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Public Opinion Regarding Various Forms of Sexual Behavior

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Is the sexual revolution over? Are the youth of today more liberal or more strict than the youth of yesterday in their interpretations of sexual morality? Does the recent attack on homosexuals' rights or the resurfacing of the campaign against pornography indicate a general shift in social attitudes toward more restrictive values regarding sexual behavior?

To examine these questions we gathered the results from public opinion studies done over the last 30 years which asked people about their attitudes in four major areas: birth control and sex education; the morality of premarital sex and the morality of extramarital sex; attitudes toward homosexuality; and exposure to as well as attitudes toward pornography. We find from our analysis that attitudes toward birth control and sex education in the public schools have become increasingly liberal since World War II and will continue to in the near future. Attitudes toward premarital sex are also becoming more liberal and this trend is likely to continue. Extramarital sex, however, has always been rejected by an overwhelming majority of Americans. There is no recent trend for this question and, in fact, the youngest generation is more opposed than the teens of the sixties and early seventies. There is little data available to study trends in attitudes toward homosexuality. What little

evidence has been there suggests that there is a slight increase in acceptance of the practice (although the overall level is quite low), that this trend will continue slowly, but that the generational differences on this question have stopped increasing as well. Finally, there has been a rapid decline in the popularity of pornography--both in public exposure and in public acceptance of the availability of pornography. This decline in support has been particularly great in the younger generations, who were once the main supporters of pornography (as well as the chief advocates of the other kinds of

sexual freedoms discussed here. Birth Control and Sex Education in the Public Schools

Figure 1 shows the trends in support for availability of birth control information and for sex education in the public schools. There are also a few individual data points shown for questions which were not repeated over time. These points are included to show the level of support for propositions which are related to the trend items. It is interesting to note that during the World War II years, the percent supporting\availability of birth control information decreased. We lack data for the 1950s and it is not until the 1960s that we see the increases in support shown in Figure 1.

//Figure 1
here//

Much has been made of the sexual revolution of the 1960s--the difference in values between the younger generation and their parents and grandparents. We can study the sexual revolution--the changing values of the younger generation--by using the social scientist's technique of cohort analysis. A birth cohort consists of all the people born during a certain span of time. When we say that the young are different in their values we are saying that people who were born after a certain date are different in their opinions than people who were born before a certain date. If the sexual revolution consists of an emergence of new values among the young, then in any of our surveys those born after a certain date (younger cohorts) should always be much more liberal on sexual attitudes. Therefore, the key subgroups to analyze are people who were born during different eras of recent American history. These groups will form our cohorts. Table 1 shows the cohorts which we will use. The younger generation of the 1960s is the "New" cohort--people born between 1940 and 1955. They were adults 30 and under in 1970 and are ages 23 through 38 in 1978. The younger generation of the 1970s and 1980s is the "Future" cohort. They are between 18 and 22 years of age in 1978. //Table 1 here//

Figure 2 shows the trend in cohort differences for the question of whether or not birth control information should be available for anyone who wants it. At any point in time, we see that those in the younger cohorts are more in favor of supplying birth control information. This is the pattern which we expect under our interpretation of the sexual revolution. Figure 2 also shows that a great deal of attitude change has taken place within each cohort, with the exception of the oldest group. Both the young and the middle cohorts--the "establishment" in 1970--show a great deal of change in the liberal direction on the question of birth control during the years of the sexual revolution.

//Figure 2
here//

On the question of providing birth control information to teenagers, the cohorts show the same pattern of differences. In addition, for this question there is an educational difference within each cohort--the more educated, the more in favor of distributing information. The data from the NORC General Social Survey questions on providing birth control information to teenagers are analyzed by cohort and education in Table 2. This same pattern--a cohort

//Table 2 here//

difference and an educational difference within each cohort was also found in 1959

for the more general question about providing birth control information to those

who want it. As cohorts became more liberal on this question (as shown in Figure 2) the educational differences disappeared.

The picture that emerges from the birth control questions is that the sexual revolution is alive and well--younger cohorts are progressively more liberal and there are further educational differences on controversial issues. But this is not the pattern for all of the questions which we will analyze and it is not even the pattern for all of the questions pertaining to birth control and sex education in the schools.

For sex education in the schools, there has been a slowing of the rate of change. The youngest cohort is no more in favor of the practice than the next older cohort--and within the youngest cohort, it is the better educated who have "turned away." The differences by cohort and education in support for sex education in the public schools are shown in Table 3.
//Table 3 here//

Premarital Sex and Extramarital Sex

The trends on these questions are summarized in Figure 3. Premarital sex shows a tremendous gain in approval between the late 1960s and now. Extramarital sex shows a high level of disapproval and little sign of change. //Figure 3 here//

The gain in approval for premarital sex has been especially strong in the younger cohorts. These trends are shown in Figure 4. The younger the cohort, the more rapid the increase in approval for premarital sex between 1972 and now.

We also note, however, that the youngest cohort is not clearly the most liberal group.

They are the least likely to say that premarital sex is always wrong, but the New cohort--the younger generation of the 1960s--is the most **likely to** say it is never **wrong**. The Future cohort--the current younger generation--is still quite liberal, comparatively speaking, but this is another indication that the sexual revolution may be slowing. The appropriate description of the trend is not that there is a reaction or a return to fundamental values, but rather that time: rate of change--the increasing differentiation of the generations-- has slowed. The values of the 1960s are becoming consolidated. //Figure 4 here// Within cohorts there is no relationship between education and approval of premarital sex.

On the question of extramarital sex there is also a cohort difference. The percent thinking that extramarital sex is sometimes justifiable is higher in the younger cohorts. The differences between cohorts, once again, stop with the 60s generation. The data are shown in Table 4.

//Table 4 here//

Figure 3 shows that there is no trend in the 1970s on approval of extramarital

sex. Further analysis shows that this is also the case within cohorts--the percent approving and disapproving are stable for the period of time we are able to examine. There is a small educational difference on this question. Within each cohort, those with college training are about 10 percent more likely

to say that extramarital sex is sometimes not wrong.

Homosexuality: Tolerance and Approval

The discussion of the public view of homosexuality is divided into two topics: how much people approve of homosexual behavior and how much tolerance people will show for the civil rights and civil liberties of homosexuals. There is very little trend data which can be used to study these questions. Figure 5 shows the information that was available. There are several other

//Figure 5 here//

tables showing public views of homosexuality printed in the last issue of Public Opinion.

There is a slight increase in approval of homosexual behavior. The percent thinking it is not wrong at all has gone from 10.6 percent in 1973 to 14.2 percent in 1977. Other than this, there are no other reliable changes to report.

The practice of homosexuality is much more **accepted in the** younger cohorts. The percentages are shown in Table 6. Once again, there is little difference between the younger generation of the 60s and the younger generation of the 70s. The trend toward greater acceptance of homosexuality, slight as it is, appeared in each cohort.

//Table 6
here//

There are substantial cohort differences in toleration of the civil

rights and civil liberties of homosexuals. The data for the "college teaching" question are shown in Table 7.

//Table 7 here//

Within each cohort, there are further substantial differences by educational level in tolerance. Table 7 shows that the reason the younger generations do not differ in tolerance is that the well educated of the 70s generation are no more tolerant than the well educated of the 60s generation.

Pornography

The summary of trends in public opinion on pornography is that people's exposure to pornography is going down, opposition to pornography is going up, but there remains a substantial minority of the population who do not find nudity or sexually explicit materials offensive. The general trend data on the pornography issue are summarized in Figure 6.

//Figure 6
here//

We have found that support for easier access to birth control information, approval of premarital sex, and approval of homosexuality have gone up at least a little within each cohort in the past few years. With exposure to pornography we find **that younger** cohorts have had more experience, but that the trend is toward less interest within each cohort. In fact the dropoff is the greatest in the youngest age groups. The data are shown in Figure 7. Within cohorts

//Figure 7 here//

there is no relationship between educational attainment and attending x-rated movies.

Figure 6 also shows an increase in principled objections to pornography after 1975. There is an increase in the percent who believe that pornography leads to a breakdown in morals and causes people to commit rape. This trend appears in each cohort, as shown in Figure 8. There are substantial cohort

//Figure 8 here//

differences in objection to pornography, as shown in Figure 8. There are also educational differences--the college educated are about 10 percent less likely than the rest in each cohort to believe in the ill effects of pornography.

The trends in support for restriction of pornography are less certain. The cohort differences on this issue, however, are great. The younger cohorts are much more in favor of restricting pornography to adults, while the older cohorts favor a complete ban. The data are shown in Table 8

//Table 8
here//

Within cohorts there are no-educational differences on this question.

Summary

Whither the sexual revolution? The data reported here have demonstrated two points: (1) the 70s generation is not more sexually liberal than the 60s generation on several of the questions examined here, although both are more liberal than older generations; and (2) there are divergent trends in current opinion on sexual matters.

Future forecasts of public opinion on these questions must take into account of the cohort differences in public opinion. In 1985 over 60 percent of the adult population will be comprised of people born in 1940, in 1970 this figure was 29 percent. As the older cohorts are replaced by the younger-cohorts in the population, there will be a general shift in public opinion in the liberal direction for every opinion measure considered here because older, more conservative people will be replaced by younger, more liberal people. This demographic shift in public opinion might be offset by a within-cohort trend toward conservatism--as for the pornography items--but it is clear that

there is no indication of a general shift in the conservative direction. _

Considering the weight of the evidence, and with the usual assumption of the constancy of the factors not studied here, we believe that the appropriate forecast is continued change in a liberal direction for most items, but at a slower rate than in the recent past.

Technical
note

There are known problems in sampling members of young cohorts as they enter the adult population. They are usually undercounted in two ways. First, younger people are harder to locate for personal interviews. This produces too few of them in a national sample but does not result in a large sampling bias for most of the opinion measures which are of interest in reports such as this. The second reason for the undercount is that in the early adult years many people are in college and/or living in residential quarters which do not ordinarily fall into the area probability sampling frame used by national survey organizations. This results in an undercount of the better educated and especially of the better educated who live away from home. This bias clearly threatens the results reported here. We doubt that the bias is so great as to change the general nature of the conclusions, and our belief is supported by the analyses we have done examining cohort differences within educational levels.

Documentation for Figure 2

Questi
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(Category Displayed)

	<u>Documentation for Figure 1</u>					
Cohort						
Future		AIPO				
New	<u>12/59</u>	<u>8/62</u>	<u>5/63</u>	<u>11/64</u>	<u>2/65</u>	
young	72	72	74	81		80
Middle						
Old	NORC GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY 3/74					
	3/75	3/77				
	91	89	91			
		AIPO				
		<u>1/40</u>	<u>12/43</u>	<u>11/45</u>	<u>3/47</u>	
	69	61		61	64	
	NORC GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY 3/74					
	3/75	3/77	78	79	82	
	NORC GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY <u>3/74</u> <u>3/75</u> <u>3/77</u>					
	79	76	77			
	AIPO					
	<u>4/65</u>	<u>1969</u>	<u>1970</u>	<u>12/77</u>		
	69	71	65	77		

In some places in the United States, it is not legal to supply birth control information. How do you feel about this--do you think birth control information should be available to anyone who wants it or not? (Should be)

Would you approve or disapprove of having government health clinics furnish birth control information to married people who want it?(Approve)

Do you think birth control information should be available to teenagers who want it or not.(Should be available)

Would you be for or against sex education in the publis schools? (For)

Do you approve or disapprove of schools giving courses in sex education?(Approve)

It has been suggested that a course in sex education be given to students in high schools. Do you approve or disapprove of this plan?(Approve)

Professional birth control information, services and counseling should be made available to unmarried teenagers who are sexually active.(Yes)

How do you feel about birth control information and services being made available to unmarried young:persons 18 years and over? (Favor)

Do you favor or oppose making birth control devices available to teenage boys and girls? (Favor)

Data Source Date Percent

AIPO
5/43
68

AIPO 6/72 62

AIPO
1/71
69

AIPO 2/77 56

Table 1
Birthdates and Ages of Cohorts

Cohort	Birthdates		1959		
Future	36-52			1908-19	1
New	53+	1978	after	24	9
Young		18-22	1955	before	7
Middle	18-30	23-38	1940-19	1907	0
Old	31-46	39-54	55		
	47-63	55-71	1925-19	Age in	
21-35	64+	72+	39	Year:	

Percent Favoring Availability of Birth Control
Information

Data Source: AIPO NORC GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS
Date: 1959 1974 1975 1977

		98	97
	96	95	96
81	93	91	91
73	88	87	89
66	80		
		71	75

Table 2
 Percentage Within Each Cohort Favoring Availability of Birth
 Control
 Information to Teens, By Educational Groups
 Data Source: Pooled 1974,1975 and 1977 NORC General Social
 Surveys

Education	Future New		Cohort		
			Young	Middle	Old
0-11 Yrs.	92(62)	(295)	76(381)	63(515)	45(338)
High School	(63)	(607)	86(442)	76~318)	54(56)
College	100(24)	95(664)	87(356)	85(232)	59(93)
Total	94	91 83	72	49	

Table 3
 Percent in Each Cohort Favoring Sex Education in the
 Public Schools, By Educational Groups
 Data Source: Pooled 1974, 1975, 1977 NORC General Social
 Surveys

Education	Cohort				
	Future	New	Young	Young	Old
0-11 Yrs.	(62)	75(296)	72(386)	6°(518)	44(337)
High School	(63)	(610)	(443)	76(320)	56(57)
College	92(24)	94(664)	90(357)	82(232)	62(93)
Total	87	88	82	69	49

Documentation for Figure 3

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Data Source, Date, Percent

Question Wording (Category Displayed)

NORC GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS

3/73 3/74 3/76 3/77

(Always Wrong)

69 73 68 72

(Not Wrong at All)

4 2 4 3

What is your opinion about a married person having sex relations with someone other than the marriage partner-is it always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all? AIPO

AIPO AIPO

7/69 7/73

(Wrong) 68 48

(Always wrong) 65

(Not wrong at all) 4

There's been a lot of discussion about the way morals and attitudes about sex are changing in this country. If a man and a woman have sex relations before marriage, do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all'

There's a lot of discussion about the way morals and sex are changing in this country. Here is a question that is often discussed in women's magazines. What are your views on this? Do you think it is wrong for people to have sex relations before marriage or not?

26 30 32 36 38

Documentation for Figure

4

Percent Thinking Premarital Sex is Always Wrong, Never Wrong

Data Source: NORC GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS

Cohort	1972		1974		1975		1977		1978	
	Always	Never	Always	Never	Always	Never	Always	Never	Always	Never
Future							12	42	14	47
New	17	40	15	47	17	49	17	51	17	54
Young	36	25	31	27	31	29	30	32	32	32
Middle	42	18	46	18	37	17	43	23	40	21
Old	60	12	56	11	58	12	59	15	56	14

Table 4
 Cohort Differences in Attitudes Toward Extramarital Sex
 Data Source: Pooled 1973,1974,1976,1977 NORC GENERAL SOCIAL
 SURVEYS

Cohort	Percent Saying Extramarital Sex is Wrong			(N)
	Always	Sometimes	Not At All	
Future	61	34	3	(175)
New	60	34	5	(2056)
Young	70	25	3	(1568)
Middle	79	19	2	(1485)
Old	89	9	1	(673)

Question Wording (Category
Displayed)

Documentation for Figure 5

NORC GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS 3/73 3/74
3/76 3/77
70 67 67 69
11 12 15 14

NORC GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS
3/73 3/74 3/76 3/77
61 62 62 62

What about sexual relations between two
adults of the same sex--do you think it
is always wrong, almost always wrong,
wrong only sometimes or not wrong at all?

(Always Wrong)
(Not Wrong At All)

What about a man who admits that he is a
homosexual? Suppose this admitted
homosexual wanted to make a speech in
your community. Should he be allowed to
speak or not?
(Allow)

(SAME LEAD AS PREVIOUS QUESTION) Should
such a person be allowed to teach in a
college or university? (Allow)

In general do you think homosexuals
should or should not have equal rights in
terms of job opportunities? (Should)

Do you think homosexual relationships
between consenting adults should or
should not be legal? (Should)

Now I'd like to ask you about the hiring
of homosexuals in specific occupations.
Do you think homosexuals should or should
not be hired for the following
occupation? Elementary School Teachers
(Should)

Do you think homosexuals should or should
not be allowed
to adopt children?

Data Source, Date, Percent

47	~50	52	49	
AIPO				
7/77				
72				
				43
				27
				14

Table 6

Cohort Differences in Approval of Homosexual Relations
Data Source: Pooled 1973,1974,1976,1977 NORC GENERAL SOCIAL
SURVEYS

Cohort	Percent Saying Homosexual Relations Are Wrong			(N)
	Always	Sometimes	Never	
Future	58	21	19	(175)
New	57	18	21	(2054)
young	69	14	12	(1566)
Middle	77	9	8	(1482)
Old	84	5	3	(672)

Table 7

Percentage Within Each Cohort Tolerant of Homosexual
Teaching in A College or University, By Educational Groups
Data Source: Pooled 1973,1974,1976,1977 NORC GENERAL SOCIAL
SURVEYS

Education	Cohort				
	Future	New	Young	Middle	Old
0-11 Yrs.	57(61)	44(403)		35(509)	28(699)16(468)
High School	(84)	1(787)5 (586)		7339)	22< 87)
College	8 (30)	81(867)		(475)	55(345)(120)
Total	63	66	51	38	20

Documentation for Figure

6

Question Working (Category
Displayed?

The next questions are about pornography--books, movies, magazines and photographs that show or describe sexual activities. I am going to read some opinions about the effects of looking at or reading such sexual materials. As I read each one please tell me if you think sexual PORNOGRAPHY materials do or do not have that effect; --

Sexual materials lead to breakdown of morals.
(Disagree)
Sexual materials lead people to commit rape.
(Disagree)

Which of these statements comes closest to your feelings about pornography laws?

There should be laws against the distribution of pornography whatever the age. (Agree) There should be laws against the distribution of pornography to persons under 18. (Agree) There should be no laws forbidding the distribution of -pornography. (Agree)

Have you seen an X-Rated movie in the last year?
(yes)

Do you think the standards in this co, unity regarding the sale of sexually explicit materials should be stricter than they are now, not as strict, or kept as they are now?
(Stricter)

Have you, yourself ever seen an x-rated movie?

(yes)

Would you find topless nightclub waitresses objectionable? (No)

Would you find actors and actresses appearing in the nude in Broadway plays objectionable?

(No)

Data Source? Date,
Percent

NORC GENERAL SOCIAL
SURVEYS

3/73 3/75 3/76 3/78
42 40 40 43

NORC
COMMISSION GENERAL SOCIAL
SURVEYS

1970 3/73 3/75 3/76 3/78
56 53 51 55 57
49 50 52 53 57

47 48

9 11

25 19

50 49

8 7

18 15

AIPO
3/77
45

35

39

34

Documentation for Figure

7

Percent Attending an X-Rated Movie in the
Last Year Data Source: NORC GENERAL SOCIAL
SURVEYS

Cohort	1973	1975	1976	1978
Future			45	26
New	44	34	29	21
Young	26	15	14	14
Middle	12	8	7	6
Old	2	4	4	3

Documentation for Figure

8

Percent Believing that Sexual Materials Lead to A Breakdown
in Morals Data Source: NORC GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS

Cohort	1973	1975	1976	1978
Future			3`	45
New	39	37	42	44
Young	53	51	57	62
Middle	62	65	67	71
Old	71	74	76	77

Table 8
 Cohort Differences in Attitudes Toward Pornography Laws
 Data Source: Pooled 1973,1975,1976 and 1978 NORC GENERAL SOCIAL
 SURVEYS

Cohort	To Everyone	~ Saying Pornography Should be Illegal To Minors	. (N) To No
One			
Future 26	60	13	(243)
New 24	65	10	(2131)
Young 43	48	7	(1524)
Middle 55	34	9	(1415)
Old 68	22	7	(663)