

Gaëlle Meslay (gaelle.meslay@ined.fr)

PhD student in Sociology

Sorbonne University (Paris 4) & Institut national d'études démographiques (INED), Research group: "Demography, Gender, Societies"

Title: Same-sex marriages in France: Major differences between gay couples and lesbian couples

Population Association of America, April 10, 2019 – April 13, 2019, Austin

Session: Gender and Sexual Minority Families

Introduction:

After various countries had adopted registered partnerships as the first opportunity for same-sex couples to be recognized by law, the Netherlands legalized same-sex marriage in the early 2000s and it rapidly spread to other countries — especially in Europe, where the European Union leads in legislative uniformity (Digoix, 2008, p. 32). However, in the countries where it has been authorized, same-sex couples get married much less often than different-sex couples (Badgett, 2009), probably because gays and lesbians are more often ideologically opposed to marriage (Eskridge and Spedale, 2007) and less likely to have children (Badgett, 2009, pp. 46–47). In 2013, France allowed for the first time same-sex couples to marry, and in over five years since enacting the law (2013-2017)¹, 39 916 same-sex couples have married there. According to our estimates, there are between 100 000 and 150 000 same-sex couples in France (Algava and Hallépée, 2018 ; Buisson and Lapinte, 2013), meaning that approximately one-third of them got married². This rate is relatively high in comparison with other countries, such as in Scandinavia (Banens, 2017), and this is most likely due to practical as well as ideological reasons, given the French political and legal context. In terms of rights, the filiation between same-sex couples and their children require that they be married, including cases where one is the biological parent and the other adopts the child (adoption in France is restricted only to married people, which is not the case in other European countries). Furthermore, marriage is also required for receiving the survivor's pension (an important issue when getting older) and for obtaining residence rights when one partner is a foreigner. All these elements undoubtedly matter in the decisions of French couples.

So, who are the couples who decide to marry? Are female couples similar to male couples? When we compare them to different-sex married couples as well as to unmarried same-sex couples, some specific characteristics stand out and provide new aspects for sociological

¹ Currently, databases are available only for this period.

² We have no information concerning the proportion of divorces, but considering the fact there are a maximum of 26 divorces for 1000 marriages after 5 years of union among different-sex couples, it is probably marginal. Applying this rate to same-sex marriages would lead to 1057 divorces, which is probably overestimated because they are not similar to different-sex couples; in particular, an important part of them had been waiting a long time to marry.

research on couples and unions. I will use the databases on marriages provided by the French National Institute of Statistics. These statistics are exhaustive and, in particular, they provide information concerning all the couples who got married for each year³. Therefore, these data are highly important due to the fact that, as a minority group, same-sex couples are difficult to count (Festy, 2007). Afterwards, I will compare them to individual gays and lesbians in the Family and Housing Survey, a French survey associated with the 2011 census that covered 359 800 people aged eighteen and over. The two samples are not similar, especially because same-sex couples could not marry in 2011. In the survey, 1168 people said they lived with a same-sex partner, and I will analyze them as “unmarried” gays and lesbians, although they are not properly “unmarried couples”. However, these data are the best that we have. Parsing the two samples enables us to determine the profile of same-sex couples who are married, and it thereby sheds light on the factors influencing their choices in regard to the specificities of French legislation about marriage.

Same-sex couples: Older than different-sex couples, especially among gay men

To begin, married same-sex couples are older than different sex-couples, and this is particularly the case for gay couples: on average, they are 46 years old versus 41 years old for lesbian couples and 37 years old for heterosexual couples. For gays and lesbians, the ones who got married more recently were younger than those who married just after enactment of the law: the average age of men declined from 50 in 2013 to 44 in 2017, and that of women from 43 to 39. The first couples to get married had probably been waiting a long time for the opportunity, which can explain this significant decrease.

Table 1: Average age and distribution by age of married couples and cohabiting couples

	Married couples			Cohabiting couples ⁴		
	Same-sex couples		Different-sex couples	Same-sex couples (unmarried)		Different-sex couples
	Men	Women		Men	Women	
Average age (2013-2017) n =	45.9 42606	40.7 37226	36.5 2281442	42.5 548	42.4 620	50.0 231513
2013	49.8 8618	43.0 6120	35.9 462810			
2014	46.2 11344	41.4 9716	36.2 461908			
2015	44.4 8170	40.0 7332	36.4 457130			
2016	44.2 7344	39.8 6882	36.8 451224			
2017	44.4 7130	39.3 7176	37.1 448370			

³ Currently, data for 5 years of marriages are available.

⁴ The cohabiting couples can live together in a non-official relationship or in a civil partnership. Different-sex couples can also be married, but same-sex couples are necessarily unmarried, as they could not marry in 2011.

Age class (2013-2017) (%)						
18-24	2.4	3.9	7.4	6.9	8.4	3.4
25-34	18.6	32.1	47.4	20.4	21.7	16.2
35-44	26.1	31.3	23.8	37.0	30.4	21.0
45-54	28.6	19.1	12.8	20.0	21.9	20.4
55 +	24.4	13.8	8.7	15.8	17.8	39.1

Source: Databases on marriages (2013- 2017), INSEE / Family and Housing Survey (2011).

Field: Partners of the couples who got married in France between 2013 and 2017 / cohabiting couples in 2011.

Note for the reader: 29.5% of women who married women between 2013 and 2017 were between 25 and 34 years old.

Moreover, contrasting the age structures of cohabiting (“unmarried”) couples and married couples reveals an important gap between the two groups: there is an over-representation of “older” gay adults (more than 55 years old) among the married; whereas the 25-34-year-old lesbians are over-represented (Table 1). However, bearing in mind, first, that these are also considered to be appropriate ages for becoming parents (Bajos and Ferrand, 2006 ; Debest, 2014) and, second, that same-sex couples who live with children are mostly women (Buisson and Lapinte, 2013), marriage among lesbians would appear to be related to adoption.

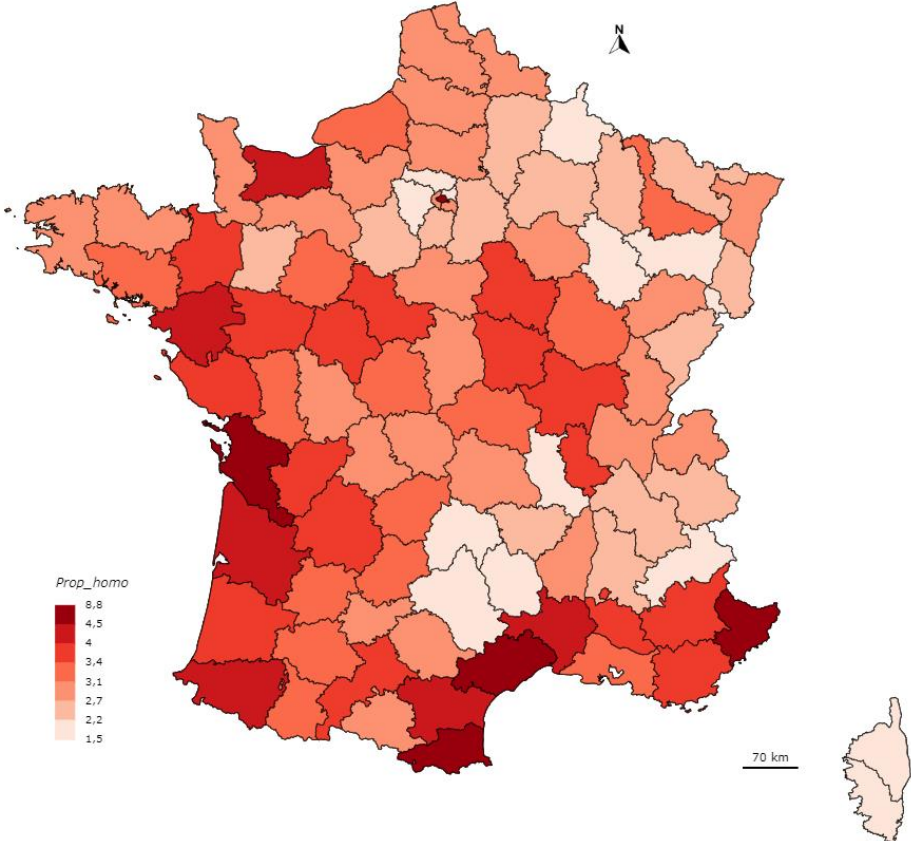
In contrast, aging matters above all for male couples who choose to marry, since they are exposed to higher risks such as accidents or illnesses. Issues concerning the protection of one’s partner — such as survivor’s pension, inheritance, or wealth management — could be more important for men than for women; and the juridical motives for marriage (adoption vs. protection) could be different between gays and lesbians due to their family configurations being different, namely in terms of having children. Heterosexual couples who got married are similar to lesbian couples in that they are over-represented among the 25-34-year-olds, and this is probably because — regardless of whether or not there is an adoption procedure — being a parent increases the chance of being married (Prioux, 2009).

The geographical specificity of gay couples

The marriage databases highlight certain gay specificities, such as these couples living much more than others in the Paris agglomeration: this is the case for 28% of them, versus 16% of female couples and 19% of different-sex couples. Different factors can explain this result, such as the known link between male homosexuality and geographic mobility. For example, the choice of “Ile-de-France” (the Parisian suburbs) is a much more prevalent destination in the internal migrations of gays than of lesbians (Rault, 2016); and this is in part because women with children generally remain in or return to close geographic proximity with their parents. Otherwise, relations to space appear to be gendered, such as a part of gay people report their preference for Paris as a consequence of their investment in sexuality and homosexual sociability (Giraud, 2014), whereas lesbian sociability is centered much more on private contexts (Ferzli, 2001). Compared to different-sex married couples, same-sex married couples

live more often in Paris; in the west and the south of the country and in some departments that include large agglomerations (Figure 1). We count 9 same-sex couples for every 100 marriages in Paris, and between 4 and 5 in Hérault, Alpes-Maritimes, Gironde and Loire-Atlantique (where Montpellier, Nice, Bordeaux and Nantes are located). This result agrees with observations made in other countries, namely that same-sex couples tend to live more often in certain departments (or states) that include large agglomerations (Black et al., 2000).

Figure 1: Proportion of same-sex marriages among all marriages (for every 100 marriages)

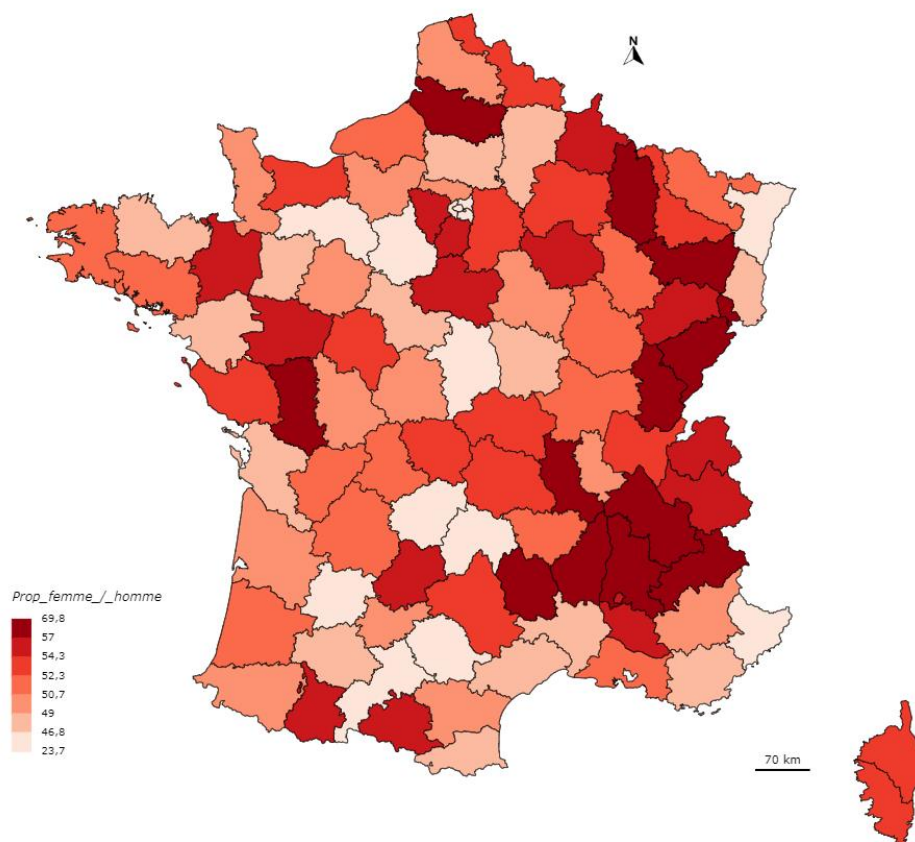


In a like manner, when we observe the proportion of marriages by department of residence, we can note that the distribution of female couples looks very similar to that of different sex couples — even if they are a little more present in some departments that include large agglomerations (Gironde, Alpes-Maritimes, Hérault, Loire-Atlantique). More specifically, if we compare the distribution of lesbian couples to that of gay couples by department, they more often live in the east and less often in departments that include large agglomerations (for example, Bas-Rhin, Alpes-Maritimes, Haute-Garonne and Hérault count only 38 to 47% of women among same-sex unions) (Figure 2). In Paris, women are in an extreme minority, as only 24% of same-sex married couples living there are lesbian. They are also less numerous than gays in the immediate suburbs of Paris, but their proportion increases in the farthest suburbs. Apart from the explanation of geographic mobility, these differences must also reflect gendered income inequalities, because a notable gap of 23.7% in annual remuneration exists to the disadvantage of women (Chamkhi and Toutlemonde, 2015). Residential possibilities are certainly lower for lesbians, which can explain that they choose “distant” departments, which are cheaper than

Paris and its bordering area. This is probably even more the case for them, since they frequently live with children and also because the proportion of families is significantly higher in the distant suburbs than in Paris (also because of economic issues) (Atelier parisien d'urbanisme, 2010).

On this subject, there is probably an age effect such as gays living in south departments are also older than others are (Non-presented figures). Nevertheless, some statistically significant differences in the geographic distribution of gays, lesbians and heterosexual couples persist after a control by age, in particular for Paris (Non-presented multinomial regressions).

Figure 2: Proportion of female marriages among all same-sex marriages (for 100 marriages)



Conclusion:

To conclude, the databases on marriages provided by the National Institute of Statistics are exhaustive. Thus, we are provided with excellent new data on a minority population that, for many reasons, is otherwise difficult to count. It shows:

- Major differences in the geographic distribution of male and female couples: gay couples live much more in Paris and some other departments that include large agglomerations.
- Gay couples are older, whereas lesbian couples who get married are overrepresented among those aged 24-35.

Therefore, this probably reflects variations in the use of marriage between the two groups, which among lesbians may be linked more to motives of adoption. These results also call for more comparative studies on this subject, namely that wide differences in the juridical contexts of marriage and filiation could truly affect the choices of couples – specifically because of the many variations existing among countries.

Lastly, the databases also indicate that lesbian couples are more “homogamous” than gay couples: they are less likely to be binational and they have lower age differences. This is probably a consequence of the fact that they are less likely to meet in public spaces, and more likely to start a relationship by meeting in “private spaces” where members are selected. These results also connect with the social homogamy in lesbian couples already pointed by some research studies in other countries (Kurdek and Schmitt, 1987).

Bibliography

ALGAVA Elisabeth, **HALLEPEE** Sébastien, 2018, “Estimer les effectifs de couples de personnes de même sexe au recensement : expérimentation d’une solution de validation du sexe par le prénom”, Documents de travail, F1807, Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques.

ATELIER PARISIEN D’URBANISME, 2010, “Analyse des données statistiques sur les familles parisiennes”, Paris.

BADGETT M. V. Lee, 2009, *When Gay People Get Married. What Happens When Societies Legalize Same-Sex Marriage*, New York University Press, 307 p.

BAJOS Nathalie, **FERRAND** Michèle, 2006, “L’interruption volontaire de grossesse et la recomposition de la norme procréative”, *Sociétés contemporaines*, 61(1), p. 91.

BANENS Maks, 2017, “Dix ans de partenariats de même sexe”, *Newsletter Démos*, 1, pp. 1–19.

BLACK Dan, **GATES** Gary, **SANDERS** Seth, **TAYLOR** Lowell, 2000, “Demographics of the gay and lesbian population in the United States: Evidence from available systematic data sources”, *Demography*, 37(2), pp. 139–154.

BUISSON Guillemette, **LAPINTE** Aude, 2013, “Le couple dans tous ses états. Non-cohabitation, conjoints de même sexe, Pacs...”, *Insee Première*, 1435.

CHAMKHI Amine, **TOUTLEMONDE** Fabien, 2015, “Ségrégation professionnelle et écarts de salaires femmes-hommes”, *Dares Analyses*, 82.

DEBEST Charlotte, 2014, *Le choix d’une vie sans enfant*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes, Le Sens social, 216 p.

DIGOIX Marie, 2008, “Scandinavie. Le concept nordique d’égalité entre différenciation et universalisme”, in **Descoutures** Virginie, **Digoix** Marie, **Fassin** Éric, **Rault** Wilfried (eds.), *Mariages et homosexualités dans le monde : L’arrangement des normes familiales*, Paris, Editions Autrement, Mutations, pp. 18–33.

ESKRIDGE William N., **SPEDALE** Darren R., 2007, *Gay Marriage: for Better or for Worse? What We’ve Learned from the Evidence*, 1 edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 352 p.

FERZLI Raphaële, 2001, “Couples au féminin : aspects du quotidien”, *Cahiers du Genre*, 30(1), pp. 147–178.

FESTY Patrick, 2007, “Enumerating same-sex couples in censuses and population registers”, *Demographic Research*, 17(12), pp. 339–368.

GIRAUD Colin, 2014, *Quartiers gays*, Paris, PUF, Le Lien Social, 348 p.

KURDEK Lawrence A., **SCHMITT** J. Patrick, 1987, “Partner homogamy in married, heterosexual cohabiting, gay, and lesbian couples”, *Journal of Sex Research*, 23(2), pp. 212–232.

PRIOX France, 2009, “Les couples non mariés en 2005 : quelles différences avec les couples mariés ?”, *Politiques sociales et familiales*, 96(1), pp. 87–95.

RAULT Wilfried, 2016, “Les mobilités sociales et géographiques des gays et des lesbiennes”, *Sociologie*, 7(4), pp. 337–360.