

Population-wide studies about attitudes towards sex can give us an insight into how our changing attitudes as a society may support efforts for social change. For example, increasing [support](#) for gay marriage reflects the way that attitudes towards same-sex sexual activity are changing over time.

An article published last month in the [Archives of Sexual Behavior](#) looked at changes in sexual attitudes between 1972 and 2012 using data from the nationally representative General Social Survey of US adults. By separating out the effects of time period, age and generation they were able to show how attitudes have changed - and that the change is mostly due to generational shifts. So - while young people's attitudes may differ from their parents, the point is that their attitudes remain different over time, making the new generation different from the older generation even as they age. Take for example, acceptance of premarital sex. In the early 1970s premarital sex was accepted by 29% rising to 58% in the period between 2010 and 2012. Attitudes towards sexual activity among two adults of the same sex also changed: accepted by less than 20% before 1993 rising to 44% in 2012 (35% for men; 51% for women) and 56% for the generation born after 1982.

However, while attitudes towards premarital sex and same-sex activity are becoming more accepting, attitudes towards extramarital sex and early teen sex are not becoming more permissive in the same way.

We cannot simply say that "attitudes are becoming more permissive". Rather, it seems we are becoming more sophisticated in our collective attitude to sex. We seem to be less worried about the behaviour of consenting adults, but continue to be concerned about situations that may involve deception (as in the case of extramarital sex) or where the participants are under the age of consent (as in the case of early teen sex).

These patterns of changing attitudes are not confined to the US. Similar patterns of changes over time in sexual attitudes are evident in both Australia and Britain.

The [Second Australian Study of Health and Relationships](#) surveyed over 20,000 Australians aged 16-69 about their sexual attitudes and behaviour. Most (87%) agreed that premarital sex was acceptable and that an affair while in a committed relationship was unacceptable (83%). A

comparison of these [findings](#) with the first Australian Study of Health and Relationships conducted 10 years earlier shows that we now have more permissive attitudes towards premarital and same-sex activity, and less tolerance of sex outside a committed relationship.

Similarly in Britain, the three [National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles](#) which have taken place since 1990 have shown that attitudes have changed in the same way, with acceptance of same-sex partnerships and intolerance towards those who have extra-marital affairs increasing over time.

These studies across the populations of the US, UK and Australia give us a broad snapshot of how attitudes towards sex are changing over time. As individuals we will always have diverse opinions based on myriad factors including our beliefs, our experiences and aspirations. As a collective group of individuals making up society (and making up our minds) our attitudes are changing and will drive social change accordingly.

Disclosure

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