

Population & Societies

Where do people meet their first sexual partner and their first life partner?

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In the rural France of former times, marriages were often between neighbours. Public dances then became the most popular meeting place, but their role declined with the rural exodus. Michel Bozon and Wilfried Rault describe the places, both new and traditional, where people meet their first life partner today. But for most, their first sexual relations are no longer with the first life partner; so where do they meet their first sexual partner?

The way that couples are formed has changed over the last half-century. In the early 1960s, marriage was the only legitimate option for entering a union and starting a family, and for women it was the only accepted way to begin their sexual life. Couples most frequently met at a public dance (*bal*) or at work, courted for a while without living together, then married.[1] Despite the norm condemning sex outside marriage, couples often engaged in first sexual intercourse some time before their wedding, which was brought forward if the woman became pregnant. From the late 1960s, this model progressively became obsolete, and marriage has now become a question of personal choice. Premarital cohabitation and informal unions are commonplace, and the longer time spent in education has led to an increase in the mean age at first entry into union. The tendency to pair up with a person of similar social background, known as homogamy, has persisted, however, [2] partly because people who are socially alike tend to frequent the same places in their daily life and leisure activities.[3]

Against this backdrop of a decline in marriage and the emergence of new communication technologies in the 2000s, where do people today meet their first life partner or their first sexual partner? The term "life partner" is used here in the broad sense, and refers to all persons with whom an individual has lived, whether married, in a civil partnership or otherwise.

Encadré

Context of Sexuality in France survey (INSERM-INED, 2006) and couple formation

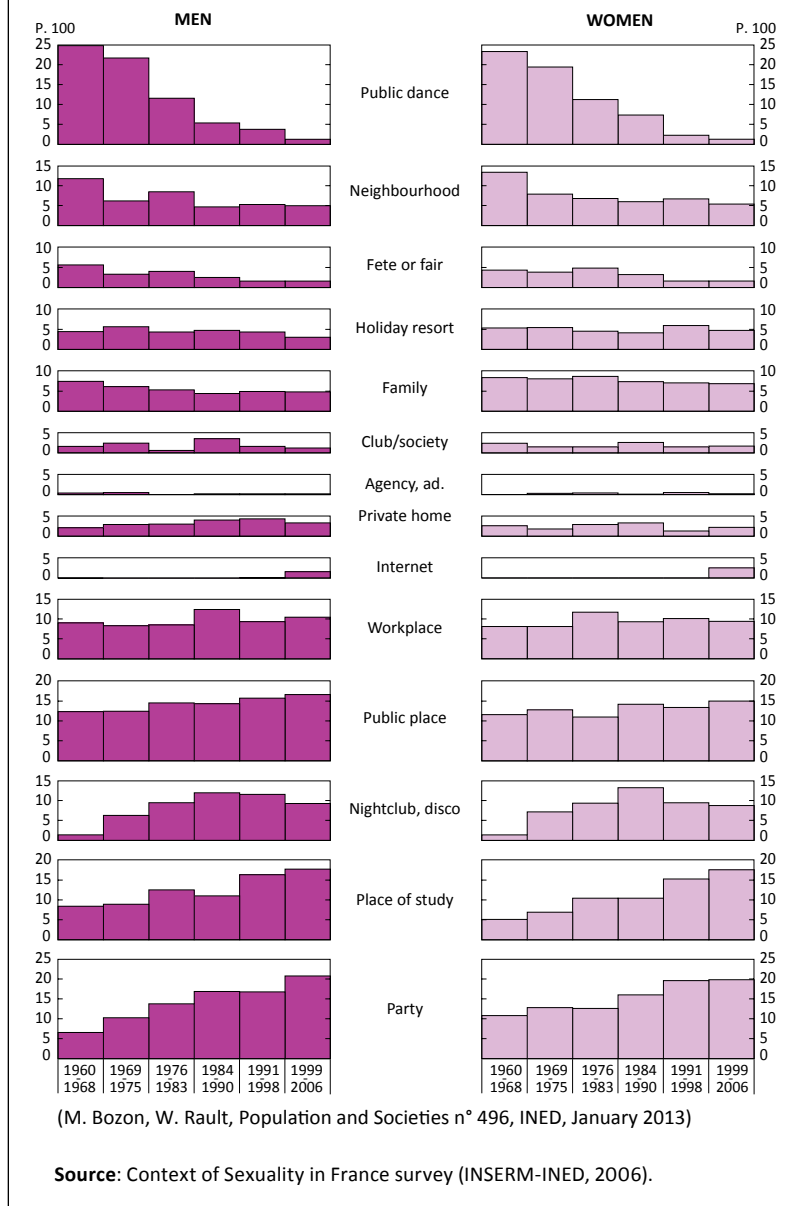
The Context of Sexuality in France survey (CSF), supported by the ANRS, was designed to analyse the new features of contemporary sexuality in France.[4] The survey data have also been used to study certain aspects of couple formation. It addressed both sexual debut and entry into union, but also young people's sexual and romantic relationships more generally. Regarding the first sexual partner and first life partner, respondents were asked: "Where did you meet for the first time?"

The survey was conducted by phone on a random sample of the population aged 18-69 comprising 12,364 individuals (6,824 women and 5,540 men).

The Context of Sexuality in France survey (Contexte de la sexualité en France, CSF; see Box) conducted by INSERM and INED, sheds light on these trends up to 2006.

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Figure 1. Meeting place of first partner by date of couple formation (1960-2006)



Meeting the first life partner: public dances replaced by parties with friends

In the post-war boom years (1945-1974), public dances were the preferred setting for finding a new partner in France; they were the meeting place of up to 25% of couples formed in the 1960s. With the rural exodus, their importance then declined, and encounters at dances practically disappeared, accounting for just 10% of meetings in the early 1980s and barely more than 1% in the early 2000s (Figure 1). Meetings through the family or in the neighbourhood also declined, while meetings in leisure settings increased. Discotheques replaced public dances as a meeting place for the first life partner (13% of encounters in the late 1980s), before waning in their turn (9% of encounters in the early

2000s). By contrast, more and more future life partners were met at private parties with friends or at school, and these settings accounted for 20% and 18% of meetings, respectively, in the early 2000s, versus just 12% and 11% at the turn of the 1980s. Following a trend that first began in the post-war period, first meetings less and less often take place under the watchful eye of elders – parents in particular – but rather in settings of "horizontal" sociability, i.e. among peers.

What is the role of Internet dating? When the first dating sites came online in the early 2000s, they were forecast to play a growing role in couple formation. At the time of the CSF survey in 2006, one-third of young people aged 18-24 had already visited a dating website [4], but few couples had been formed in this way: just 2% in the first half of the 2000s. The next INED survey on couples, scheduled for 2013 in collaboration with INSEE, will update this analysis for the most recent years, which have seen rapid growth in the number of dating sites and in the use of social networks.

First sexual partner and first life partner are met in different places

Given the relative stability over the last two decades in the places where people meet their first life partner, our analysis focuses on the period 1984-2006. The change in meeting places reflects a change in young people's sociability, which has become increasingly detached from the adult world. The first life partner is no longer necessarily the first sexual partner: only 19% of women and 10% of men born after

1981 had a first sexual partner who later became their life partner. From sexual debut to entry into union, romantic encounters do not occur in a single place. What do we see if we follow individual trajectories from the time of sexual debut?

First, school or university is by far the most common setting for finding a first sexual partner (Table). This is due both to the longer time spent in education, and to the decrease in age at sexual debut: the median age at first intercourse (age at which half of all individuals have already had their first sexual relation) was slightly above 17 years in the 2000s. More men than women meet their first sexual partner at school or university (39% of men versus 25% of women), and the situation is reversed for parties with friends (15% of women versus 10% of men). The

Table: Meeting place of first sexual partner and first life partner (1984-2006) (%)

Meeting place	Meeting with first sexual partner		Meeting with first life partner	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Place of study	39	25	15	14
Party with friends	10	15	18	18
Club/society	1	1	2	2
Public dance	2	3	4	4
Nightclub, disco	7	9	11	11
Fete or fair	1	2	2	2
Family	3	5	5	7
Public place	12	12	16	14
Holiday resort	10	8	4	5
Private home	2	2	4	3
Neighbourhood, district	6	8	5	6
Work	3	5	10	10
Agency, advertisement	0	0	0	0
Internet	1	1	1	1
Other	2	3	1	2
Don't know	1	1	3	2
TOTAL	100	100	100	100
<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>2,794</i>	<i>3,447</i>	<i>2,568</i>	<i>3,175</i>

(M. Bozon, W. Rault, Population and Societies n° 496, INED, January 2013)

Source: Context of Sexuality in France survey (INSERM-INED, 2006).

settings of daily living (school, work, public places and neighbourhood) account for more than 60% of encounters for men, versus less than 50% for women, who prefer more private places. When asked about how they saw their first partner when they first met, men much more frequently replied that it was a "casual" relationship (30% of men versus 10% of women), and the reply "boy/girlfriend or steady partner" was given by 56% of men and 63% of women. These differences in meeting places and in the perception of the first partner reflect social norms which tend to discourage women from dissociating sexuality and couple formation, while men can see their sexual debut as a more individual experience.

Compared with the meeting places of the first sexual partner, those of the first life partner are much less differentiated by gender. The place of study, now of similar importance for both men and women, is much less central than for the first sexual partner (15%). After reaching adulthood, the places frequented become more diverse, and include discotheques, the workplace and public places. For men and women alike, parties with friends become the preferred meeting place (18%). No major difference is observed between the two sexes.

Major disparities by social background

The meeting place of both first sexual partner and first life partner varies a great deal by individual social characteristics. The higher a person's level of education, the greater the likelihood that he or she will meet the first sexual partner in a place of study (generally at school) (Figure 2). For the low educated, meetings in public places and at places that offer dancing are more popular. The same tendencies are observed for women, although the place of study is less important for them.

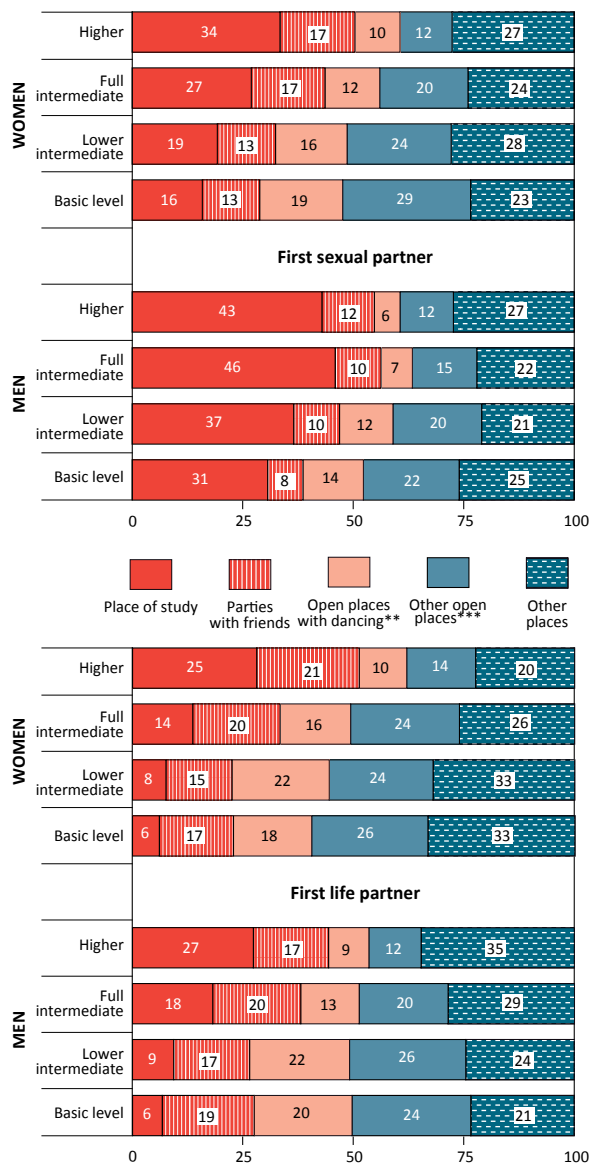
What is true for the first sexual partner is also true for the first life partner, although the gender differences are less marked. As enrolment in education becomes increasingly selective with age, schools and universities are a frequent meeting place for members of the highest-educated group (more than a quarter met there), compared with just 22% who met their life partner in a public space, be it a place of daily living (neighbourhood, public place) or an open place for dancing and sociability (public dance, nightclub, fete or fair). Twice as many of the lowest educated meet in this way (44%). Parties with friends are also a frequent meeting place for both high and low-educated. The trend towards greater independence from one's parents and the increased importance of peer networks are common to young people in all social groups.

The links between social background and forms of sociability are very strong, so these differences are also observed across social groups (as defined by the father's occupation).[5] For example, public dances and nightclubs are now preferred by farmers' children (to meet both the first sexual partner and the first life partner) and, to a lesser extent, by the children of manual workers (especially for the first life partner), but are less popular among the children of people in higher-level occupations. Conversely, more than 14% of the sons of people in higher-level occupations met their first partner in a holiday resort, versus just 1% of farmers' sons, who rarely go away on holiday during adolescence. Meeting a first life partner at a party with friends is common to all social groups, the children of people in higher-level occupations especially.

In the trajectory that leads from the first sexual relationship to first union, men's and women's experiences are not the same. While men frequently begin their sexual life with a partner met in a place of daily living (such as school), this is less often the case for women, who, even in adolescence, are more selective in their choices (party with friends). Later, for men and women alike, first partners are met in more diverse settings.

Preferred meeting places have changed over time, as young people have gained greater independence. Yet

Figure 2. Meeting place by sex and educational level* (percentage)



(M. Bozon, W. Rault, *Population and Societies* n° 496, INED, January 2013)

Note: * "Basic level" corresponds to no qualifications or lower secondary vocational qualification, "lower intermediate" to lower secondary qualification, "full intermediate" to a *baccalauréat* high-school diploma or equivalent, and "higher" to a qualification in higher or tertiary education.

** public dance, nightclub, fete or fair.

*** neighbourhood, street, district, public places.

Source: Context of Sexuality in France survey (INSERM-INED, 2006).

vary by social group. The social groups whose first encounters take place in open places with dancing are not the same as those who meet their partner in a holiday resort, so conditions still favour meetings between individuals from a similar background (homogamy). And while the electronic media are an increasingly important component of young people's social lives, dating sites still do not appear to play a major role in the first romantic relationship and in couple formation. Future surveys will shed light on the impact of the Internet – via social networks and dating sites – on young people's dating behaviour.

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Abstract

In France, people no longer find their first life partner as they did in the 1960s. Public dances and the neighbourhood are now much less frequent meeting places, while parties with friends (18%), the place of study (15%), public places (15%) and nightclubs and discotheques (11%) have grown in popularity. Despite the development of the electronic media in the 2000s, the Internet does not appear to play a major role in young people's search for their first life partner. Moreover, the first sexual partner today is generally not the first life partner. The place of study is the most frequent setting for meeting the first sexual partner, more often for men than for women (39% versus 25%). However, more women than men meet their first sexual partner at a party with friends (15% versus 10%). The settings of daily living (school, work, public places and neighbourhood) account for more than 60% of encounters for men, versus less than 50% for women. The higher a person's level of education, the greater the likelihood that he or she will meet the first sexual partner in a place of study (generally at school). For the low educated, meetings in public places and at places that offer dancing are more common.

each social group maintains its own preferences. Today, young people of all backgrounds meet partners at parties with friends and at the place of study, but the proportions