

# Attitudes of young adults toward marriage and divorce, 2002-2018

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## **Attitudes of young adults toward marriage and divorce, 2002-2018**

Abstract: We investigate if and how attitudes of college-aged students in Flanders, Belgium towards marriage and divorce have evolved between 2002 and 2018. Because students in 2018 are more frequently confronted with divorce, unmarried cohabitation, extramarital fertility, and ‘alternative’ family types, we expect them to hold more positive attitudes towards these developments than students in 2002. We also expect students in 2018 to hold more negative attitudes towards marriage. Data were collected among first-year psychology students of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at KU Leuven (Belgium): 167 in 2002-2003, 471 in 2018-2019. Results confirm our expectations: students in 2018 hold more positive attitudes towards divorce and more negative attitudes towards marriage, than students in 2002. We also find attitude differences by gender and family type.

Key words: attitudes towards marriage; attitudes towards divorce; young adults; liquid love; pure relationships

## **Introduction**

The characteristics of the so-called second demographic transition (which started around 1965) are well known: marriage and fertility rates declined, and unmarried cohabitation, extramarital fertility and divorce increased (Amato & James, 2010; Corijn & Van Peer, 2013; Lappegård, Klüsener & Vignoli, 2017; Lesthaeghe & van de Kaa, 1986; Pasteels, Lodewijckx & Mortelmans, 2013). A parallel evolution was the increased participation of women in higher education and employment outside of the home. Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, is no exception to these trends (Corijn & Van Peer, 2013; Pasteels et al., 2013). The public's attitudes towards alternative family types, cohabitation, and divorce became more 'open' and permissive (Axinn, Emens & Mitchell, 2007; De Coninck, Matthijs, & Dekeyser, 2020). This is sometimes called the deinstitutionalisation of marriage, or liberal and tolerant attitudes towards unmarried cohabitation, extramarital fertility, and divorce (Amato & James, 2010; Corijn & Van Peer, 2013; Lappegård et al., 2017; Pasteels et al., 2013; Stacey, 1990; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Treas, Lui, & Gubernskaya, 2014).

In this study, we investigate changes in attitudes of college-aged young adults - a relevant sociological subgroup when studying evolutions in family contexts - towards alternative and traditional family types. More specifically, we investigate this by comparing two groups of first-year university students, most of which are 18 or 19 years old, of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the KU Leuven. Their attitudes were measured in 2002 and 2018 using the same assessment. The choice to investigate attitudes of young adults is related to their perceived role as cultural seismographs, which are groups that "quickly register and transmit existing cultural trends in society. They do not have to be the first ones to introduce these new standards, but they are the ones that transmit them to the population on a large scale" (Vinken, Ester, & de Bondt, 1997, p. 165; Johansson & Herz, 2019). Young adults today are the descendants of the authors and directors of the second demographic transition

(see above). We distinguish two groups: on the one hand we have the sons and daughters (first-year students in 2002) of the (late) babyboomers, and on the other hand those of the (early) babybusters (first-year students in 2018).

### **Societal context and sociological relevance**

Insight into the attitudes of young adults towards marriage, divorce, and other aspects of private life offers inspiring points of reference for the interpretation of contemporary (and future?) family structures and processes. Today, families and households are different than two decades ago. Partner choice and ties, and parent-child and sibling relationships are no longer equally homogeneous, stable, and uniform (the post-war model). Instead, they are now both solid and liquid, durable and fragile, open and closed, distant and inclusive. Information about this is relevant for several societal actors such as teachers, therapists, lawyers, politicians. And parents. Recent Flemish research shows that teachers do not know how to deal with the consequences of newly reconstituted families in a classroom context (Buysse, Mertens, & Matthijs, 2018). This is also true for health care workers, family and child therapists, and social workers. They are all confronted with young adults with emotional and/or social difficulties, which are sometimes rooted in or amplified by problematic parent-child relationships (Miles & Servaty-Seib, 2010).

In contemporary societal analyses about (post) modern family- and household formation, the importance of personal autonomy and individual freedom of choice is often emphasized (Frissen, 1997; Lesthaeghe & Surkuyn, 1988; Stacey, 1990; Thornton, 1989). Today, these aspects are considered important, and this is fundamentally different from attitudes about the traditional marriage and nuclear family post-World War II. According to Anthony Giddens (1992), families and relationships have evolved into ‘pure relationships’ over the past decades. A pure relationship has three characteristics. Firstly, it is no longer rooted in traditional community values, traditional family- and gender roles, and religious denomination.

Instead, they are ‘voluntarily’ established and are maintained through communication and negotiation. Second, these relationships are not taken ‘for granted’, neither by the partners, nor by others. Being in a relationship is the result of a series of choices, but these may be temporary: there can and should be reflection and negotiation about the relationship. Third, pure relationships are reflexive: they are evaluated by criteria like individual freedom and personal autonomy (Giddens, 1992; Hall, 2003; Hughes, 2005; Muniruzzaman, 2017).

Contemporary intimate relationships have also received a lot of attention in the work of Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002). They emphasize that marriages are now increasingly the result of voluntary and mutual agreement, without institutional control or patronization. According to them, this idea is both liberating and stressful to partners. They find that intimate relationships are increasingly unravelling, by which they mean that individuals have become aware that relationships are now more unstable and temporary than in the past. Paradoxically, this can be seen a reason to not invest too much in intimate relationships, but rather focus more on personal development, the relationship with oneself. Besides that, individuals also increasingly invest time and energy in other, less intimate relationships, such as friend- and acquaintanceships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

The societal analysis of Zygmunt Bauman (2003) also touches upon (post)modern relationships. In his book *Liquid love: on the frailty of human bonds* he suggests that due to growing individualism and consumerism, intimate relationships have now become more ‘liquid’, fluid, than in the past. Bauman sees the success of the new social media as an illustration of this; they offer convenient tools to permanently look for new romantic and/or sexual partners and other (intimate) relationships. Through online dating, romance has evolved into a kind of entertainment where users are able to date, knowing that they can always (and easily) look for another (romantic) opportunity if they are no longer satisfied in their current situation. This strongly resembles looking for and attempting to realise a vague, perhaps even

unattainable and contradictory dream: on the one hand, a desire for more freedom and ‘loose’ intimate ties, but on the other hand the need for order, stability, certainty, and security. Bauman (2003) emphasizes that the contemporary individual, especially younger generations, constantly balances between these poles. This is a difficult process which many people struggle with, and this explains -according to Bauman- why a growing number of people are seeking the help of (relationship)therapists and life coaches.

## **Hypotheses**

Given the increasing deinstitutionalisation of marriage and more liberal and tolerant attitudes towards unmarried cohabitation, extramarital fertility, and divorce, it is increasingly important to examine attitudes towards marriage and divorce of young adults who are at a time in their lives when they are beginning to consider the possibility of partnership. While there are several studies that investigate attitudes towards marriage and divorce among young adults (Branch-Harris & Cox, 2015; Huang & Lin, 2014), to the best of our knowledge, very few studies have compared such attitudes over time among a highly similar group of respondents. The results might contribute to a better understanding of the behavioural patterns of family formation among young people in general, given that trends in family formation in Flanders have been shown to be similar to those in other Western countries (Branch-Harris & Cox, 2015; Christensen, 2014; Pasteels et al., 2013).

Considering their different experiences with recent family characteristics and developments, we expect that students in 2018 will hold more positive attitudes toward divorce, extramarital fertility, unmarried cohabitation, and alternative family types than students in 2002 (*hypothesis 1*). At the same time, we also expect students in 2002 to hold more positive attitudes towards marriage than those in 2018 (*hypothesis 2*). There are likely to be attitude differences between students from intact and non-intact families. Based on longitudinal research (1962-1980) in the United States, adolescents with divorced parents tend to hold more

positive attitudes towards divorce, unmarried cohabitation and extramarital fertility, and more negative attitudes towards marriage, than adolescents with married parents (Axinn & Thornton, 1996). In this regard, Amato (1996) refers to the intergenerational transmission of divorce, the phenomenon that a parental separation is related to a higher tolerance for divorce and separation among children of separated parents (Amato & Booth, 1991; Andersson, 2016; Cunningham & Thornton, 2006; Wolchik, Christopher, Tein, Rhodes, & Sandler, 2019). Based on this information, we develop a *third hypothesis*: students from non-intact families hold more positive attitudes towards divorce, unmarried cohabitation, and alternative family types than students from intact families. Finally, we also expect to find gender differences. Generally, women are more tolerant towards divorce and separation and unmarried cohabitation than men (Amato & Booth, 1991; Andersson, 2016; Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier, 2011; Kapinus & Flowers, 2008). Men also tend to be more critical towards gay marriage and hold a more traditional view of marriage than women (Day et al., 2011). This may be related to the fact that, in contemporary (Western) societies, men receive more social and economic advantages from marriage than women (Christensen, 2014). There is a persistent asymmetric distribution of household tasks between partners: women are responsible for most household tasks and childcare, which stimulates the association of marriage with specific obligations and burdens (Christensen, 2014; Day et al., 2011; Fetterolf & Eagly, 2011; Kapinus & Flowers, 2008). Women acknowledge the disadvantages of a marriage, while men recognize its convenience to them (Huang & Lin, 2014). In conclusion: women are expected to hold more positive attitudes towards alternative family types than men (*hypothesis 4*), and more negative attitudes towards traditional family types than men (*hypothesis 5*).

## **Data and methodology**

### *Data collection*

In 2002, data about attitudes towards marriage and divorce were collected among a sample of first-year students at KU Leuven. In that academic year, 4,748 first-year generation students<sup>1</sup> were enrolled at KU Leuven. From this student population, 4,217 Belgian students were selected to ensure they were fluent in Dutch, the survey language. International students were excluded. From this group, a random sample of 2,000 students (47%) was drawn. These students received an e-mail in December of 2002 with a request to participate in the online study. Personalized links were used: respondents had to log in using a personalized password which guaranteed their anonymity. The survey was fielded for 56 days – until February of 2003. At that time, there were 1,059 respondents (53%) (Vanhove & Matthijs, 2003). In order to ensure comparability with the data from 2018-2019 (see below), only students enrolled in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences were selected (n = 167). Approval for this study was obtained from the Social and Societal Ethics Committee from KU Leuven (G-2017 09 934).

In 2018, data about attitudes towards marriage and divorce were collected among all students that were enrolled in a sociology course at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at KU Leuven. The assessment took place during the first class of the academic year 2018-2019, early October of 2018. The questionnaire was created and programmed in Qualtrics, a web-based survey tool to conduct survey research, evaluations and other data collection activities. A link to the questionnaire was posted on the digital student portal of the course just prior to the start of the class. It could be completed by laptop, tablet, or smartphone.

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<sup>1</sup> A generation student refers to someone who registers for a professional or academic bachelor's degree in Flemish higher education for the first time.

If students were not able to complete it at the time, they also had the option to complete it at home until midnight of the same day. A total of 471 (83%) out of the 570 enrolled students participated in this study. Again, the survey language was Dutch, the language of instruction of this course (De Coninck, Matthijs, & Luyten, 2019).

The analysis was conducted in several steps: first, attitudes of psychology students from 2002-2003 ( $n = 167$ ) and 2018-2019 ( $n = 471$ ) were descriptively compared using cross-tabulation analysis. Using paired-samples t-tests, we then investigated if there were significant differences in attitudes between students of 2002 and 2018. This same procedure is repeated for analyses by family type (intact vs. non-intact) and gender (men vs. women) (Table 1).

#### *Attitudes towards marriage and divorce*

Attitudes towards marriage and divorce were measured through 33 items (Table 2). These items originated from the *Attitudes towards Marriage* scale (Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986), *Attitudes towards Divorce* scale (Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986; Moats, 2004), and Braaten and Rosén's (1998) *Attitudes towards Marriage* scale.

The *Attitudes towards Marriage* scale by Kinnard & Gerrard (1986) is a fourteen-item instrument which assesses attitudes toward marital responsibilities, happiness, freedom and adjustment to marriage. Each question uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Eight of the questions assess positive attitudes about marriage and six statements assess negative attitudes. The scale focuses on happiness within marriage, loyalty and the significance of marriage. Higher scores represent more positive views toward marriage. Kinnaird and Gerrard (1986) reported that the Cronbach's alpha for their scale is .77 and that test-retest reliability was .86 (Moats, 2004). The *Attitudes towards Divorce* scale (Kinnard & Gerrard, 1986) is a twelve-item instrument that assesses positive and negative attitudes toward divorce. Again, each question uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly

disagree to (1) to strongly agree (5). There are six question statements that report positive attitudes toward divorce and six statements that measure negative attitudes of divorce. Higher scores represent more positive views toward divorce. Reliability and validity of this instrument were not available (Moats, 2004)

The *Attitudes towards Marriage* scale by Braaten and Rosén (1998) is an eight-item scale designed to measure a person's current beliefs about marriage. Each question uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). High scores on this scale indicate positive attitudes toward marriage. Braaten and Rosén (1998) reported that the Cronbach's alpha for their Attitudes toward Marriage scale is .68.

#### *Sociodemographic characteristics*

In both assessments, participants were asked to indicate gender and the marital status and educational level of their parents. Most respondents were female (82% in 2002, 80% in 2018). Additionally, most respondents had highly educated parents: 57% of respondents in 2002 had highly educated mothers and fathers, while 72% and 65% of respondents in 2018 had highly educated mothers and fathers, respectively. These distributions were similar to those of students from other Flemish universities (Wartenbergh et al., 2009). We observed a difference in terms of parents' marital status between assessments: in 2002, 15% of respondents had parents who were legally or de facto separated, while in 2018, this percentage had nearly doubled to 29%. This is in line with evolutions of family characteristics in the general population, which we discussed earlier.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents in 2002-2003 and 2018-2019

	2002-2003 (N = 167)		2018-2019 (N = 471)	
	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	30	18	95	20
Female	137	82	376	80
<b>Mean age</b> (in years)	18.6	-	18.3	-
<b>Educational attainment mother</b>				
Primary/secondary education	59	36	116	25
Tertiary education	93	57	330	72
Do not know	12	7	10	2
<b>Educational attainment father</b>				
Primary/secondary education	58	35	138	31
Tertiary education	93	57	293	65
Do not know	13	8	19	4
<b>Parental marital status</b>				
Married	137	84	285	61
Unmarried cohabitation	-	-	23	5
Legally separated	19	12	98	21
De facto separated	5	3	35	8
Widowed	2	1	26	5

## Results

There are some notable shifts between 2002 and 2018 in attitudes of first-year psychology students towards 'traditional' and 'alternative' cohabitation types (Table 2). The proportion of students that believe it is okay to have children outside of marriage, has increased from 50% to 74%. The support for gay marriage has also increased: 82% of respondents believed gay people should be able to get married in 2002, but in 2018 this is nearly unanimous (96%). The proportion of students that believe that single parents can raise a child as well as two parents has increased from 47% to 58%. Furthermore, there is a growing (but still limited) tolerance for the idea that two people can get married with the thought of divorce in the back of their mind (from 6% in 2002 to 12% in 2018).

Other attitudes have hardly or not changed over the past two decades. In 2002 and 2018 there is limited support for the idea that a man or a woman should get married in order to obtain financial security (4% in 2002, 3% in 2018). Attitudes towards the individual wellbeing in certain cohabitation types also remain stable: respondents at both times do not believe that married partners are happier than (unmarried) cohabiting partners. There are few respondents who believe that you should not get married or have children, since relationships do not last. Additionally, the (small) share of respondents that believes that marriage has lost a lot of value and that it is an outdated institution, has remained stable.

There are also a number of statements with which respondents agreed less in 2018 than in 2002, and these generally point in the same direction as the trends mentioned above. These statements are mostly related to the position of a child in a relationship. The share of respondents that agrees that children have more security when they are born in a marriage, decreased with 27% (from 47% to 20%). The share of respondents who agreed that children are happiest in an intact family, and that a child needs both its father and its mother, decreased respectively with 18% and 15% (from 61% to 43%, and from 82% to 67%). In addition, the

institutional context of the traditional family is being increasingly questioned in 2018: a smaller share of respondents believes that marriage is the best foundation for family life (-19%), that you develop a sense of responsibility within a marriage that you would not develop otherwise (-9%), and that marriage offers more advantages than unmarried cohabitation does (-10%). Finally, it also appears that students generally do not believe that people get divorced too quickly (a decrease of 16% between 2002 and 2018), or that the divorce procedure should be shortened (-19%).

In conclusion, the results teach us that the first hypothesis (students in 2018 hold more positive attitudes towards divorce, extramarital fertility, unmarried cohabitation, and alternative family types than those in 2002) is confirmed. The second hypothesis (students in 2018 hold more negative attitudes towards marriage than those in 2002) is also confirmed.

Table 2. Attitudes towards marriage and divorce of first-year psychology students of KU Leuven in 2002-2003 and 2018-2019, ranked by the difference in (fully) agree-answers

	2002-2003		2018-2019		Difference
	0	+	0	+	%
1. It is okay to have children outside of a marriage. ( $\mu_{2002} = 3.2$ , $\mu_{2018} = 4.0$ )	21	50	14	74	+24*
2. Gay people should also be able to get married. ( $\mu_{2002} = 4.0$ , $\mu_{2018} = 4.7$ )	11	82	3	96	+14*
3. Single parents can raise a child as well as two parents. ( $\mu_{2002} = 3.3$ , $\mu_{2018} = 3.6$ )	27	47	23	58	+11*
4. I think it is okay that two people decide to get married with in the back of their mind the thought that: “if it doesn’t work out, we can still get divorced”. ( $\mu_{2002} = 1.7$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.0$ )	11	6	13	12	+6*
5. Marriage has lost a lot of its value. ( $\mu_{2002} = 3.5$ , $\mu_{2018} = 3.5$ )	26	58	25	59	+1
6. People who are married are usually happier than people who cohabit. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.1$ , $\mu_{2018} = 1.9$ )	25	1	20	2	+1*
7. I prefer a career over a family. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.1$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.1$ )	27	5	25	6	+1
8. These days there are few marriages in which both partners are happy. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.4$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.4$ )	23	15	29	14	-1
9. Marriage is an outdated institution. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.5$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.5$ )	24	19	28	18	-1
10. In order to attain financial security, it is important for a man to get married. ( $\mu_{2002} = 1.9$ , $\mu_{2018} = 1.6$ )	14	3	12	3	-*
11. You shouldn’t have children, because relationships never last. ( $\mu_{2002} = 1.6$ , $\mu_{2018} = 1.4$ )	3	2	3	1	-1*
12. You shouldn’t get married, because relationships never last. ( $\mu_{2002} = 1.8$ , $\mu_{2018} = 1.7$ )	9	3	7	2	-1
13. In order to attain financial security, it is important for a woman to get married. ( $\mu_{2002} = 1.9$ , $\mu_{2018} = 1.6$ )	14	5	12	3	-2*
14. If there are young children, parents must remain married no matter what. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.4$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.2$ )	26	10	18	8	-2*
15. Marriage offers a type of security that you do not have if you cohabit. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.8$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.6$ )	32	26	25	24	-2
16. Marriage offers more advantages than unmarried cohabitation. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.9$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.8$ )	49	24	38	22	-2*
17. When you cohabit you miss the emotional security that you do have when you are married. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.4$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.2$ )	22	13	24	9	-4
18. Love, warmth, and happiness are things that only marriage can offer. ( $\mu_{2002} = 1.8$ , $\mu_{2018} = 1.6$ )	7	5	5	1	-4
19. It is possible that I will cohabit later, without getting married. ( $\mu_{2002} = 3.5$ , $\mu_{2018} = 3.5$ )	16	64	23	60	-4

20. Both partners have greater freedom if you cohabit than when you're married. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.4$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.2$ )	31	14	24	10	-4*
21. If you are married, then you have little personal freedom. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.1$ , $\mu_{2018} = 1.9$ )	11	8	8	3	-5*
22. I think that I will marry. ( $\mu_{2002} = 3.7$ , $\mu_{2018} = 3.7$ )	12	70	24	64	-6
23. When parents fight a lot, it is better for their children that they get a divorce. ( $\mu_{2002} = 3.3$ , $\mu_{2018} = 3.2$ )	31	47	35	40	-7
24. A marriage is not necessary in order to have a successful relationship. ( $\mu_{2002} = 4.2$ , $\mu_{2018} = 4.1$ )	4	90	8	82	-8
25. By getting married, you develop a certain sense of responsibility that you otherwise wouldn't have. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.8$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.5$ )	31	27	25	18	-9*
26. Only in a stable family can you find the necessary love, warmth, and happiness. ( $\mu_{2002} = 3.0$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.7$ )	28	35	24	26	-9*
27. When one of the partners becomes mentally handicapped, the other partner must maintain the marriage, regardless of their own happiness. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.9$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.3$ )	55	16	28	6	-10*
28. A child needs its father and its mother. ( $\mu_{2002} = 4.1$ , $\mu_{2018} = 3.8$ )	13	81	17	67	-14*
29. These days, couples get divorced too easily. ( $\mu_{2002} = 3.8$ , $\mu_{2018} = 3.5$ )	23	71	30	55	-16*
30. A child is happiest in an intact family. ( $\mu_{2002} = 3.6$ , $\mu_{2018} = 3.2$ )	25	61	30	43	-18*
31. Marriage is the best foundation of family life. ( $\mu_{2002} = 2.9$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.2$ )	32	29	19	10	-19*
32. The legal divorce procedure should proceed much more quickly. ( $\mu_{2002} = 3.8$ , $\mu_{2018} = 3.5$ )	25	67	43	48	-19*
33. Children have more security when they're born within a marriage. ( $\mu_{2002} = 3.2$ , $\mu_{2018} = 2.5$ )	27	47	24	20	-27*

Note. \*  $p < .05$ .

0: Neutral, +: (Fully) agree.

$\mu_{2002}$ : mean score of item in 2002,  $\mu_{2018}$ : mean score of item in 2018.

### *Differences by family type*

In order to simplify the comparison between family types, respondents with parents who are married or cohabit (see Table 1) were merged into ‘intact family’. Respondents with legally or de facto separated parents were merged into ‘non-intact family’. Those with at least one divorced parent were not included in the analysis (2002: n = 2; 2018: n = 26).

The results indicate attitude differences between family types (Table 3). In 2002-2003, students from non-intact families hold more positive attitudes towards marriage than students from intact families. They believe that marriage is an outdated institution, and that it has lost a lot of value. Students from intact families hold more positive attitudes towards (gay) marriage. In 2018-2019, we generally observe the same trends. These findings are similar to the findings of previous studies on the relationship between family type and attitudes towards marriage and divorce (Amato, 1996; Amato & Booth, 1991; Andersson, 2016; Cunningham & Thornton, 2006; Wolchik et al., 2019), and they confirm the third hypothesis: both in 2002-2003 and 2018-2019, students from non-intact families hold more positive attitudes towards divorce, unmarried cohabitation, and alternative family types than students from intact families.

Table 3. Attitudes towards marriage and divorce of first-year psychology students of KU Leuven by family type in 2002-2003 and 2018-2019, ranked by the difference in (fully) agree-answers between students from intact and non-intact families in 2018

	2002-2003				
	Intact		Non-intact		Difference
	0	+	0	+	%
23. When parents fight a lot, it is better for their children that they get a divorce.	29	47	38	50	+3
3. Single parents can raise a child as well as two parents.	28	47	25	58	+9
19. It is possible that I will cohabit later, without getting married.	17	63	9	82	+19*
4. I think it is okay that two people decide to get married with in the back of their mind the thought that: "if it doesn't work out, we can still get divorced".	10	4	17	13	+9
5. Marriage has lost a lot of its value.	28	56	17	71	+15
32. The legal divorce procedure should proceed much more quickly.	27	65	18	73	+8
8. These days there are few marriages in which both partners are happy.	20	13	33	25	+12*
9. Marriage is an outdated institution.	22	15	33	29	+14*
7. I prefer a career over a family.	25	5	39	4	-1
12. You shouldn't get married, because relationships never last.	7	3	21	4	+1*
14. If there are young children, parents must remain married no matter what.	24	10	38	8	-2
18. Love, warmth, and happiness are things that only marriage can offer.	7	5	-	4	-1*
21. If you are married, then you have little personal freedom.	10	7	8	13	+6
26. Only in a stable family can you find the necessary love, warmth, and happiness.	30	33	21	38	+5
2. Gay people should also be able to get married.	10	85	17	70	-15
6. People who are married are usually happier than people who cohabit.	26	1	17	-	-1 <sup>+</sup>
11. You shouldn't have children, because relationships never last.	2	2	8	-	-2
27. When one of the partners becomes mentally handicapped, the other partner must maintain the marriage, regardless of their own happiness	56	15	55	18	+3
31. Marriage is the best foundation of family life.	35	27	31	42	+15
24. A marriage is not necessary in order to have a successful relationship.	5	88	-	100	+12*
1. It is okay to have children outside of a marriage.	22	50	17	48	-2
13. In order to attain financial security, it is important for a woman to get married.	13	5	17	4	-1

10. In order to attain financial security, it is important for a man to get married.	12	3	22	-	-3
20. Both partners have greater freedom if you cohabit than when you're married.	29	13	44	17	+4+
17. When you cohabit you miss the emotional security that you do have when you are married.	22	13	21	13	-
29. These days, couples get divorced too easily.	23	71	27	68	-3
33. Children have more security when they're born within a marriage.	27	46	21	54	+8
28. A child needs its father and its mother.	13	83	13	75	-8
25. By getting married, you develop a certain sense of responsibility that you otherwise wouldn't have.	30	27	37	29	-2
22. I think that I will marry.	12	65	14	45	-20*
16. Marriage offers more advantages than unmarried cohabitation.	50	25	46	21	-4
30. A child is happiest in an intact family.	23	64	38	46	-18
15. Marriage offers a type of security that you do not have if you cohabit.	31	26	38	25	-1

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , +  $p < .10$ . 0 = Neutral, + = (Fully) agree.

Table 3. Continued

	2018-2019				
	Intact		Non-intact		Difference
	0	+	0	+	%
23. When parents fight a lot, it is better for their children that they get a divorce.	37	36	27	53	+17*
3. Single parents can raise a child as well as two parents.	25	53	19	68	+15*
19. It is possible that I will cohabit later, without getting married.	23	58	22	67	+9*
4. I think it is okay that two people decide to get married with in the back of their mind the thought that: "if it doesn't work out, we can still get divorced".	14	10	12	17	+7+
5. Marriage has lost a lot of its value.	26	58	22	65	+7+
32. The legal divorce procedure should proceed much more quickly.	47	44	33	50	+6*
8. These days there are few marriages in which both partners are happy.	26	12	38	18	+6*
9. Marriage is an outdated institution.	30	17	25	22	+5
7. I prefer a career over a family.	24	5	25	9	+4+
12. You shouldn't get married, because relationships never last.	6	2	11	4	+2*
14. If there are young children, parents must remain married no matter what.	19	8	14	10	+2

18. Love, warmth, and happiness are things that only marriage can offer.	5	1	3	2	+1
21. If you are married, then you have little personal freedom.	8	3	9	4	+1
26. Only in a stable family can you find the necessary love, warmth, and happiness.	26	26	19	27	+1
2. Gay people should also be able to get married.	4	95	2	95	-
6. People who are married are usually happier than people who cohabit.	21	2	16	2	-
11. You shouldn't have children, because relationships never last.	2	1	6	1	-
27. When one of the partners becomes mentally handicapped, the other partner must maintain the marriage, regardless of their own happiness	25	6	31	6	-
31. Marriage is the best foundation of family life.	21	10	13	10	.*
24. A marriage is not necessary in order to have a successful relationship.	8	82	7	83	-1
1. It is okay to have children outside of a marriage.	15	74	13	75	-1
13. In order to attain financial security, it is important for a woman to get married.	12	4	10	2	-2
10. In order to attain financial security, it is important for a man to get married.	12	4	9	2	-2+
20. Both partners have greater freedom if you cohabit than when you're married.	21	12	29	8	-4
17. When you cohabit you miss the emotional security that you do have when you are married.	25	11	23	4	-7*
29. These days, couples get divorced too easily.	29	57	32	50	-7
33. Children have more security when they're born within a marriage.	28	22	16	15	-7*
28. A child needs its father and its mother.	16	70	19	62	-8
25. By getting married, you develop a certain sense of responsibility that you otherwise wouldn't have.	26	21	22	12	-9*
22. I think that I will marry.	23	68	25	57	-11*
16. Marriage offers more advantages than unmarried cohabitation.	35	26	43	13	-13*
30. A child is happiest in an intact family.	32	47	27	33	-14*
15. Marriage offers a type of security that you do not have if you cohabit.	24	27	28	12	-15*

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , +  $p < .10$ . 0 = Neutral, + = (Fully) agree.

### *Differences by gender*

In terms of attitudes towards marriage and divorce, women are generally more progressive than men, both in 2002 and 2018. Women believe more than men that single parents can raise a child as well as two parents. A larger share of men than women believe that, if both partners have children together, a marriage must never be dissolved. However, there is some skepticism among men towards marriages as well: they believe more than women that it is an institution in which they enjoy insufficient freedom – although this is less the case in 2018 than in 2002.

Men's attitudes towards marriage became more negative between 2002 and 2018, while women became more tolerant towards divorce and unmarried cohabitation, which is in line with previous research (Amato & Booth, 1991; Andersson, 2016; Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Day et al., 2011; Kapinus & Flowers, 2008). This confirms hypothesis four (women hold more positive attitudes towards alternative family types than men) and hypothesis five (women hold more negative attitudes towards traditional family types than men).

Table 4. Attitudes towards marriage and divorce of first-year psychology students of KU Leuven by gender in 2002-2003 and 2018-2019, ranked by the difference in (fully) agree-answers between men and women in 2018

	2002-2003				
	Men		Women		Difference
	0	+	0	+	%
3. Single parents can raise a child as well as two parents.	31	30	27	51	+21+
23. When parents fight a lot, it is better for their children that they get a divorce.	24	41	33	47	+6
22. I think that I will marry.	8	63	13	72	+9
32. The legal divorce procedure should proceed much more quickly.	26	71	25	66	-6
19. It is possible that I will cohabit later, without getting married.	20	68	15	64	-4
2. Gay people should also be able to get married.	15	73	10	84	+11
15. Marriage offers a type of security that you do not have if you cohabit.	26	22	32	27	+5
17. When you cohabit you miss the emotional security that you do have when you are married.	19	19	19	12	-7
27. When one of the partners becomes mentally handicapped, the other partner must maintain the marriage, regardless of their own happiness.	52	11	56	17	+6
29. These days, couples get divorced too easily.	16	68	24	71	+3
26. Only in a stable family can you find the necessary love, warmth, and happiness.	26	41	29	34	-7
1. It is okay to have children outside of a marriage.	23	42	21	51	+9
10. In order to attain financial security, it is important for a man to get married..	23	4	13	2	-2
12. You shouldn't get married, because relationships never last.	11	-	8	4	+4
11. You shouldn't have children, because relationships never last.	7	-	2	2	+2
31. Marriage is the best foundation for a family life.	22	41	32	26	-15
16. Marriage offers more advantages than unmarried cohabitation.	46	18	38	26	+8
18. Love, warmth, and happiness are things that only marriage can offer.	7	4	7	4	-
10. In order to attain financial security, it is important for a woman to get married.	19	8	13	4	-4
8. These days there are few marriages in which both partners are happy.	31	15	22	15	-
6. People who are married are usually happier than people who cohabit.	22	-	19	1	+1
7. I prefer a career over a family.	24	-	28	5	+5
14. If there are young children, parents must remain married no matter what.	17	31	27	6	-25*

4. I think it is okay that two people decide to get married with in the back of their mind the thought that: “if it doesn’t work out, we can still get divorced”.	17	7	10	5	-2
5. Marriage has lost a lot of its value.	22	59	27	58	-1
33. Children have more security when they’re born within a marriage.	22	48	25	47	-1
24. A marriage is not necessary in order to have a successful relationship.	-	82	5	92	+10*
28. A child needs its father and its mother.	19	78	11	82	+4
30. A child is happiest in an intact family.	35	64	23	60	-4
20. Both partners have greater freedom if you cohabit than when you’re married.	24	16	32	13	-3
25. By getting married, you develop a certain sense of responsibility that you otherwise wouldn’t have.	29	36	29	25	-11
9. Marriage is an outdated institution.	26	30	24	16	-14+
21. If you are married, then you have little personal freedom	21	14	8	6	-8*

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , +  $p < .10$ . 0 = Neutral, + = (Fully) agree.

Table 4. Continued

	2018-2019				
	Men		Women		Difference
	0	+	0	+	%
3. Single parents can raise a child as well as two parents.	28	35	22	64	+29*
23. When parents fight a lot, it is better for their children that they get a divorce.	40	28	33	43	+15*
22. I think that I will marry.	32	53	22	67	+14*
32. The legal divorce procedure should proceed much more quickly.	48	38	42	51	+13*
19. It is possible that I will cohabit later, without getting married.	22	68	23	57	+11+
2. Gay people should also be able to get married.	3	92	3	97	+5*
15. Marriage offers a type of security that you do not have if you cohabit.	30	20	24	25	+5
17. When you cohabit you miss the emotional security that you do have when you are married.	35	5	21	10	+5
27. When one of the partners becomes mentally handicapped, the other partner must maintain the marriage, regardless of their own happiness.	33	3	26	6	+3
29. These days, couples get divorced too easily.	35	53	29	56	+3
26. Only in a stable family can you find the necessary love, warmth, and happiness.	22	24	24	27	+3

1. It is okay to have children outside of a marriage.	15	72	14	75	+3
10. In order to attain financial security, it is important for a man to get married..	14	2	11	4	+2
12. You shouldn't get married, because relationships never last.	8	2	7	3	+1
11. You shouldn't have children, because relationships never last.	5	1	3	1	-*
31. Marriage is the best foundation for a family life.	21	10	18	10	-
16. Marriage offers more advantages than unmarried cohabitation.	39	23	38	22	-1
18. Love, warmth, and happiness are things that only marriage can offer.	8	2	4	1	-1
10. In order to attain financial security, it is important for a woman to get married.	16	4	11	3	-1*
8. These days there are few marriages in which both partners are happy.	30	14	29	13	-1
6. People who are married are usually happier than people who cohabit.	29	3	17	1	-2*
7. I prefer a career over a family.	26	8	24	6	-2
14. If there are young children, parents must remain married no matter what.	21	11	17	7	-4*
4. I think it is okay that two people decide to get married with in the back of their mind the thought that: "if it doesn't work out, we can still get divorced".	10	15	14	11	-4
5. Marriage has lost a lot of its value.	26	64	25	58	-6*
33. Children have more security when they're born within a marriage.	30	25	23	19	-6*
24. A marriage is not necessary in order to have a successful relationship.	5	87	8	81	-6
28. A child needs its father and its mother.	14	73	18	66	-7
30. A child is happiest in an intact family.	30	49	30	41	-8
20. Both partners have greater freedom if you cohabit than when you're married.	37	17	21	8	-9*
25. By getting married, you develop a certain sense of responsibility that you otherwise wouldn't have.	29	26	24	17	-9*
9. Marriage is an outdated institution.	39	26	25	16	-10*
21. If you are married, then you have little personal freedom	19	12	6	1	-11*

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , +  $p < .10$ . 0 = Neutral, + = (Fully) agree.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to develop insights into the recent evolution (2002-2018) of attitudes towards marriage and divorce of first-year (psychology) students of KU Leuven (N 2002: 167; N 2018: 471). There is a gap of about 20 years between these two assessments, which allows us to compare attitudes of two different generations of young adults. Special attention went to attitude differences by gender (of the respondent) and family background (the family in which respondents grew up in).

The results teach us that students in 2018 hold more positive attitudes towards alternative family types than those in 2002, which is in line with previous research (Branch-Harris & Cox, 2015; De Coninck et al., 2020; Treas et al., 2014). In 2018, students are more tolerant towards divorce and extramarital fertility. The institution of marriage becomes less popular: students are less likely to prefer it to unmarried cohabitation. They also believe that there is little to no difference in wellbeing between married and unmarried cohabiting partners. As for children, they do not necessarily have to be born and raised within a marriage, this can also take be done by single or cohabiting parents. There is also an increasing acceptance of marriage between LGBT-partners. Students also think it is okay for a partner to end a relationship – no matter how delicate the circumstances (see statement about handicapped partner).

Students in 2018 believe, more so than those in 2002, that people can get married with divorce as a ‘realistic option’ in the back of their minds if the marriage does not work out the way they hoped. Young adults these days do not perceive marriage as something in which they can get ‘stuck’ anymore. Paradoxically enough, for many this a key reason to get married: this step no longer represents a life-long commitment by default (Bauman, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002). However, that does not prevent young people from looking for safety and security: both in 2002 and 2018, most respondents believe that they will get married. The

liberal and progressive views towards alternative family types in 2018 are likely related to the fact that the presence or absence of children is no longer seen as a stimulus or impediment for divorce or single parenthood: in 2002, students were hesitant towards alternative family types when there were children present, while in 2018 they are more positive. The ‘inhibiting’ role of children for divorce has apparently decreased over time.

Although we have presented some interesting results, there are also some limitations to this study. The results are not representative for Flemish young adults. The sample was collected among first-year students of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of KU Leuven, assessed in 2002 and 2018. This repeated cross-sectional approach does not allow conclusions about the causes of the perceived attitude differences and other findings. In the sample, we also need to acknowledge an underrepresentation of young adults with a migration background and those with a technical or vocational educational background. The analysis therefore offers a limited picture, which needs to be supplemented and completed with more and different information. On the other hand, there is a clear social and cultural pattern found in the results. All findings point in the same direction. Furthermore, our sample does concern a group of young people who act as a kind of role model (‘cultural seismographs’) to others.

Given the observed differences between students in 2002 and 2018, future research might consider measuring and examining the varied and changing attitudes about marriage and divorce and how they might relate to actual family formation behavior using longitudinal designs. Such designs currently do not exist but would provide unprecedented insights into the interplay between family attitudes and behavior. There is a strong need for more research not only to better understand how marital and divorce beliefs or attitudes are shaped, but to identify specific pathways between attitudes and how they relate to family behavior and more general demographic trends.

## **Self-of-the-researcher**

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