

# Family life

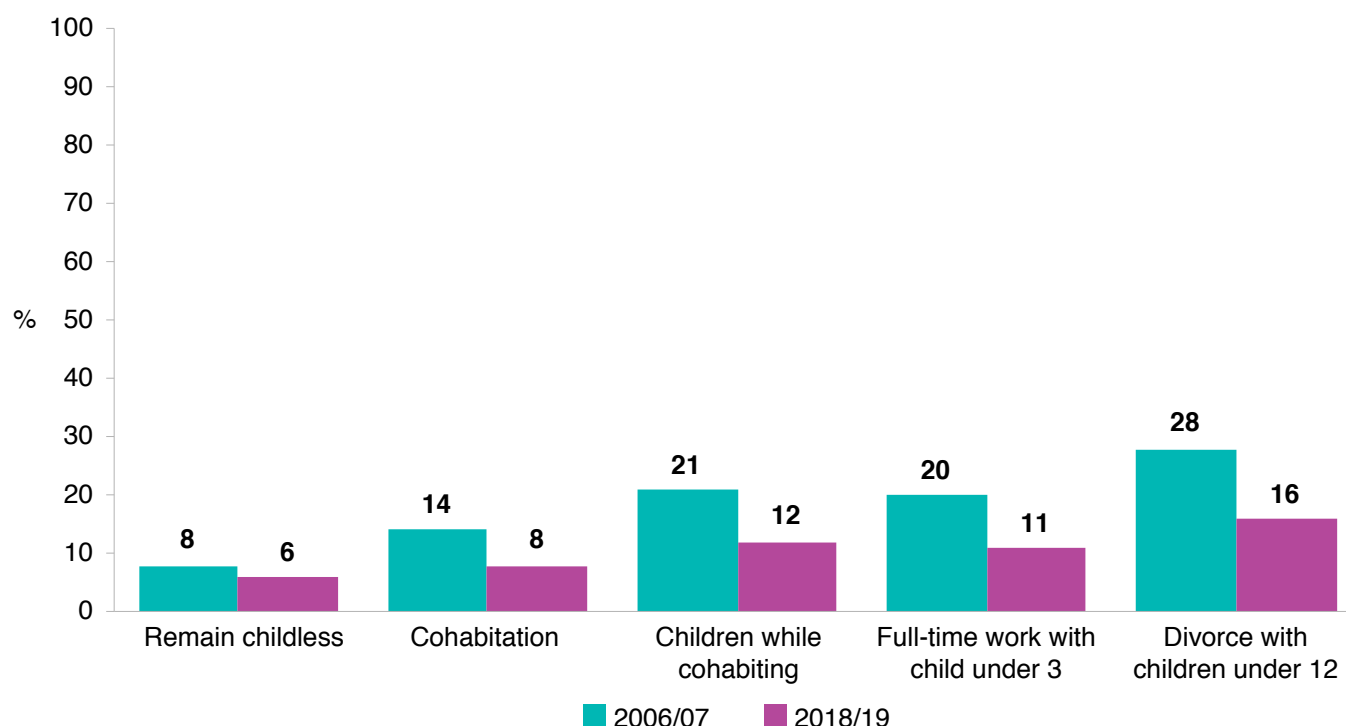
## Attitudes to non-traditional family behaviours

This chapter examines changing attitudes to social norms related to five aspects of family life, including choosing to remain childless, cohabitation without marriage, children born outside of marriage, full-time work with young children, and divorce with children. Using data from the European Social Survey (ESS) we look at changes in UK attitudes between 2006/7 and 2018/19. We also consider comparisons between the UK and a set of European countries.

### Spotlight

Attitudes in the UK have become more liberal between 2006/07 and 2018/19 towards all five family behaviours. In terms of the level of disapproval, the rank order of the norms remains unchanged, with respondents in both years most likely to disapprove of divorce with children aged under 12, and least likely to disapprove of choosing never to have children. Levels of disapproval fell in more or less equal proportions across the behaviours.

**Proportion who disapprove of each non-traditional family behaviour, 2006/07 and 2018/19**



## Overview

---

### Changing attitudes to family behaviour

**Attitudes in the UK have become more liberal between 2006/07 and 2018/19 towards all five of the family behaviours we asked about.**

- Between 2006/07 and 2018/19, the proportion disapproving fell for remaining childless from 8% to 6%, for having children while cohabiting from 21% to 12%, and for divorcing while a child was younger than 12 from 28% to 16%.
  - In both years people were most likely to disapprove of divorce with children aged under 12, and least likely to disapprove of choosing never to have children.
  - Alongside the continuing declines in disapproval, there have been substantial decreases in the proportion who neither approve nor disapprove, resulting in increases of more than 20 percentage points in those approving of childlessness, cohabitation (in general and with a child) and divorcing while a child is under 12.
- 

### Generations and social norms

**Changes in attitudes to non-traditional family behaviours can operate through the changing composition of the population over time.**

- The passing of the generation born before 1928 has contributed to the overall decline in disapproval.
  - Disapproval of divorce with children under 12, and of working full-time with young children, has fallen between 2006/07 and 2018/19 among every birth cohort in the sample.
- 

### Comparisons between the UK and Europe

**In the UK and across a range of European countries, the direction of travel is towards a less prescriptive, more laissez-faire attitude among the public towards fertility and family choices by both men and women.**

- Disapproval of childlessness, cohabitation and having children outside marriage has fallen sharply in every country represented in the data.
  - Countries in eastern Europe remain more disapproving of these behaviours than elsewhere.
  - Disapproval of working full-time with young children is lower overall and less differentiated between countries.
  - The UK has a similar attitudinal profile on these questions to Nordic countries and the Netherlands.
-

## Authors

### Eric Harrison

Senior Lecturer in Quantitative Sociology at City, University of London, and Deputy Director of the European Social Survey

## Introduction

This chapter examines changing attitudes to social norms related to a number of aspects of family life, including choosing to remain childless, cohabitation without marriage, children born outside of marriage, full-time work with young children, and divorce with children. First, it discusses the concept of social norms and their role within debates about society and politics. Second, it describes the dataset on which the chapter is based, namely the European Social Survey (ESS), the ‘timing of life’ module that has been fielded twice on the ESS twelve years apart (on ESS round 3 in 2006/7, and on ESS round 9 in 2018/19), and the specific items upon which the analysis is performed. Third, it presents findings on family norms in the UK and comparisons with a set of European countries. A short fourth section concludes.

## Social norms and the ‘Family’

Social norms are the sets of values, behaviours and unwritten rules that govern behaviour in groups and societies. They are regarded as representations of acceptable behaviour. Social norms have had an important place in sociology since the nineteenth century, and in social life for far longer. Durkheim (1893) argued that such norms were crucial to maintaining social cohesion in the urban and industrial societies that were emerging at the time. In order to prevail, these norms required either widespread consensual support, or a system of sanctions for those who did not conform. In traditional societies the Church often took on the role as enforcer of social norms; in modern, more secular societies, this role is associated more with the legal system and bureaucracy acting on behalf of the state. At more micro-levels of society, most local communities and voluntary associations use social norms to maintain their cohesion. In fact it is difficult to think of any ‘in-group’ that does not have stated social norms which it enforces.

For as long as there have been social norms there has probably been concern about their erosion or total breakdown. The sociology of deviance is a catalogue of ‘dangerous’ out groups (young people, any number of sub-cultures, and latterly migrants) that are thought to have threatened the cohesion of society. A different sort of threat, and the one that is the subject of this chapter, has been a perceived decline in standards of personal morality, manifested in the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family and behavioural norms associated with it. These concerns go back at least as far as the ‘permissive society’ of the 1960s and reached their apogee in the 1990s with the short-lived and ill-fated ‘Back to Basics’ slogan of the then Conservative government.

In sociological terms, the weakening of many of these traditional moral, lifestyle and life-course norms stems from the secularisation that was ushered in by a century of industrialisation and urbanisation. These economic processes also transformed the meaning and role of

the family as an economic unit. The norms around family and fertility are very divisive. Those of a liberal inclination praise the new freedom of individuals (mostly female) to make their own choices about life events such as childbearing and childrearing, not to mention the more diverse range of family models on offer beyond the traditional two-parent model that was dominant until the 1960s. On the other hand, many social conservatives hold the ‘breakdown of the family’ to be at the heart of a range of social ills, ranging from low educational attainment of children in one-parent families to criminality among young men growing up without male role models. The expansion of female labour force participation, and the accompanying increase in the number of dual-worker households, are also criticised by conservative commentators for undermining traditional gender roles and family stability.

It is worth remembering that each of the five norms that are discussed in this chapter (childlessness, cohabitation without marriage, children born outside of marriage, full-time work with young children, and divorce with children) were, until relatively recently, strongly policed and their transgression involved considerable (frequently gendered) stigma. Women who remained childless attracted the uncomplimentary epithet ‘spinster’. Those who chose to cohabit might be described as ‘living over the brush’, or ‘living in sin’. Children born out of wedlock were labelled as ‘illegitimate’ (or worse) and their families would go to considerable lengths to mitigate or conceal this fact – the ‘shotgun wedding’ is an allusion to such mitigations – and it was not unknown for single women to give a baby up for adoption, or exceptionally to allow the child to be raised by another relative. As late as the 1980s, children with working parents who returned from school to an empty house might still be referred to as ‘latch-key kids’. Finally, the phrases ‘staying together for the children’ and ‘coming from a broken home’ give some indication of the prevailing attitudes to divorce and its effects on children.

Attitudes to these issues have steadily ‘loosened’ since the 1980s. A review of the British Social Attitudes data in the thirty years after 1983 concluded that there was an increasing sense of ‘live and let live’ when it comes to our views on other people’s relationships and lifestyles. It noted that “generational trends make it likely that this shift...will continue, although it is important to recognise that events can upset even seemingly long-term and deep-rooted shifts in opinion” (Park et al., 2013:19). The 2010s have been marked by the rise of populist political movements, many of which hold socially conservative views and promote adherence to more traditional values. The decision of the UK to leave the European Union in 2016 reversed a forty-year trend towards greater integration with the continent. Events can have an impact on seemingly inexorable trends.

At the same time, many of the once stigmatised behaviours outlined above are now far more common than they once were. In the UK, between 2008 and 2018 the number of cohabiting couple families increased from 2.7 to 3.4 million (representing about 18% of all

families). Lone parent families account for 2.9 million of all families (15%). Between 1996 and 2017 the proportion of dependent children living in cohabitating households rose from 7% to 15% (ONS, 2017, 2018). Slightly more than a fifth live in lone-parent families, though the proportion has changed little in the last two decades. Of course, the fact that a phenomenon is widespread is not in itself a sign of moral approval, but the greater visibility it has in public life and the more common it becomes as a personal experience, the more it becomes a *de facto* norm.

The importance of social norms around family life for key life-course decisions (and the potential reproduction or disruption of the norms) has been noted in the relevant literature (Liefbroer et al., 2010), as has the gendered nature of patterns of disapproval in relation to childlessness, of working full-time while having children, and of the family life course in general (Rijken and Merz, 2014). These papers all emphasise the presence of the ‘gendered double standard’, in other words that there is a difference in society’s views towards the behaviour of men and women. This implies a residual traditionalism in respect of gender roles within the broader liberalising trend.

Given that attitudinal changes to social norms were already evident at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and that the prevalence of those norms has continued to erode in the last two decades, the rest of this chapter addresses four questions. First, has the slow tide of liberalisation continued in relation to attitudes to personal morality and lifestyles? Second, are there any differences between specific types of behaviour or are they all subject to an increase in generalised social tolerance? Third, have gendered double standards faded or do they persist? Fourth, is there continued evidence of a ‘generational effect’ or are attitudes changing throughout the population?

## The data

The data on which the analysis is based is drawn from two rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS). First conceived in the mid-1990s, the ESS is a cross-sectional cross-national general social survey, carried out every two years in a large number of countries – 38 have participated in at least one round and 14 have done so in every round since its inception in 2002.<sup>1</sup>

Round 3 of the European Social Survey included a module on ‘The Timing of Life: The Organisation of the Life Course in Europe’. In Round 9 a subset of the original module was fielded again (for a full description of the module’s aims and content see European Social Survey, 2018).

<sup>1</sup> Unlike the BSA series which draws a representative sample of those aged 18 years and over, the ESS draws a representative sample of the population aged 15 and over in each participating country. This chapter reports on data from the UK (including Northern Ireland which is not included in BSA), as well as other ESS countries. Fieldwork for ESS Round 3 was carried out in 2006/2007, and for Round 9 in 2018/2019.

The concept of norms about family behaviour was measured by a set of five items. These were asked as follows:

*How much do you approve or disapprove if a woman/man...*

*...chooses never to have children?*

*...lives with a partner without being married?*

*...has a child with a partner she/he lives with but is not married to?*

*...has a full-time job while she/he has children aged under 3?*

*...gets divorced while she/he has children aged under 12?*

Respondents could answer on a 5-point scale ranging from 'strongly approve' to 'strongly disapprove'. Half the sample was randomly assigned to be asked the questions with references to a woman, and half to a man.

## Changing attitudes to family behaviour in the UK

### Norm by norm analysis

While the five items can be thought of as measuring an underlying concept (norms about family behaviour) we would still expect some variation between the items. Harrison and Fitzgerald (2010) found this to varying degrees in relation to 2006/07 data for eleven countries. Table 1 summarises the responses to each of the five items.

			<b>Disapprove or Strongly disapprove</b>	<b>Neither approve nor disapprove</b>	<b>Approve or Strongly approve</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
Remain childless	2006/07	%	8	70	22	2394
	2018/19	%	6	53	41	2204
Cohabitation	2006/07	%	14	60	26	2394
	2018/19	%	8	47	44	2204
Children while cohabiting	2006/07	%	21	57	22	2394
	2018/19	%	12	46	43	2204
Full-time work with child under 3	2006/07	%	20	42	37	2394
	2018/19	%	11	37	52	2204
Divorce with children under 12	2006/07	%	28	60	13	2394
	2018/19	%	16	54	30	2204

Source: European Social Survey rounds 3 (2006/07) and 9 (2018/19), respondents aged 15+ in the UK

Table 1 shows that attitudes have become more liberal between 2006/07 and 2018/19 towards all five norms. For example, between 2006/07 and 2018/19, the proportion disapproving fell for remaining childless (from 8% to 6%), for having children while cohabiting (from 21% to 12%), and for divorcing while a child was younger than 12 (from 28% to 16%). Regarding the level of disapproval, the rank order of the norms remains unchanged, with respondents in both years most likely to disapprove of divorce with children aged under 12, and least likely to disapprove of choosing never to have children. Levels of disapproval fell in more or less equal proportions across the behaviours.

In 2006/07 the proportion of respondents with a neutral position (neither approving nor disapproving) was very high – above half of the responses, except for the question about combining full-time work with caring for a child under three years old. This question exhibited the greatest degree of polarisation, with 20% disapproving, 37% approving and 42% neutral. On each of the first four items, the level of approval exceeded the level of disapproval. The exception was the question of divorce, where those who disapproved outnumbered those who approved by more than two to one.

What has changed in the intervening twelve years is that alongside the continuing declines in disapproval, there have been substantial decreases in the ‘neutral’ category, resulting in increases of more than 20 percentage points in those approving of childlessness, cohabitation (in general and with a child) and divorcing while a child is under 12. In the case of working full-time with a child under 3, what was already the largest level of approval has now become a majority (52%). It is difficult to interpret the declining proportions in the middle category. One intriguing idea is that it marks a shift in attitude from one of basic ‘tolerance’, a sort of studied indifference, to an active acknowledgement of such behaviours as appropriate and desirable choices for those individuals who make them.

## Indexes of disapproval and approval

It is useful to make a distinction between the recognition of a norm in the sense of an established (if not necessarily ideal) model for behaviour, and the social judgement passed upon the breaking of that norm. There is some distance between a society that tolerates pluralism and divergence from established norms, and one where multiple life course choices and behaviours are not only accepted, but encouraged, sometimes celebrated, and perceived as being equally valid, both legally and ‘morally’. We begin this section by getting a feel for the intensity of disapproval for those who transgress norms of family life, using a social disapproval index. However, a better measure of the trajectory to full social liberalism may not be the absence of disapproval, but the presence of approval. Therefore, we go on to consider also a social approval index.

The social disapproval index was constructed by coding respondents as ‘1’ if they report ‘disapproving’ or ‘strongly disapproving’ of a norm being broken. Other values are coded to 0. This produces a range of possible values for the index from 0 (disapprove of none) to 5 (disapprove of all).<sup>2</sup> The resulting scores are shown in Table 2. In 2006/07 around half the sample did not express disapproval for any of the five behaviours. In 2018/19 this has increased to around seven in ten. In 2006/07, only 12% were consistent disapprovers, taking a negative view of three or more of the five. In 2018/19 this has decreased to 7%. In both 2006/07 and 2018/19 only 1% of the sample disapproved of all five.

**Table 2 Number of non-traditional family behaviours disapproved of, 2006/07 and 2018/19**

<b>Disapprove or Strongly disapprove</b>		<b>None</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>All</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
2006/07	%	51	24	13	7	4	1	2394
2018/19	%	71	16	6	4	2	1	2204

Source: European Social Survey rounds 3 (2006/07) and 9 (2018/19), respondents aged 15+ in the UK

Given this overwhelming absence of public censure, it is tempting to announce the death of social norms in relation to fertility and the family, although it might be premature to suggest that ‘anything goes’. Table 3 shows the opposite set of responses, in an index of social approval, where those answering ‘approve’ or ‘strongly approve’ score 1 on each item.

**Table 3 Number of non-traditional family behaviours approved of, 2006/07 and 2018/19**

<b>Approve or Strongly approve</b>		<b>None</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>All</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
2006/07	%	47	23	9	9	7	5	2394
2018/19	%	34	16	8	10	14	19	2204

Source: European Social Survey rounds 3 (2006/07) and 9 (2018/19), respondents aged 15+ in the UK

Two salient features emerge from Table 3. The first is the reminder that there is some distance between not disapproving and actively approving. In 2006/07, while it was the case that half the sample

<sup>2</sup> The following analysis makes use of both a disapproval and an approval index, so it is useful to establish the degree to which the five items do measure the same underlying concept, using an exploratory factor analysis. The results showed that they did indeed form a single factor, explaining 48% of the variance, based on the 2006 UK data. For the 2018 data this increased to 63%. In terms of the correlations between the items, the first three relating to childlessness, cohabitation and raising a child in a cohabiting relationship, had the strongest inter-correlations, and had more explanatory power on their own than with the other two items. However, the five items cohere sufficiently by conventional statistical criteria to be considered as representing a single factor.

disapproved of none of the five items, around half did not approve of any either. Around a quarter only approved of one out of five. Around one in ten respondents approved of four, or all, of the five. The second notable finding is the extent to which this has changed in the intervening 12 years. Respondents are now distributed much more evenly across the scale. A third still approve of none of the items, but the proportion of 'strong social liberals' who approve of four or five of the items is now also approaching a third, a close to threefold increase on the share of the 2006/07 sample. Around a fifth of respondents now approve of all five behaviours.

When placed together, these two indexes show that, since 2006/07, there has been movement at both ends of the attitude spectrum. Outright disapproval has declined; there is a large increase in strong social liberalism; the proportion of 'qualified approvers' (who approve of two or three of the items) has stayed constant.

## The gendered double standard

One of the distinctive features of the 'timing of life' module is the 'split ballot' design, in which respondents are randomly assigned sets of questions which relate to either women or men. Harrison and Fitzgerald (2010) showed that in eleven countries there was a massive disparity between disapproval of women and men when it came to working full-time with a young child (with people more likely to disapprove of a woman working with a young child), and a more modest gap between disapproval of men, as against women, in relation to the divorce item in ten of the eleven countries, with people being more likely disapprove of a man with a child divorcing, than when asked about a woman.

Table 4 re-examines the gendered nature of family norms by comparing the two datasets. The data show the persistence of the gendered double standard in relation to full-time work and divorce, but at lower 'absolute' levels of disapproval. In relation to the first three norms – childlessness, cohabiting and having children while cohabiting – disapproval has fallen with reference to both men's and women's behaviour. In both 2006/07 and 2018/19 the small differences in disapproval when asked about men and women for these items are not significant.

What are significant changes are those pertaining to working full-time with a small child. With the continued expansion of female labour-force participation, albeit within the context of incomplete and often expensive childcare provision, disapproval for this pattern of working motherhood has halved in a little more than a decade, while attitudes to working fatherhood have not shifted outside the margin of error (although disapproval was already at a very low rate). Reactions to this are likely to be ambivalent. On the one hand, this is a major closing of the gap in attitudes – itself a form of social prejudice – towards the norms appropriate for women and men in a relatively short period. On the other hand, four times as many respondents are

critical of the idea of a woman with young children doing a full-time job than a man in a comparable situation. In a previous analysis of eleven ESS countries, Harrison and Fitzgerald (2010) observed ‘The issue of maternal employment and child-rearing may be one domain where social attitudes will not get any more liberal; alternatively this may be the next stage of social liberalisation waiting to happen’ (2010:152). Revisiting this a decade on, there has certainly been a substantial degree of movement on this particular norm, although attitudes are still some way off the parity we see in respect of other measures. Disapproval of divorce has also fallen markedly, but the difference in attitudes to women and men getting divorced when children are very young has not. There is still a 10 percentage-point difference, with more disapproval towards men.

**Table 4 % disapproving of life-course behaviours, by sex asked about, 2006/07 and 2018/19**

% Disapprove or Strongly disapprove	Asked about women		Asked about men	
	2006/07	2018/19	2006/07	2018/19
Childless	8	4	8	7
Cohabiting	14	8	14	10
Children in Cohabitation	21	10	20	13
Full-time work child under 3	37	17	3	4
Divorce when children under 12	23	12	32	22
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1213</i>	<i>1143</i>	<i>1175</i>	<i>1043</i>

*Source: European Social Survey rounds 3 (2006/07) and 9 (2018/19), respondents aged 15+ in the UK*

## The motor of change: generations and social norms

Accounting for long-term shifts in social norms and attitudes to them is a challenging task. Unlike political revolutions, social revolutions tend to grind fine but slowly. In relation to family norms, there are many potential drivers of change at the individual level – for example, an individual’s religious beliefs, marital status, and educational level can influence their attitudes. At the aggregate, societal level, changes in religious traditions, socio-economic circumstances, and legal underpinnings can also influence changing norms. At the same time, the portrayal of such norms in popular culture may also lead to changes in attitudes.

Age is another important factor in relation to interpreting any set of norms regarded as ‘traditional’. Older people might be thought to be more likely to support traditional norms, but attitudes of different age groups may also change over time as social norms shift. One approach to analysing social change is to use the theory of generations (Mannheim, 1923). The basis for measurement is not the location of the individual in some notional stage of their life, but their

membership of a group of people all born at roughly the same time, whose formative experiences have taken place during a particular period. These experiences are arguably responsible for shaping many attitudes and beliefs which they continue to hold throughout their lives. One of the reasons social change is often so gradual is that it operates not through such individuals reappraising their values and attitudes, but by the changing composition of the population over time. This mechanism of ‘generational replacement’ (Abramson and Inglehart 1992) is summed up in the old aphorism ‘people never change their minds, they just die’.

Table 5 presents a summary of attitudes to each of the five norms split not by age, but by birth year, as recorded in the survey. It follows the commonly-used conventions in relation to cut points (see for example Pew Research Centre 2015 and 2019). The birth years used, and the titles they are commonly given, are as follows:

- Born 1901-1927 – the Greatest Generation
- Born 1928-1945 – the Silent Generation
- Born 1946-1964 – the Baby Boomers
- Born 1965-1980 – Generation X
- Born 1981-1996 – Millennials
- Born 1997-2012 – Generation Z

Arbitrary those these are, it allows us to compare results against other empirical and theoretical work in the field of generational change.

Those born between 1901 and 1927, often dubbed ‘The Greatest Generation’, reached adulthood any time from the end of World War One to the end of World War Two. At the time of the 2006/07 survey, the youngest respondent would have been 79 years old. By the time of the 2018/19 fieldwork period, the lower limit for this group would have been 91. No respondents of that age are recorded in the UK data. This is the starkest example of a cohort effect. The high levels of disapproval on the four items relating to cohabitation, children born outside of marriage, working and divorcing parents reflect an upbringing and education that is now beyond the memory of the living. The demise of this generation (albeit they formed only around 5% of the weighted sample in 2006/07) is a partial explanation for the overall shift in attitudes.

**Table 5 % disapproving of life-course behaviours, by birth cohorts, 2006/07 and 2018/19**

			1901- 1927	1928- 1945	1946- 1964	1965- 1980	1981- 1996	1997- 2012
Childless	2006/07	%	16	9	4	8	10	n/a
	2018/19	%	-	7	5	6	5	6
Cohabiting	2006/07	%	43	21	10	10	13	n/a
	2018/19	%	-	21	7	10	5	6
Child while cohabiting	2006/07	%	50	33	18	14	13	n/a
	2018/19	%	-	30	10	10	8	7
Full-time work with child under 3	2006/07	%	39	34	16	16	16	n/a
	2018/19	%	-	21	13	9	7	9
Divorce with children under 12	2006/07	%	53	41	20	23	24	n/a
	2018/19	%	-	30	18	16	11	17
Unweighted base	2006/07		184	555	732	628	288	n/a
	2018/19		-	334	749	541	475	89

Source: European Social Survey rounds 3 (2006/07) and 9 (2018/19), respondents aged 15+ in the UK

n/a = not eligible in that round

Those born between 1928 and 1945 (the ‘Silent Generation’) are represented in both samples. Aged between 61 and 78 in 2006/07 and in the later survey between 73 and 90, this cohort did not move significantly in its attitudes to childlessness, cohabiting or children born outside marriage. However, there was a drop of around 10 percentage points in those disapproving of working and divorcing parents, although they remained the most disapproving generation in the survey. The most well-known of generations, the ‘baby boomers’ (born 1946-64) did not significantly change their attitudes to family norms over the period 2006/07-18/19 with the exception of children born outside marriage, where there was an 8 percentage-point decline in those disapproving.

The following generation born between 1965 and 1980 (‘Generation X’) changed little in their disapproval of remaining childless or cohabiting (where levels were already low). However, the proportion disapproving of having children outside marriage fell by 4 percentage points, working parents by 7 points, and divorcing with young children 7 points. The Millennial generation (sometimes called ‘Generation Y’) plays an important part in the overall pattern of societal attitudes. Born between 1981 and 1996, they are given that name because they all became adults after 2000. During the first data collection point in 2006/07, only those born before 1992 would have been eligible for inclusion in the sample, with the remainder of the cohort being included in the 2018/19 round. This may partially explain the quite dramatic falls in disapproval between the two surveys; the

proportion of this group expressing disapproval dropped by more than half with regard to every norm, with the exception of children born outside marriage, where it fell by a third.

Finally, in 2018/19, the Greatest Generation was replaced by the older part of the cohort born since 1997, with all those born before 2004 eligible for inclusion (and comprising about 8% of the sample in 2018). Their levels of disapproval are low by comparison with previous generations, all being in single figure percentages, with the exception of divorcing while children are under 12, where about one sixth of the cohort disapproved of this behaviour.

The main points of this analysis overall are as follows. First, the disappearance of the more socially conservative Greatest Generation (1901-1927) between the two surveys has some effect on the overall proportions, although they already represented a small fraction of the sample. Second, the Silent Generation (1928-1945) represent a declining share of the sample between data points (down from more than a quarter to less than a sixth), and this also contributes to the overall changes. Third, there is a marked difference between the five questions asked. For the first three (childlessness, cohabiting, and children outside marriage) the attitudes within each generation have remained broadly consistent, though younger cohorts have become more positive towards cohabitation. When it comes to combining full-time work with childcare and divorcing when children are very young, there has been a decline in disapproval in every cohort, even those born before the end of World War Two. In other words, while generational replacement largely accounts for the modest changes in respect of childlessness and cohabitation, the other norms have been subject to both a 'cohort' and 'period effect', in that respondents in every age band have become more accepting.

## The UK in a European context

The primary focus of this chapter has been on changing attitudes to norms of family behaviour in the United Kingdom. The comparisons have been over time rather than across countries. However, the European Social Survey contains data from a set of countries that have taken part in both of the rounds that fielded the module on the 'timing of life' and this makes it possible to compare the UK with other countries. This set of countries is geographically representative of Europe, as well as providing variation in historical experience and economic wealth. We consider next whether the UK is relatively socially liberal or conservative in both the level of disapproval and the change since 2006/07, compared with these other European countries.

Data for twelve countries are presented: the UK, France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, Poland, Slovakia and Bulgaria.

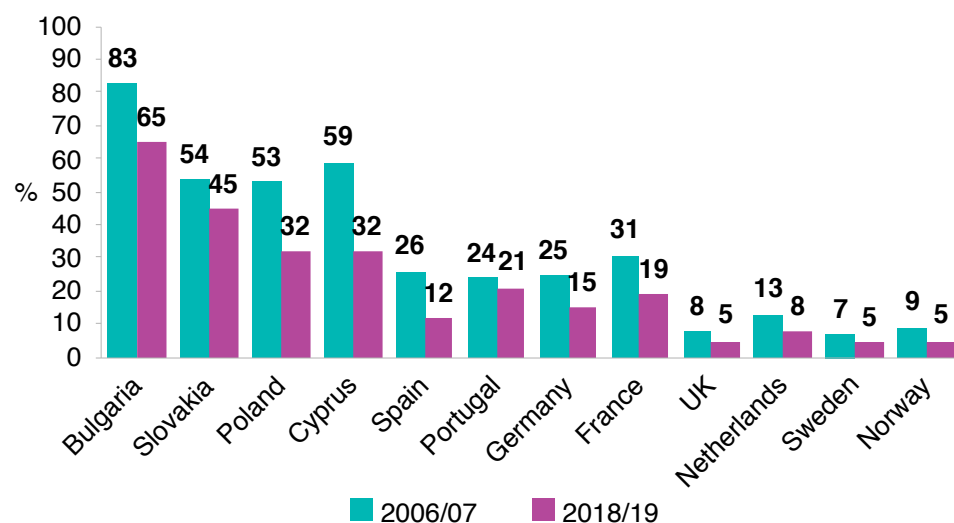
The following charts (Figures 1-5) show the proportions of respondents expressing disapproval of each of the family behaviours

in both years. The countries are displayed from left to right, in broadly the order in which we would expect them to align in terms of being socially conservative or liberal (from more conservative on the left to more liberal on the right), given their scores on other attitudinal variables in ESS. First are the eastern European former Communist countries (Bulgaria, Slovakia and Poland), next the Mediterranean countries (Cyprus, Spain, Portugal), followed by the western European countries (Germany, France, UK and the Netherlands), and finally the Nordic countries (Sweden and Norway).

Regarding their gross domestic product (GDP), the post-communist countries have the lowest levels, followed by the Mediterranean countries, then all (bar one) of the western European countries with the Nordic countries at the top. The Netherlands is the exception, with a GDP higher than the Nordic countries. In terms of religiosity, the Mediterranean and former Communist countries clearly have the highest levels. They are also predominantly Catholic. Lower levels of religiosity are found in the Nordic and western European groupings where Protestantism is generally, although by no means always, prevalent. In terms of the proportion of working women the differences between countries are perhaps a little less clear-cut, but the pattern is still broadly the same, with the lowest levels in the post-communist countries and the highest levels in the Nordic countries.

Figure 1 shows the proportions in each country disapproving of a person choosing to remain childless. This figure contains the largest range of values of any of the five items, with more than four-fifths of respondents in Bulgaria disapproving of the decision to remain childless in 2006/07. Disapproval is lowest in the Nordic countries (5% each in Sweden and Norway in 2018). The UK is similar to the Nordic countries in its outlook, with about a third the level of disapproval (5% in 2018/19) of its immediate neighbours France (19%) and Germany (15%).

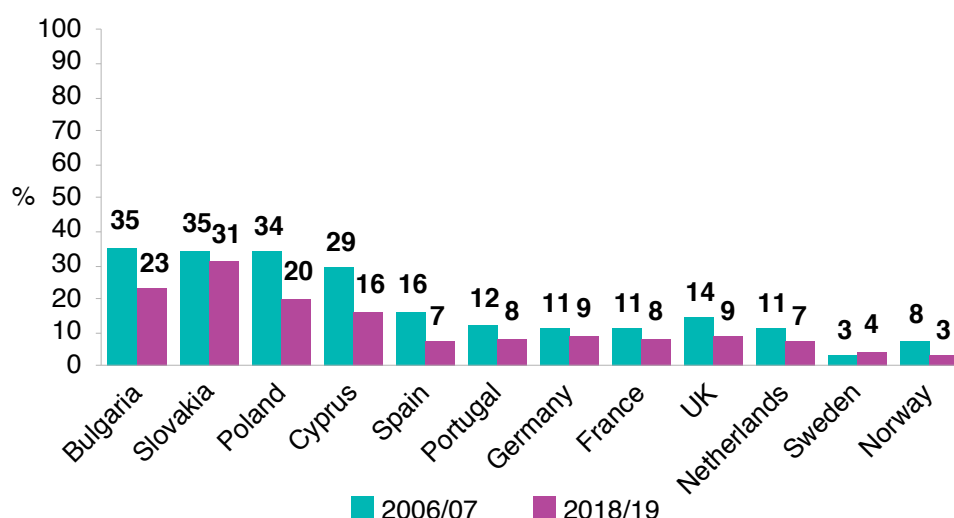
**Figure 1 % disapproving of remaining childless, by country, 2006/07 and 2018/19**



The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in Appendix table A.1 of this chapter

Figure 2 shows the proportions disapproving of cohabitation in each country. This shows a similar pattern, with levels of disapproval of cohabitation falling across the period. Absolute values of disapproval are lower for cohabitation than for remaining childless and, except for the post-Communist countries and Cyprus, there is a broad similarity between countries.

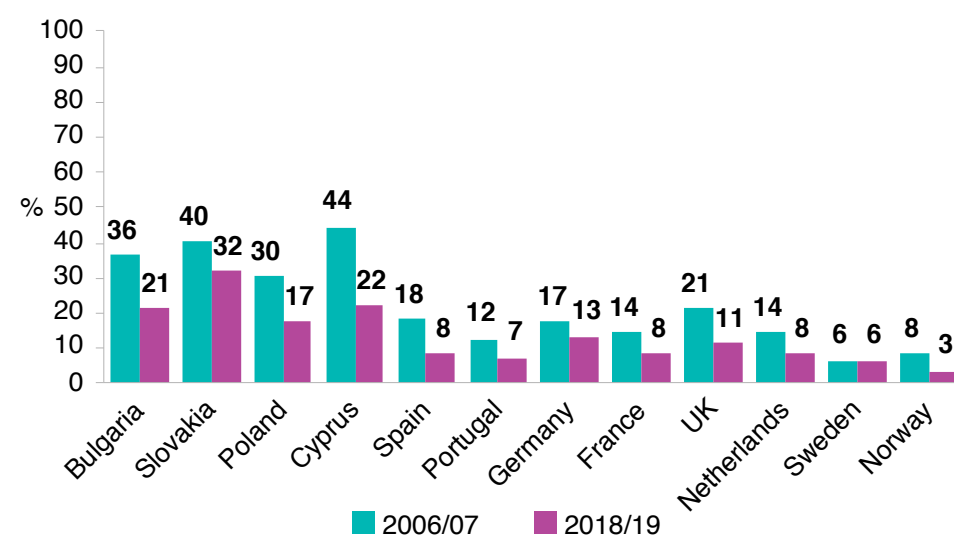
**Figure 2 % disapproving of cohabitation, by country, 2006/07 and 2018/19**



The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in Appendix table A.1 of this chapter

Figure 3 shows levels of disapproval of having a child outside of marriage. This again shows a similar pattern of results with the proviso that in many countries, levels of disapproval are higher when a child is introduced into a cohabiting relationship. The lingering norm of choosing to get married when offspring are imminent appears to have some limited traction.

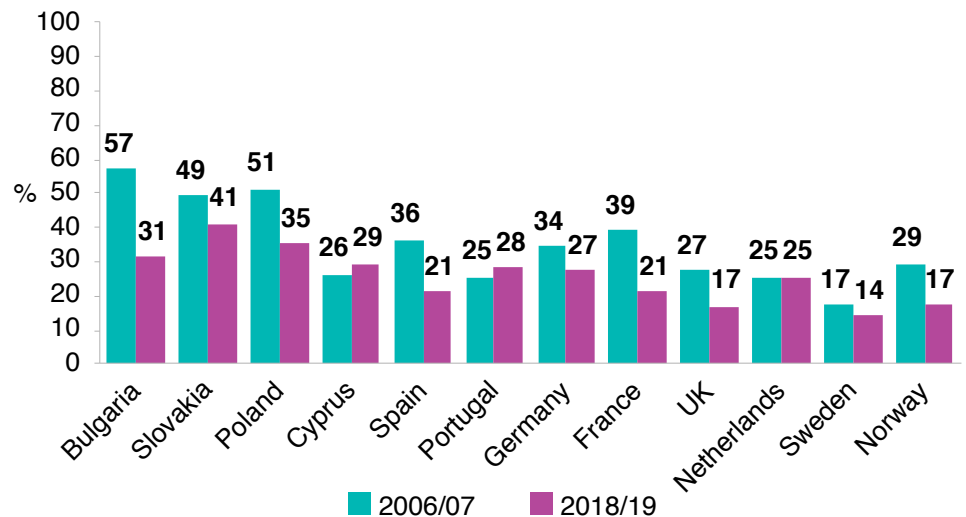
**Figure 3 % disapproving of having a child while cohabiting, by country, 2006/07 and 2018/19**



The data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in Appendix table A.1 of this chapter

Figure 4 show disapproval of a person divorcing when a child is under 12. For this behaviour again the post-Communist countries take the most socially conservative position on divorce at both time points. Levels of disapproval in the other western European countries are higher than in the UK. By 2018/19 only the UK, Sweden and Norway had less than a fifth of respondents disapproving of divorcing while children were still under 12.

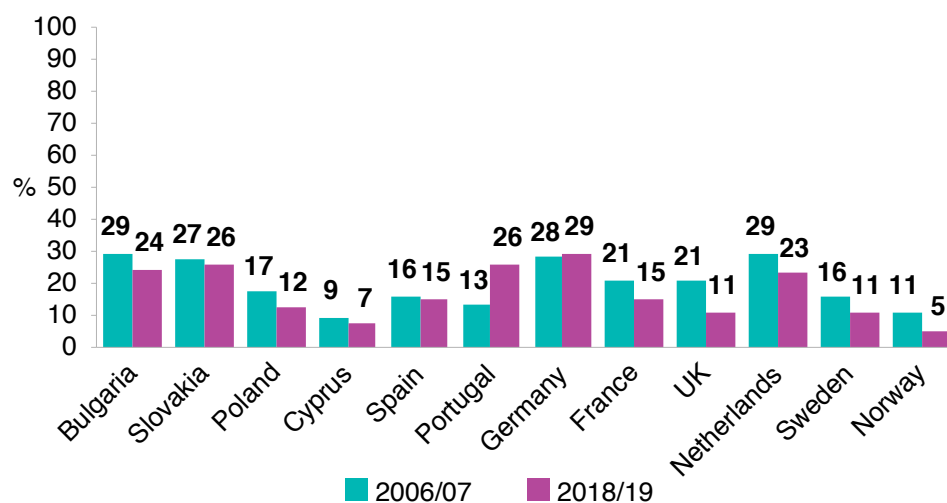
**Figure 4 % disapproving of a person divorcing when a child is under 12, by country, 2006/07 and 2018/19**



*The data on which Figure 5 is based can be found in Appendix table A.1 of this chapter*

The final family behaviour produces a different pattern of results. Figure 5 shows disapproval of a person working full-time while a child is aged under 3. In this figure there is less difference between the countries, and less change between 2006/07 and 2018/19, than for the previous items. Germany and the Netherlands score as high for disapproval of parents working full-time as Bulgaria and Slovakia, and Cyprus has the lowest disapproval rating of all countries bar Norway. By 2018/19 the UK had a similar profile to the Nordic countries.

**Figure 5 % disapproving of a person working full-time while a child is under 3, by country, 2006/07 and 2018/19**



The data on which Figure 5 is based can be found in Appendix table A.1 of this chapter

The factors driving between-country differences in social attitudes are complex. The predictors of generalised social tolerance – such as the strength and reach of organised religion – may be supplemented by other factors when it comes to a specific item such as working full-time with small children. These would include the country's type of 'welfare regime' – the provision of state services such as childcare and welfare payments, along with the regulation of the labour market. While the UK is conventionally seen as representing a different social 'model' from that of the Nordic states, it exhibits a very similar pattern of attitudes to family norms.

## Conclusions

The results reported here paint a remarkably consistent set of pictures. First, in the UK and across a range of European countries, the direction of travel is towards a less prescriptive, more laissez-faire attitude among the public towards fertility and family choices by both men and women. This goes further than the decline of disapproval and its replacement with passive tolerance. Increasing numbers of the public actively approve of individuals who elect to depart from 'traditional' norms in the way they 'do family life'. Second, although all five measures follow the same trajectory in the UK, the relative levels of disapproval to each are unchanged. The least contentious norm is remaining childless, where the UK has the lowest levels of disapproval outside Scandinavia. The UK public is also increasingly relaxed about couples cohabiting and having children inside that relationship, with only around one in ten disapproving. This is also the case in relation to parents of small children choosing to work full-time – the behaviour that has seen the largest reduction in disapproval over the period. Even in respect of the most frowned upon practice,

namely divorcing when children are involved, only around a sixth of respondents now actively disapprove.

There are systematic differences within this story, along lines of generation and sex. Younger people are more accepting of the transgression of family norms. In respect of some norms relating to divorce and combining paid work with childcare, acceptance has increased in the last decade within every birth cohort. Within this pattern, some gendered 'double standards' exist in terms of acceptable behaviour by men and women. Four times as many respondents disapprove of a woman working full-time when her child is under 3, than they do a man in the same position. Conversely, twice as many would disapprove of a man with young children divorcing than they would a woman doing the same. 'Gender traditionalism' cuts both ways.

At least in relation to norms of fertility, family formation and dissolution, the United Kingdom is a socially liberal country and becoming steadily more so. This is true both in absolute terms and relative to many other European countries, though on each of the five measures discussed here there is substantial international convergence.

## Acknowledgements

The European Social Survey (ESS) is a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC). Participating countries contribute to the central coordination costs of the ESS ERIC as well as covering the costs of their own fieldwork and national coordination. In the UK these funds are provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The views expressed are the author's alone.

## References

- Abramson, P. and Inglehart, R. (1992), 'Generational replacement and value change in eight West European societies', *British Journal of Political Science*, 22(2), pp. 182-228.
- Billari, Francesco C., Hagestad, G., Liefbroer, A. and Spéder, Z. 2005. "The Timing of Life: The Organisation of the Life Course in Europe (Proposal for a Rotating Module -ESS 3)." European Social Survey.
- Billari, F., Hagestad, G., Liefbroer, A. and Speder, Z. (2006), *Timing of Life: The organisation of the life course in Europe*, available at: [www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/round3/questionnaire/ESS3\\_billari\\_proposal.pdf](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/round3/questionnaire/ESS3_billari_proposal.pdf)
- Durkheim, E. (1893:1991), *The Division of labour in society*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990), *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press

European Social Survey (2018). *ESS Round 9 Module on Timing of Life – Question Design Final Module in Template*. London: ESS ERIC Headquarters c/o City, University of London.

Harrison, E. and Fitzgerald, R. (2010), 'A Chorus of Disapproval? European attitudes to non-traditional family patterns', in Park, A., Curtice, J., Thomson, K., Phillips, M., Clery, E. and Butt, S. (eds). *British Social Attitudes: the 26th report*, London: Sage.

Liefbroer, A. and Billari, F. (2010), 'Bringing Norms Back In: A Theoretical and Empirical Discussion of Their Importance for Understanding Demographic Behaviour.' *Population, Space and Place* 16(4): 287-305.

Mannheim, K. (1923), 'The Problem of Generations', first published in English as pp. 163-195 in Mannheim, K. (1953) *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Office for National Statistics (2017), *Families and Households in the UK: 2017*, available at: [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2017](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2017), accessed 26/08/20.

Office for National Statistics (2018), *Families and Households in the UK: 2018*, available at: [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2018](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2018), accessed 26/08/20.

Park et al (2013). 'Key Findings: How and Why Britain's Attitudes and Values are Changing' in Park, A., Bryson, C., Clery, E., Curtice, J. and Phillips, M. (eds.) (2013), *British Social Attitudes: the 30th Report*, London: NatCen Social Research.

Pew Research Centre (2015), The Whys and Hows of Generation Research, available at: [www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/09/03/the-whys-and-hows-of-generations-research](http://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/09/03/the-whys-and-hows-of-generations-research), accessed 24/11/20.

Pew Research Centre (2019), Defining generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins, available at: [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins), accessed 24/11/20.

Rijken, Arieke J., and Eva-Maria Merz. (2014), 'Double Standards: Differences in Norms on Voluntary Childlessness for Men and Women.' *European Sociological Review* 30(4): 470-82.

## Appendix

**Table A.1 % disapproving of life-course behaviours, by country, 2006/07 and 2018/19**

Country	Childless		Cohabiting		Child while Cohabiting		Full-time work child under 3		Divorce child under 12		Unweighted base	
	2006-07	2018-19	2006-07	2018-19	2006-07	2018-19	2006-07	2018-19	2006-07	2018-19	2006-07	2018-19
Bulgaria	83	65	35	23	36	21	29	24	57	31	1400	2198
Slovakia	54	45	35	31	40	32	27	26	49	41	1766	1083
Poland	53	32	34	20	30	17	17	12	51	35	1721	1500
Cyprus	59	32	29	16	44	22	9	7	26	29	995	781
Spain	26	12	16	7	18	8	16	15	36	21	1876	1668
Portugal	24	21	12	8	12	7	13	26	25	28	2222	1055
Germany	25	15	11	9	17	13	28	29	34	27	2916	2358
France	31	19	11	8	14	8	21	15	39	21	1986	2010
UK	8	5	14	9	21	11	21	11	27	17	2394	2204
Netherlands	13	8	11	7	14	8	29	23	25	25	1889	1673
Sweden	7	5	3	4	6	6	16	11	17	14	1927	1539
Norway	9	5	8	3	8	3	11	5	29	17	1750	1406

Source: European Social Survey rounds 3 (2006/07) and 9 (2018/19), respondents aged 15+ in each country

## Publication details

Curtice, J., Hudson, N., and Montagu, I. (eds.) (2020) British Social Attitudes: The 37th Report. London: The National Centre for Social Research

© The National Centre for Social Research 2021

First published 2021

You may print out, download and save this publication for your non-commercial use. Otherwise, and apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to The National Centre for Social Research.

The National Centre for Social Research  
35 Northampton Square  
London  
EC1V 0AX  
[info@natcen.ac.uk](mailto:info@natcen.ac.uk)