

It's Not A Revolution But It Sure Looks Like One: A Statistical Accounting of the Post-Sixties Sexual Revolution

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Was There A Sexual Revolution and If So, What Was It?

Despite the popular image of Alfred Kinsey as an inadvertent, mild-mannered grandfather to the post-1960s Sexual Revolution, most scholars in the survey research tradition deny that the sexual changes of the 1960s and 1970s were “revolutionary.” An analysis of sexual attitudes from a 1970 Kinsey Institute study concluded that the survey responses were “quite conventional and conservative, and not at all what one would expect if a sexual revolution had actually occurred” (Klassen *et al.* 1989, xxix). Although the responses were nonrepresentative because “90% of the respondents in the 1970 survey were married or had been married,” the conservatism of the responses led the authors to conclude that reports of the Sexual Revolution were exaggerations based in “pluralistic ignorance” (Klassen *et al.* 1989, xxvii, xxix). A later overview of public opinion surveys measuring sexual attitudes concluded “The trends in sexual attitudes that can be tracked hardly amount to a Sexual Revolution. They are both smaller and more nuanced than aptly fits a revolutionary characterization” (Smith 1990, 419). Qualitative sociologist Steven Seidman echoes the survey researchers’ dismissals. In *Romantic Longings*, Seidman called the Sexual Revolution “more rhetoric than reality,” while in *Embattled Eros*, he wrote that the Sexual Revolution “is important for its symbolic and strategic meanings, not as a descriptive or explanatory account of what actually happened in the postwar years” (1991, 122; 1992, 21). While Seidman and the survey researchers are technically correct for debunking some of the wilder claims of revolution, none of them actually defines “revolution” or describes how to distinguish “revolutionary” and “evolutionary” social change. In addition, while they can easily dismiss the Sexual Revolution as “pluralistic ignorance” or a mere

“rhetorical trope” (Seidman 1992, 21), the Sexual Revolution skeptics still cannot explain why the sexual changes of the 1960s and 1970s were *subjectively experienced* as revolutionary.

Feminist accounts of the Sexual Revolution and its aftermath express regret that the Revolution failed to live up to expectations (Grant, 1994; Rubin, 1990; Jeffreys, 1990), but generally feminist analyses have focused on contrasting the positive and negative outcomes of the Revolution rather than debating whether the Revolution occurred. In somewhat similar accounts of the Sexual Revolution, Barbara Ehrenreich and historian Stephanie Coontz not only attribute the Sexual Revolution to an emerging “singles culture” in large urban areas, but they both uphold Helen Gurley Brown’s 1962 bestseller, *Sex and the Single Girl*, as an exemplar of how protofeminist consciousness sprung from urban women’s experience with premarital sex (Ehrenreich *et al.* 1986, 54-62; Coontz 1992, 172). Third Wave feminist Paula Kamen concurs: “The greatest change the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s produced was obtaining social permission for women to have sex outside marriage” (2000, 9). These feminist accounts of the Sexual Revolution are correct to place central emphasis on premarital sex, but Ehrenreich and Coontz erroneously claim that feminist consciousness developed *after* experience with premarital sex. Instead, survey data will show that increases in the moral approval of women’s experience with premarital sex did not come until after 1968 and the emergence of the Second Wave of the women’s liberation movement.

Defining Revolution

The word “revolution” is more often applied metaphorically to social and technological trends than substantive political change, but social science has done little to clarify the usage of “revolution” in non-political contexts. Ted Gurr (1973, 363) suggests that “social change” can be classified by type of change (What has changed?), extent of change (How many things changed?), scope of change (How many people were affected by the change?), patterning of change (Is the change nonrandom?), and rate of change. Using Gurr’s conceptualization of revolution as a subcategory of “social change,” I define “revolution” as a social change that has (1) broad *extent*, (2) broad *scope*, and (3) occurs at a rapid *rate of change*. I differentiate “extent” and “scope” by defining “extent” as the number of institutions and social practices transformed by a social change, while “scope” refers to the number of individuals and social groups affected by that change. A social change cannot have both broad extent and scope, unless it simultaneously affects both a large number of social

practices *and* large groups of people from different social categories. If a trend does not fulfill the three criteria of broad extent, broad scope, and rapid change, then it cannot qualify as revolutionary. Using this standard, the post-1960s Sexual Revolution in the United States fulfills only one of the three criteria. The social changes popularly referred to as the Sexual Revolution were broad in scope, because they radically transformed attitudes about premarital sex in all major demographic groups of American society in less than a decade. On the other hand, the changes of the post-1960s Sexual Revolution were not broad enough in changing American sexual practices and attitudes to qualify as truly revolutionary. Attitudinal and behavioral changes about sexuality were considerably faster than more evolutionary attitude changes about equal rights for women and African-Americans, but not as fast as opinion shifts related to the Vietnam War. The Sexual Revolution *seemed* revolutionary while it was happening, because of the number of people affected by it, but the number of social practices and institutions affected by the “revolution” was surprisingly narrow.

The Narrowness of the Sexual Revolution: Evidence from Attitudes

The narrow “extent” of the Sexual Revolution can be established by focusing on where sexual change did not occur. American attitudes about homosexual and extramarital sex never liberalized during or after the 1960s, with moral condemnation of both practices consistently exceeding 70 percent (Smith 1990, 423-424). American opposition to antigay discrimination has increased since the 1980s, but only because of support for civil liberties of homosexuals, not because of decreasing belief in the immorality of homosexuality (Loftus 2001). American opinion polls have also registered over 60% support for sex education in public schools and publicly funded birth control information since the 1940s, which suggests that no liberalizing “revolution” occurred, because a majority of Americans already held liberal attitudes on those issues (Smith 1990, 428-430). Polls about birth control attitudes have changed wording so frequently that we learn more about the changing mindset of the pollsters than of their respondents. Pollsters in the 1940s asked whether respondents approved birth control for married couples, while their counterparts in the late 1950s and early 1960s asked whether they approved birth control for a generic “anyone.” Finally, in the 1970s and 1980s, pollsters asked whether adults approved birth control for teenagers (Smith 1990, 429-430).

The only major areas where attitudes showed rapid liberalization were premarital sex and the depiction of nudity in magazines and movies. When Gallup asked in 1969 whether it was wrong for a man and a woman to have sexual relations, only 21.4% of respondents said that premarital sex was “not wrong.” When the Gallup Poll asked a similar question in 1973, 43.0% of respondents said that premarital sex was “not wrong.” (1) Data from other 1969-1973 opinion polls indicate that opposition to premarital sex was declining. When the 1970 Virginia Slims Poll asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement “Premarital sex is immoral,” 59.5% said “Yes.” By contrast, the 1969 Gallup Poll found that 68.8% considered premarital sex morally wrong. By 1972, the NORC-GSS survey revealed that only 46.5% of respondents classified premarital sex as “Always wrong” or “Almost always wrong” (Smith 1990, 421-423). In the four years between 1969 and 1973, Americans morally opposed to premarital sex declined from almost two-thirds of the population to slightly less than one-half. Acceptance of nudity and pornography also increased between 1969 and 1973, but the trend toward liberalization was not as strong. According to the Gallup Poll, the percentage objecting to nudity in Broadway plays declined from 80.5% in 1969 to 64.8% in 1973—a hot issue at the time due to the theatrical success of *Hair* and *Oh, Calcutta!* Over the same 1969-1973 period, Gallup found that opposition to nudity in magazines dropped 72.7% to 55.0%, while opposition to topless waitresses decreased 74.3% to 58.7%. However, opposition to pornography and nudity never went below 50% and, by the mid-1970s, the convergence of feminist and Religious Right opposition to pornography reversed the liberalizing trend (Smith 1990, 424-429). The United States had a brief sexual revolution in attitudes after 1969, but it was an extremely narrow revolution limited to acceptance of premarital sex.

The Narrowness of the Sexual Revolution: Evidence from Behavior

If a large number of Americans had rapidly adopted new sexual practices in the 1960s and 1970s, this could have been evidence of a revolutionary shift, but there is no evidence for such a shift. According to Laumann’s *The Social Organization of Sexuality*, widespread use of oral sex by heterosexuals “...probably began in the 1920s, and over the past seventy years it has become more common in various social contexts and most social groups. ...Kinsey and his colleagues reported that about 70 percent of the white, middle-class, and well-educated married couples who volunteered to be interviewed in his studies...reported that they had had oral sex at least one time.

These were clearly the avant-garde of the sexual revolution in our society. Our data suggest that this proportion is now to be found in nearly all sections of society, not just the better-educated and middle-class groups” (1994, 102). Laumann and his co-authors concluded, “...the politically oriented movements salient during the latter of the 1960s did not *initiate* the increased incidence of oral sex. Rather, this period appears to mark a *leveling off* of the trend” (1994, 105). Although most Americans had already incorporated oral sex into their sexual repertoire before the 1960s, sexual liberalization during the 1960s and 1970s did not extend to adoption of anal sex. The percentage of men who describe anal stimulation by a female partner as “very appealing” is only 5.6%, while only 2.4% of female heterosexuals say the same about receiving anal stimulation. Similarly, only 6.2% of men said giving anal stimulation to a female partner was “very appealing,” while only 2.4% of straight women find anally stimulating a man “very appealing” (Laumann *et al.*, 158-159). Using Kate Millett’s definition of an ideal sexual revolution as “an end to traditional sexual inhibitions and taboos, particularly those that most threaten patriarchal monogamous marriage: homosexuality, illegitimacy, adolescent, pre-and extra-marital sexuality” (1970, 86), the behavioral changes of the post-1960s Sexual Revolution fall far short.

Because Americans did not radically change their sexual repertoire during the 1960s or 1970s, the behavioral component of the sexual revolution accomplished little beyond increasing the percentage of women who lost their virginity before marriage. In the 1933-1942 birth cohort, 54.4% of women were virgins when they married, but this dropped to 28.9% when the 1943-1952 cohort came to maturity (Laumann *et al.* 1994, 503). Since the median age of marriage for women for the 1943-1952 cohort was approximately 20 years, the biggest decrease in female premarital virginity for women probably occurred between 1963 and 1972, which overlaps with the period of greatest liberalization in attitudes. Questionnaires administered in 1970 by the Nixon Commission on Obscenity and Pornography also provide indirect evidence of a huge decrease in female premarital virginity during the transition to the Seventies. Since the median age at first marriage for all married women in 1970 was approximately 20 to 21 years old, the percentage of women with sexual experience before 21 serves as an imperfect indicator of the amount of women with premarital sex experience. In the 21-29 age group, 64% had lost their virginity before 21, while only 51% in the 30-59 group and 33% in the 60 and older group could say the same (W. Cody Wilson 1975, 53). Since more women in the older cohorts were married before age 21, the 13% difference between the 21-29 age group and the 30-59 age

group in premarital sex experience actually understates the increasing prevalence of premarital sex for young women. Other smaller scale surveys confirm the trend of greater premarital sex experience for women in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although it is difficult to draw generalizations from these studies individually because many of them consist of nonrandom samples of college students, the general trend is that young women after 1970 had considerably more premarital sex experience than their counterparts before 1970. In a

Table 1

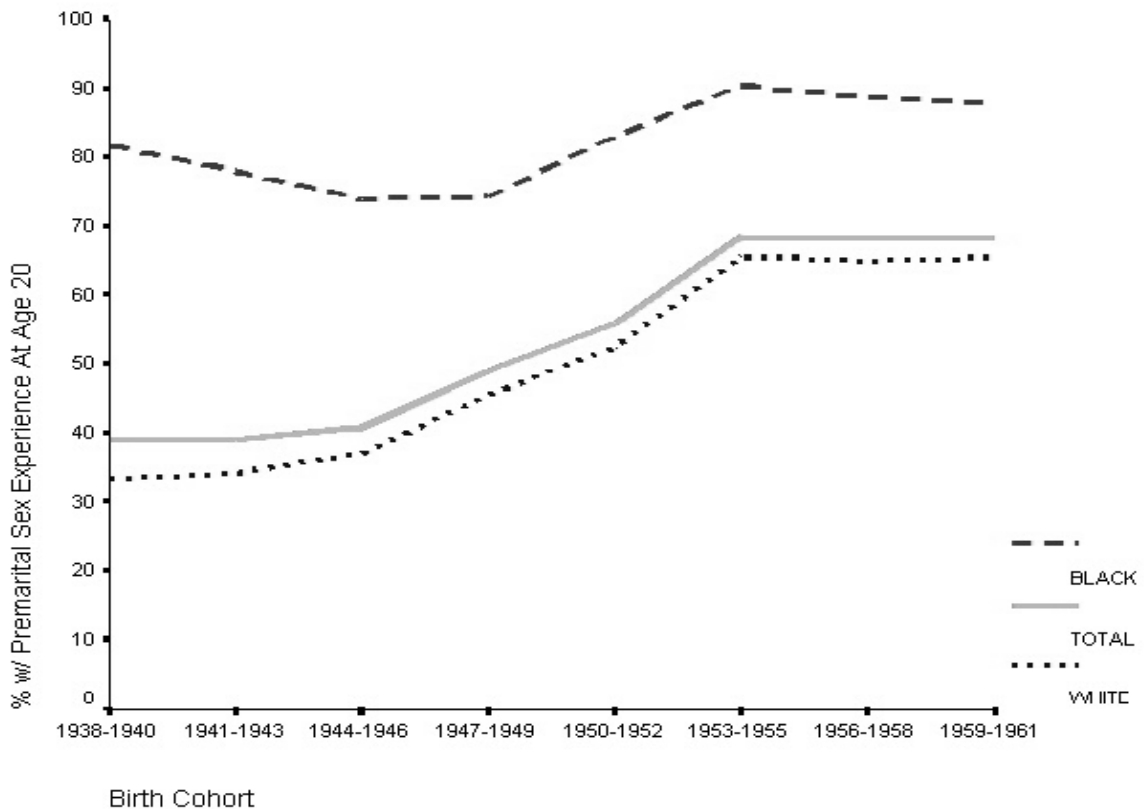
Study	Sample	Pre-Sexual Revolution	Post-Sexual Revolution
Bell and Chaskes, 1970	College students who had premarital sex before "going steady"	10% (1958, N = 250)	23% (1968, N = 205)
Bell and Chaskes, 1970	College students who had premarital sex after getting engaged	31% (1958, N = 250)	39% (1968, N=205)
Christensen and Gregg, 1970	Intermountain West college students, Mormon culture region	9.5% (1958, N=168)	32.4% (1968, N=220)
Christensen and Gregg, 1970	Midwestern college students	20.7% (1958, N=355)	34.3% (1968, N=483)
Vener and Stewart, 1974	13-17 age cohort	16.1% (1970, N=1913)	22.4% (1973, N=1972)
Bauman and Wilson, 1974	College cohort	46% (1968, N=186)	73% (1973, N=175)
Ferrell et al., 1977	College freshmen in 1967 sample, college seniors in 1971 sample	5.9% (1967, N=250)	37.0% (1971, N=250)
Ferrell et al., 1977	College freshmen in 1970 sample, college seniors in 1974 sample	22.2% (1970, N=89)	64.3% (1974, N=89)
King et al., 1977	College students, Southern U.S.	20.7% (1965, N=244)	37.3% (1970, N=295) 57.1% (1975, N=436)
Jessor and Jessor, 1977	High school students, freshmen in 1969 sample, seniors in 1972 sample	5% (1969, N=589)	55% (1972, N=483)
Jessor and Jessor, 1977	College students, freshmen in 1969 sample, seniors in 1972 sample	51% (1969, N=276)	85% (1972, N=226)
Zelnik and Kanter, 1977	White females, 15-19	21.4% (1971, N=3132)	30.8% (1976, N=2839)
Zelnik and Kanter, 1977	Black females, 15-19	51.2% (1971, N=1479)	62.7% (1976, N=1401)

Source: Richard Clayton and Janet Bokemeier, "Premarital Sex in the Seventies," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 42 (4): 762, Table 1.

comprehensive literature review of 12 premarital sex surveys replicated twice in the same setting, the prevalence of premarital sex for young women was always greater in the second survey than in the first (Clayton & Bokemeier 1980, 762). Similar results led another literature review to conclude, "...there is not a single major study that has been made in the late sixties that has found premarital coital rates that were the level of those found in the late 1950's and early 1960's" (Cannon & Long 1971, 40)

Another more systematic data source on American women's experience of premarital sex is the 1982 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), which does not have the nonrepresentativeness problems faced by collegiate surveys based on convenience samples. According to the NSFG, the percentage of women who experienced premarital sex by age 20 increased from 55.9% for the 1950-1952 cohort to 68.4% for the 1953-1955 cohort immediately afterward, but the overall pattern of movement is a steady upward climb of 27.4% from the 1944-1946 cohort to the 1953-1955 cohort (Hofferth, Kahn, and Baldwin 1987, 49). Since these cohorts are nine years apart, this represents an average increase of approximately 3% per year. Data from the NSFG survey are summarized in Chart 1.

Chart 1



Source: Sandra L. Hofferth et al., *Premarital Sexual Activity among U.S. Teenage Women over the Past Three Decades*, *Family Planning Perspectives* 19 (2): March-April 1987: 49, Table 3.

The Broad Scope of the Sexual Revolution

To compare attitudes on premarital sex in different demographic groups, both before and after the revolution, it is necessary to mix two different surveys. The baseline for pre-Sexual Revolution attitudes is a 1965 poll conducted by Gallup for Look magazine (Erskine 1966), while the measurement of post-Sexual Revolution attitudes was taken from the 1972 module of the General Social Survey, derived from the 1972-1995 Cumulative GSS data file. As the comparison of the two polls shows, all genders, races, religions, and educational groups had more permissive attitudes about premarital sex in 1972 than in 1965. Although the sexual revolution was attitudinally narrow, because it did not go beyond reducing moral condemnation for premarital sex, the sex revolution had “broad” support in the sense that almost all demographic groups were more permissive than they were in 1965.

Table 2: Percentage Who Oppose Premarital Sex

1965 Look/Gallup Poll		1972 General Social Survey	
GENDER			
54%	Men	41.1%	Men
73%	Women	56%	Women
AGE			
63%	20-30	25.3%	20-30
62%	31-50	50.5%	31-50
68%	51+	65%	51+
RACE			
66%	White	51.9%	White
49%	Nonwhite	30.9%	Nonwhite
EDUCATION			
66%	College Degree	34.3%	College Degree
65%	Secondary & Trade Schols	44.3%	High School
62%	Grade School	58.1%	Grade School
RELIGION			
64%	Protestant	52.4%	Protestant
68%	Roman Catholic	50.9%	Roman Catholic
55%	All other	18.5%	Other

Source: 1965 data from Hazel Gaudet Erskine, “The Polls: More on Morality and Sex,” Public Opinion Quarterly, 31 (1): Spring 1967, 122-123; 1972 data tabulated by author from GSS cumulative data file.

The Speed of the Sexual Revolution

Because of the lack of consistent, reliable attitudinal and behavioral data on premarital sex before 1965, it is extremely difficult to determine whether the changes of the late 60s represented “revolution” or a more slow-paced “evolution.” With a few exceptions, most of the available data from the 1960s on premarital sex attitudes and behavior comes from nonrandom surveys drawn from convenience samples of college students, which make the surveys unuseful for generalizing to the population as a whole. On the other hand, it is possible to make relative judgments about the speed of the Sexual Revolution by comparing the rate of change for sexual attitudes and behavior with the rate of public opinion change for other burning issues of the 1960s.

In Page and Shapiro’s survey of fifty years of American opinion polls, they distinguished three different types of changes in public opinion: “abrupt change,” “gradual change,” and “fluctuation.” Abrupt change referred to a change in ten percentage points per year. Fluctuation referred to “two or more significant changes in opposite directions within two years, or three or more within four years,” while gradual change referred to any substantive change that did not fit either the “abrupt change” or “fluctuation” category (1992, 53). Using Page and Shapiro’s criteria for “abruptness” as a benchmark, social change cannot be classified as a “revolution” unless the rate of change is ten or more percentage points per year. Based on this standard, the only change that comes close to qualifying as revolutionary or abrupt is the 9.5 percent decrease (from 68.8% in the 1969 Gallup Poll to 59.3% in the 1970 Virginia Slims poll) in moral condemnation of premarital sex. The 1982 NSFG survey shows a 12.5% increase in premarital sex experience for the women of the 1953-1955 birth cohort compared to the 1950-1952 cohort, but it is impossible to tell if this increase occurred quickly enough to meet Page and Shapiro’s criteria of “abruptness.”

Steven Seidman argued that the Sexual Revolution was merely a rhetorical trope to “imbue sex and sexual conflicts with a moral and political seriousness hitherto lacking” by linking sexual conflict to the major social movements of the 1960s. Based on Seidman’s argument, an interesting test of the revolutionary status of the Sexual Revolution is to determine how the speed of the attitudinal and behavioral shifts about premarital sex compared with 1960s-era opinion shifts about African-American civil rights, feminism, and the Vietnam War—all topics that meet Seidman’s criteria of “moral and political seriousness.” Compared to shifts in opinion on foreign policy during

the Vietnam War, the rate of change in sexual attitudes and behavior was more “evolutionary” than “revolutionary.” According to Page and Shapiro, the most abrupt public opinion shift on any issue in the 1960s occurred when the percentage of Americans describing themselves as “hawks” about the Vietnam War declined 22% in the three-month period between February and April 1968 in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive (1992, 57). Since there is no event that could reasonably be classified as “the Tet Offensive of the Sexual Revolution,” it is unsurprising that sexual opinions did not display the “revolutionary” shifts detected in opinion on foreign policy.

Although shifts in sexual attitudes and behavior were slow compared to changes in Vietnam policy, those attitudes and behavior changed more rapidly than opinions on most domestic issues. According to Page and Shapiro, “In the domestic realm, comparable frequencies of abrupt change occurred only on issues related to the economy and to Nixon and Watergate. In all these cases, sudden changes in events and circumstances led to correspondingly quick changes in public opinion, but such changes are more common in the realm of foreign policy” (1992, 55-56). Although America’s sexual behaviors and attitudes did not change as fast as their attitudes about Vietnam, they liberalized much faster than comparable attitudes about equality for women and African-Americans. Between 1942 and 1985, the percentage of white Americans who said that white and black students should attend “the same schools” increased “in a smooth, nearly linear fashion over the forty-three year period, averaging only 1.4 percentage points of opinion change per year” (Page & Shapiro 1992, 62). Although the civil rights movement accomplished abrupt institutional changes in American society, the attitudinal changes due to the movement were much more “evolutionary.” Similarly, attitudinal support for women’s equality did not spike upward during the 1960s, but followed a gradual linear trend. In 1937, only 18% of Americans approved of a married woman working outside the home if she has a husband capable of supporting her. By 1975, 71% supported married women working outside the home (Page & Shapiro 1992, 100-101). Overall, this represented a gradual increase in support for women working outside the home of approximately 1.4% per year, an average practically equal to the rate of increase in support for racial integration. By contrast, the 1969 and 1973 Gallup polls, which used extremely similar question wording, detected a 21.6% increase in the percentage of Americans who classified premarital sex as “not wrong,” an increase of 5.4% per year. Although the 5.4% per year increase cannot compare to rapid shifts in foreign policy attitudes, it is almost four times faster than similar opinion shifts about racial integration and women in the labor force. Although sexual attitude shifts in the

1960s or 1970s do not meet the criteria for revolutionary rate of change, their speed in comparison to equally groundbreaking, but more gradual shifts in racial and gender attitudes explains why the Sexual Revolution *felt* revolutionary at the time.

Conclusion

The post-1960s Sexual Revolution was too narrow in its effects to be revolutionary, but had the broad mass support that often accompanies revolutionary shifts in behavior. Determining whether to classify the speed of the Sexual Revolution as “revolutionary” or “evolutionary” is more difficult. Attitudinal and behavioral changes were much slower than shifts in foreign policy, but much faster than more evolutionary and linear attitude changes about equality for women and African-Americans. The speed of the Sexual Revolution does not fit an ideal-typical model of either “revolutionary” or “evolutionary” change, but instead the Sexual Revolution might be more accurately classified as rapid evolution. It was the broad base of support for the American Sexual Revolution along with an above-average (although not revolutionary) rate of change in sexual attitudes that simultaneously explains why the Sexual Revolution felt revolutionary to those who experienced it, but left few impacts (except in the realm of premarital sex) that survey researchers and demographers consider revolutionary.

Notes

1. In the 1973 poll, Gallup asked respondents whether it was wrong for “people” to have sex before marriage, while the 1969 poll asked whether it was wrong for “a man and a woman” to have premarital sex. Although the 1973 question is not verbatim from the 1969 poll, the more age- and gender-neutral wording may have induced sexual conservatism in some respondents by invoking images of homosexual or teenage sex, but not premarital heterosexual sex between consenting adults. This suggests that 1973 poll may have slightly understated the speed of liberalization regarding premarital sex.

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