

*A Longitudinal Approach to Family Trajectories in France:
The Generations and Gender Survey*

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The Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) in France is part of a project of the Population Activities Unit of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). Nineteen countries have participated so far. It is a longitudinal panel study. One person (aged 18–79 years) was selected to answer a questionnaire in a personal interview and followed up by two further waves of interviews. In mainland France, a sample of 16,000 “ordinary households” was taken from the 1999 general census, resulting in 10,079 respondents in the 2005 first wave of interviews, followed by two further interviews with the same person in 2008 and 2011. The objective was to “better understand life histories by analyzing how demographic behaviour is determined at an individual level and what the corresponding consequences are.” The results open our eyes to some new and interesting fields to examine in family life.

This volume of twelve papers based on the GGS deals largely with the results in France, although international comparison with a few of the other countries involved is discussed in some chapters. Not all the countries involved are in Europe (Japan, Australia, and the Russian Federation, for example), nor are Canada, Britain, or the United States of America participants. This work, then, is of great interest to Canadians for other important reasons, both methodological and substantive.

The first two chapters deal with the purposes, theory, and methods involved in the survey. This includes a very balanced look at the strengths and limitations of such data collection, and a most candid assessment of the quality of the data. These chapters are models of how to describe and assess such survey data, and will be very useful to anyone supervising thesis work in this area—or, even more, contemplating writing a thesis on comparative, survey, and panel studies in demography and other empirical fields in social science.

The remaining chapters take us through fascinating aspects of family and fertility in France in the 21st century, where marriage laws include a civil partnership (PACS) and a more simplified divorce law since 2005. There is special detailed examination of cohabitation, likelihood of couples

to separate and why, planned fertility and fertility intentions, the effects of unemployment on fertility, work schedules and family size, how mothers cope with their careers and the influence of state supports in this work-life balance, and the impact of intergenerational transfers of time and money. In addition, among other contemporary observations, differences in family status show that being a lone mother or a stepmother differs significantly in some ways from being a mother in a nuclear family.

To take only one example, Chapter 3 deals with LAT (Living Apart Together) or “couples in intimate non-cohabiting relationships,” a situation in which many academic “couples” find themselves in Canada, just as they do in France. There is a considerable literature on this subject, the relevant parts of which are reviewed in this chapter. The advantage of the data used here is that subjects are interviewed three times over the six-year period, so the sustainability and outcomes of such relationships are explored. For example, older people LAT were more likely to retain that relationship than younger people, who were more likely to move in together or find a new partner or both. The reasons for the situation of those interviewed show both the choices and the constraints. For many, single parenthood is a constraint to cohabit, while LAT is a choice for many seniors. Young people are far more likely to intend to cohabit than seniors, so LAT is a constraint for them. A great many situations are examined here, and not surprisingly, LAT turns out to be highly various and complex, depending on age, education, employment, and family situation. Surprisingly, differences between same-sex vs. opposite-sex couples are not examined in this or in other chapters, even theoretically. Nor is it explicitly discussed or explained, but one assumes from the context that only heterosexual couples are being discussed.

For the most part, the results are not surprising to any reader in the field. As with previous studies, levels of education, age and employment (or income) make important differences. Couples who argue, especially over finances, are more likely to separate. What is satisfying is how well the questions are asked and developed in the analysis, with a richness of detail that makes working through these data all worthwhile.

Furthermore, each of these ten chapters is fascinating in two ways. First, they either add to existing knowledge in the subject, often on a comparative basis with other country studies, or they open new avenues of exploring family life. For example, because of changed laws on birth control and abortion, achieving one’s intentions regarding fertility have stabilized quite considerably, adding to the many and illustrious studies on fertility intentions, family size, and timing in France. However, looking at the way in which women’s values are affected by their type of family and change over time opens new possibilities in the exploration of family life over the life course and even over generations.

Second, each chapter deals systematically with the methodological issues, such as effects on the data of attrition between the interviews (2005, 2008, and 2011), the limitations of the questions asked, with suggestions for improvement in subsequent studies, and with the presentation of statistical analyses.

This is quite beautiful work, and sets a standard for studies in these complex areas of life. It will be helpful not only to demographers but to any of the fields in which family life and generations are studied, including sociology, social-psychology, family therapy, and perhaps even to novelists.