rapid transformations that ensued, were probably already latent in the pre-1945 generations.

Increasing parental tolerance of heterogamous relationships

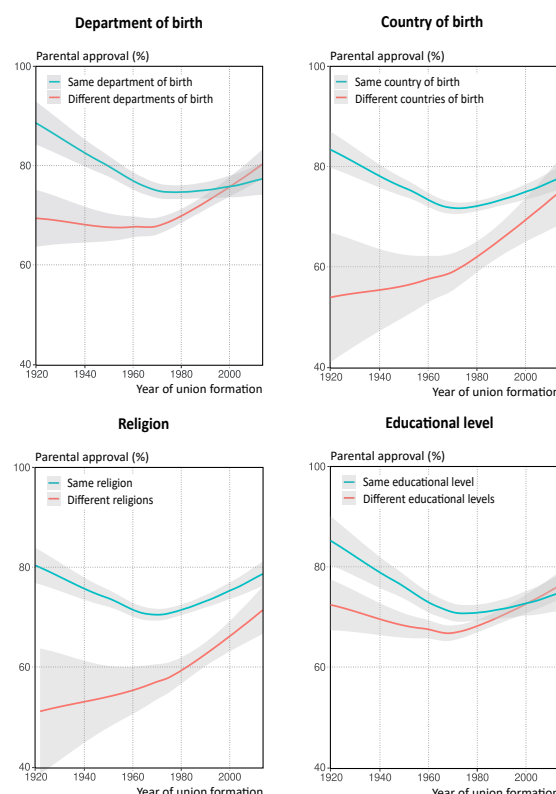
As A. Girard [4] already noted, in the 1920s family approval was less frequent when the spouses had very different social backgrounds (heterogamy) than when they came from a similar social group (homogamy; see Figure 2). Parental disapproval was most prevalent when the spouses came from different religions or countries of birth; the difference with respect to homogamous couples is 30 percentage points in both cases. The change in attitudes over the study period is spectacular, however. While this difference still stood at 15 percentage points in both cases for couples formed in the 1960s, it was no longer significant by 2014. Regarding French department of birth and level of education, the difference in parental approval between homogamous and heterogamous couples in the 1920s was smaller but high nonetheless (19 and 13 points, respectively). This difference narrowed rapidly, however. It was practically zero by the 1960s for level of education, and by around 1980 for department of birth.

A steady decrease in homogamy

This gradual increase in parental tolerance of their child's preference for a socially distant partner has occurred alongside a steady decrease in homogamy since the early 20th century (Figure 3). While 95% of spouses having formed a union in 1919 were raised in the same religion, the proportion fell sharply from the 1960s, standing at just 68% in 2014. Likewise, unions where both partners were born in the same department are also less frequent: down from 69% among those formed in 1935, to just 35% among those formed in 2014. The proportion of unions where both partners were born in the same country has remained high, at 84% in 2014 compared to 95% in 1919.

The decrease in educational and social-origin homogamy, already verified elsewhere [7], is confirmed here over a longer period. That said, these trends are mainly a reflection of structural transformations (increased social and geographical mobility, greater population heterogeneity), and not necessarily a change in individual or family preferences. For

Figure 2. Proportion of unions approved by both families, by union type (1919–2014)



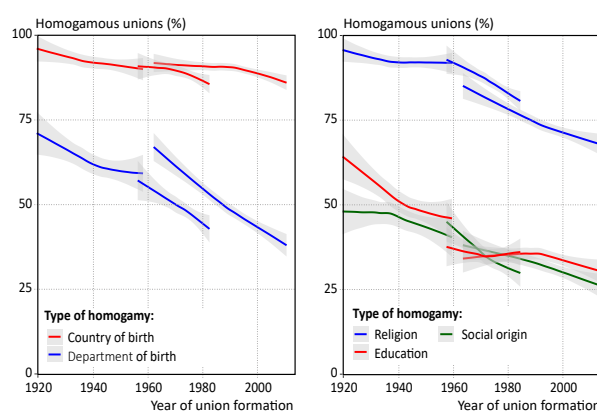
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Interpretation: Among unions formed in 1920, the parents and parents-in-law approved the match in 80% of cases when the spouses had the same religion but in only 50% of cases when they had a different religion.

Coverage: Intact unions at the time of the survey.

Sources: Choice of Spouse survey (INED, 1959) [4], Union Formation survey (INED, 1983–1984) [5], and Individual and Partnership Trajectories survey (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014) [6].

Figure 3. Homogamy rates (1919–2014)

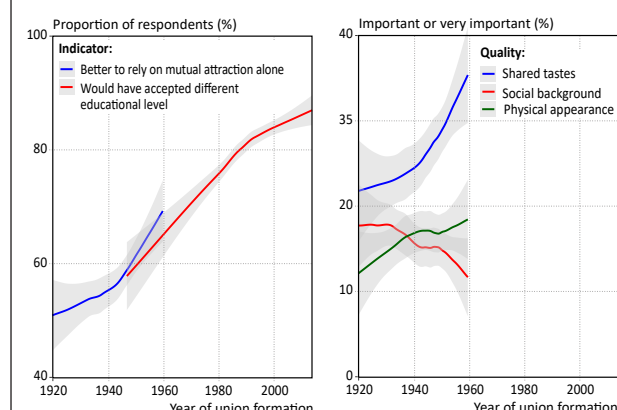


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Coverage: Intact unions at the time of the survey.

Sources: Choice of Spouse survey (INED, 1959) [4], Union Formation survey (INED, 1983–1984) [5], and Individual and Partnership Trajectories survey (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014) [6].

Figure 4. Criteria for choosing a partner (1919–2014)



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Coverage: Intact unions at the time of the survey.

Sources: Choice of Spouse survey (INED, 1959) [4] and Individual and Partnership Trajectories survey (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014) [6].

example, the increase in religious heterogamy can be explained in part by the rising proportion of people reporting no religious affiliation; in the early 20th century, practically the entire French population self-identified as Catholic.

Attraction takes precedence over social status

Over the 20th century, consistent with the decrease in homogamy over the period and greater parental tolerance of heterogamous matches, the criterion of mutual attraction began to overtake that of social status [8]. This evolution is visible in the 1959 survey, assuming that the preferences reported by respondents at the time of survey were the same as when they formed their current union.

For unions formed between 1919 and 1959, the proportion of individuals reporting that ‘when considering marriage’ it is more important to take account of ‘mutual attraction’ than ‘social status’ or ‘both’ increased sharply, especially among unions formed after 1945 (Figure 4). This suggests a first trend break at the end of the Second World War (from 50% in 1919 to 58% in 1945, and 69% in 1959). Likewise, when asked about the qualities of the future spouse which ‘count most’ ‘when considering marriage’, the proportion of respondents choosing ‘shared tastes’—from among health, physical appearance, moral standards, social status, and shared tastes—increased sharply from 22% to 37% between unions formed in 1919 and those formed in 1959. In the same period, the proportion choosing social status decreased (from 17% in 1919 to 11% in 1959), while the perceived importance of physical appearance moved in the opposite direction (from 11% in 1919 to 18% in 1959).

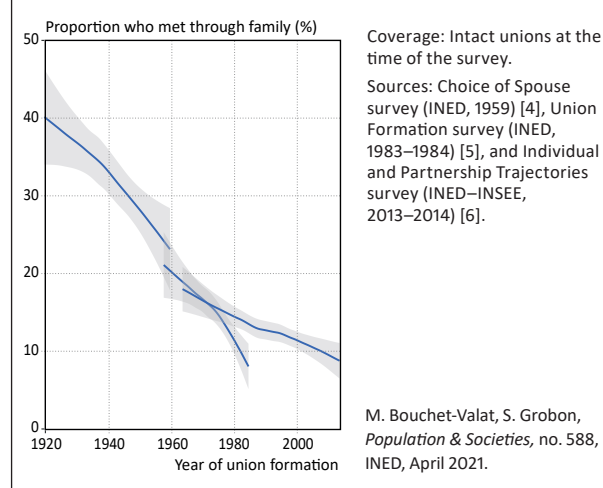
No comparable question was asked in the 1983–1984 survey, but the trend is confirmed by that of 2013–2014. It reveals a sharp increase in the proportion of respondents who would have accepted ‘the idea of being with someone who is far less educated’ or ‘much more highly educated’. This proportion, 62% for people who formed a union in 1945, rises to 83% in the early 1990s and to 88% in 2014.

Seeking a partner outside the family sphere becomes more common

Another major trend is the movement away from the family sphere when looking for a partner. In our study, meeting a partner within the family sphere signifies meeting him or her at a wedding, a family party or event, or through a relative. It also includes meeting a partner in the neighbourhood, where the family may exert an influence. While 40% of unions formed in 1919 were between partners who met through the family or in the neighbourhood, the proportion was just 9% in 2014 (Figure 5), consistent with a trend observed by Bozon and Héran [5]. A similar trend is observed for the proportion of partners whose families already knew each other.

The changes described here illustrate the transition from an early 20th-century society where half the population worked in agriculture and where mobility was limited, to an essentially urban society where geographical mobility, the expansion of education, the development of wage employment, and social protection have substantially weakened family influence on the choice of life partner, for women especially.

Figure 5. Proportion of couples who met through family in the neighbourhood (1919–2014)



Coverage: Intact unions at the time of the survey.

Sources: Choice of Spouse survey (INED, 1959) [4], Union Formation survey (INED, 1983–1984) [5], and Individual and Partnership Trajectories survey (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014) [6].

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Box. Sources and methods

Three reference surveys on union formation conducted by INED over the last 60 years are used here. Their characteristics are summarized in the table below:

Year(s)	Survey name	Reference	Sample scope and size
1959	Choice of Spouse (INED)	Girard (1959) [4]	Married couples (excluding second marriages) where the husband is under age 65 and the wife under age 62; <i>N</i> = 1,646.
1983–1984	Union Formation (INED)	Bozon and Héran (1988) [5]	Individuals under age 45 in a marital or cohabiting union; <i>N</i> = 2,924.
2013–2014	Individual and Partnership Trajectories (INED–INSEE)	Rault and Régnier-Loilier (2019) [6]	Individuals aged 26–65 in a marital or cohabiting union; <i>N</i> = 2,924.

A series of questions on the attitudes of the family and family-in-law remained relatively similar across the three surveys, making it possible to construct an indicator over the entire study period:

- 1959: 'Did your family strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of your marriage?'
- 1983–1984: 'What was their [your parents'] attitude to your spouse (partner)?' *Very positive / Merely polite / Reserved / Very negative*.
- 2013–2014: 'When you told your parents about your relationship, did they respond positively?' *Yes / No / One yes, the other no / You haven't told your parents*.

As most parents approve of their children's union, we consider their response to be negative if at least one of the four parents or parents-in-law is reserved or very negative.

Homogamy, defined here as the similarity of partners' characteristics, is measured using categories that vary slightly across the surveys. However, these differences do not pose a problem for measuring variations over time across cohorts within a single survey. Religion is measured using four categories in 1959 (Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, no religion) and by a direct question on religious homogamy in the two other surveys. The country of origin is grouped into major regions: France, Western Europe, Eastern Europe (or EU-25 in 2013–2014), North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa (Africa was not counted separately in 1959, but included in 'others'), and others (less than 2% of cases in the three surveys). Social origin is measured by the father's occupation, grouped into six categories: farmer; small entrepreneur; higher-level occupation; intermediate occupation; routine non-manual employee; manual labourer. Level of education is divided into six categories in 1959: none; primary; lower secondary; secondary vocational; upper secondary; higher. In 1983–1984, the last category is subdivided into 2 years vocational tertiary and 2–3+ years higher. In 2013–2014, it is subdivided into 2 years tertiary; 3–4 years higher; 5+ years higher.

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Abstract

The influence of family on children's partner choice has been declining since the beginning of the 20th century, leading first to more frequent parental disagreement from 1920 to 1970, then to growing tolerance. Love marriage has risen, and mutual attraction has taken precedence over social status. Partner searches have expanded outside the neighbourhood and family sphere, and parents have become increasingly tolerant of partners from other social backgrounds.

Keywords

partner choice, marriage, couple, meeting places, love marriage, homogamy, family, 1968, 20th century, France



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