

Appendix 1

Social Trends Relating to Sexual Activity Outside of Marriage

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Summary An increase in sexual activity outside of marriage in Great Britain over the last generation may have been due to several factors involving :

- Reduced numbers of people with marital status
- Increased divorce,
- Increased cohabitation,
- One parent families,
- Marriage postponement
- Changed expectations of marriage.
- Decline in church going
- Changing beliefs concerning personal choice
- More reliable contraception
- Pronouncements by sex experts
- Growing sexualised nature of mass media
- Increase in teenage sexual activity

Introduction

Research by social historians has made clear there never was a 'golden age' in this country in which sexual behaviour was limited to sex between married couples. Sexual activity outside marriage is something that has been known throughout recorded history. Prostitution was extremely widespread in both the 18th and 19th centuries. Yet there is now very probably a greater diversity of attitudes to sexual morality than was the case in the past.

Nevertheless despite past behaviour in the middle of the 20th century there was a widespread consensus that the proper context for human sexual relationships was marriage and the begetting of children and deviations from this norm were regarded as morally wrong. This view was one that has been accepted throughout Christian history and today there are still very many people who continue to hold this traditional position. But there is also a growing number who would argue that sex relations outside of marriage is acceptable. The British Social Attitudes Survey for 1998 indicates that two-thirds of those surveyed did not believe that sex before marriage was wrong and indeed thought that it was a good idea for people to live together before marriage.

Information Concerning The Decline In Marriage in this Country ¹

Marital status rates Annual marriage rates are at their lowest since records began in 1840. The proportion of women aged 18 to 49 who were married has declined continuously since 1979, from almost three quarters (74%) to less than one half (49%) in 2002. During this same period, the proportion of single women has more than doubled from 18% in 1979 to 38% in 2002

Cohabitation status rates The proportion of non-married women who were cohabiting at the time of interview has increased from 11% in 1979 to 29% in 2002. Among single women, the proportion cohabiting has almost quadrupled (from 8% in 1979 to 31% in 2002).

Based on this analysis of recent trends, it has been assumed that proportions cohabiting will continue to increase for never-married people. But for other statuses, it has been assumed that proportions will remain constant at each age.

People with no religion were the most likely to be cohabiting (16 per cent of 16 to 24 year olds). Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims were the least likely to do so. This pattern is reflected across all age groups but is most marked among young adults aged 16 to 24. Young Muslims were the most likely to be living as part of a married couple whereas people with no religion were the least likely to do so.

Lone parent family rates The proportion of children living in lone-parent families in Great Britain more than tripled between 1972 and spring 2004, to 24 per cent. Lone parenting has increased three-fold in the last twenty years. 1 in 10 families is a lone parent family. 4 in 10 people are born outside marriage

Increase in divorce Britain has one of the highest divorce rates in Europe. These days almost half of all marriages fail. If present divorce rates continue, more than one child in four will experience the divorce of their parents before they reach age sixteen.

In 1961, there were 27,200 divorces in Great Britain, which by 1969 had doubled to 55,600. The number of divorces then doubled again by 1972, to 124,600 in Great Britain and 124,900 in the United Kingdom.

¹ The source for information in this paper regarding the decline in marriage in Britain and related matters is the Government Office for National Statistics

Postponement of marriage Over the past few decades people have tended to marry later in life. The average age for first marriages in England and Wales in 2003 was 31 for men and 29 for women. This compares with 26 and 23 for men and women respectively 40 years earlier.

A rise in the number of people cohabiting helps to explain the recent trend towards later marriage. But other factors, such as increased and longer participation in further and higher education, particularly among women, may have also contributed to it.

Changed expectations of marriage

The Church of England Bishop's Report ² argues that people seem to be getting married with higher expectations than ever before in terms of personal fulfilment. Paradoxically these expectations are harder than ever to meet because of the current confusion about what such fulfilment might mean and how it might be achieved and because of conflict between men and women caused by the changing pattern of gender roles in British society. Because people have high expectations and these are often not being met, and because there is no longer the social and legal pressure to remain married that there once was, more people than ever before are choosing to end marriages that they find unfulfilling in order to try to find a better life either on their own or with someone new. In addition, people who are aware of the pressures on marriage and the harm that marital conflict can cause are choosing to remain unmarried and either to cohabit or lead a single life.

Decline in Church going

Research at least in USA has shown that those people who are conventionally religious engage less than the non-church-goers in sexual behaviour that has traditionally met with social disapproval. There has been a decline in church going particularly in Britain. The Church of England Bishops report says there has been a decline also in the belief that this life is a preparation for the hereafter and that the character of our existence in the next life will be determined by our obedience or disobedience to God. They argue that with this change there has been a rise in the emphasis upon immediate satisfaction of personal fulfilment and emotional happiness.

These changing attitudes can be seen in the statistics regarding choice of religious ceremonies. In this country since 1992, there have been more civil marriage ceremonies in England and Wales than religious ceremonies. In 2003, 68 per cent of marriages were solemnised by civil ceremonies

² [Some Issues in Human Sexuality : A guide to the debate. A discussion document from the House of Bishops Group of the General Synod of the Church of England on *Issues in Human Sexuality*, 2003, Church House Publishing.](#)

Beliefs about personal choice

There has been a growing belief that personal choice rather than the acceptance of given moral norms is the proper basis for moral commitment

The Bishop's Report says that the widening of choice in all areas of life has made people increasingly unwilling to accept external restrictions in their choice of sexual activity. If people now have greater freedom than ever before to choose what to believe and how to behave in all other areas of life, they ask why should this not also be true of their sex lives, providing that what they do does not cause harm to others?

More reliable contraception

Reliable contraception has broken the link between sexual activity and having children, with the result that increasing numbers of people link sex with pleasure rather than the possibility of procreation. The development of reliable forms of contraception and increasing confidence in the effectiveness of medicine in general has meant that in spite of the AIDS scare of the early 1980's, people are much less concerned that they once were about the medical consequences of sexual activity.

Influence of sex experts

The work of 'sex experts' such as Havelock Ellis, Marie Stopes and Alfred Kinsey has led people to believe that sexual fulfilment is a key to emotional and psychological well-being.

Mass media

People tend to conform to social standards and expectations shown on film and tv, and in books, newspapers and magazines. There has been a continuing reduction in TV and film censorship combined with the fact that there is always money to be made from sexual titillation. This has led to increasing graphic descriptions and depictions of sexual activity. British society is being increasingly shaped by the influence of the media and the message that is coming across is not in favour of traditional sexual morality. In contemporary Western life the Bible is neither known nor valued. At the same time we all have the means and encouragement to grab immediate gratification with regard to eg alcohol, entertainment and sex. Thus arguably in today's culture, increased personal freedom actually reduces spiritual freedom. A promiscuous attitude is not looking for anything deeper in life and in relationships beyond having a good time.

Teenage pregnancy In relation to young people's sexual behaviour the following was quoted from The Times newspaper stating that in this country :-

A quarter of girls first have intercourse before the age of 16

The number of 13 to 15 year olds becoming pregnant rose by 2.5% to 8,076 between 2002 and 2003. The number of abortions among under-14s rose by 6% in 2004 to 157.

New cases of the sexually transmitted disease also rose.

From all these facts and figures, it appears that the traditional family is in decline. But is this really so?

According to the BBC's Soul of Britain survey:

- 80% of us believe that marriage is not out-dated
- 76% of us expect our marriages to last for life
- 46% of us disapprove of lone parenting as a lifestyle choice