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# Sexual Permissiveness: Evidence for a Theory\*

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*This paper presents evidence in support of a theory of human sexuality. The theory basically argues that sex is highly pleasurable and therefore reinforcing; because it reinforces further contacts with the partner, sexual involvement makes the formation of stable bonds, love and eventually marriage likely. The prospect of marriage gives a clear incentive for people to control their sexual behavior and for society to regulate it. This theory leads to a variety of predictions, six of which can be tested with survey data from large student ( $N = 668$ ) and national ( $N = 1613$ ) samples. The data generally support the theory. This paper also provides evidence on some neglected variables. Enjoying sex, physical attractiveness, political ideology, views of women's careers, and preferred family size all affect sexual permissiveness and many of their effects are substantial both absolutely and in comparison with variables used in previous studies. Using ordinary least squares regression methods, quantitative estimates are provided of the independent influence of these and other variables on sexual attitudes and behavior.*

There is now a substantial and flourishing tradition of research on sexual attitudes and behavior with clear documentation for many basic facts (e.g., Giese and Schmidt, 1968; Kinsey *et al.*, 1953; Lieberman, 1971; Reiss, 1967; Simon *et al.*, 1972; Miller *et al.*, 1973; Bayer, 1977) and the beginning of systematic theory (Hardy, 1964; Reiss, 1967, and forthcoming). This paper extends that tradition in two directions. First, it provides evidence for a new theory which builds on Hardy's and Reiss' valuable foundations. Second, it shows that some previously neglected variables are important: physical attractiveness, enjoyment of sex, political liberalism, views on

women's careers, and family size preferences. These variables have substantial effects on sexual attitudes and behavior, stronger effects than many variables that played a major role in previous research.

## THEORY

The theory presented here attempts to bring some order into an area with relatively little systematic theory, to elucidate some previously neglected links between sex and social structure, and to derive some new predictions. As usual with theoretical enterprises of this sort (Popper, 1959), the theory implies both known facts and a variety of untested predictions, only some of which can be tested with available data. Also, it deals only with some aspects of the topic and only some explanatory variables, leaving aside other important aspects and variables; this is an enormously complex and varied topic and the neglect of other factors by no means implies that they are inconsequential in the larger picture. The theory has been presented elsewhere, along with supporting evidence from the literature and the underlying mathe-

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mathematical model (Kelley, 1977:1-27). Therefore, only the broad outlines will be given here, together with details of the specific reasoning underlying the six hypotheses that can be tested with the data at hand.

### *Definitions*

The term (1) "Sexual behavior" and similar phrases are meant to include coitus, petting, and any other form of overtly sexual behavior which both partners enjoy. There is direct evidence that views on coitus and petting tap essentially the same underlying attitude (Kelley, 1974:55-57) and considerable indirect evidence that attitudes and behavior toward other forms of sex are part of the same general domain (e.g., Kinsey *et al.*, 1948; Kinsey *et al.*, 1953). The term (2) "permissive" refers to favorable attitudes toward, or participation in, any form of premarital sex. Permissiveness essentially measures the stage in a developing relationship at which sex is favored; relationships typically develop from casual to increasingly intimate and committed (affection, love, marriage) and more permissive people favor each type of sexual involvement (petting, coitus, etc.) earlier in the sequence. The words (3) "utility," "gratification," "reward," and like terms are used interchangeably to refer to subjective utility.

### *Immediate Gratification*

The utility of sex depends partly on immediate gratification and that is a function of, among other things, the intrinsic gratification provided by sex itself, since sex is enjoyable in and of itself (e.g., Kinsey *et al.*, 1953:315-316). Although not enjoyable for everyone under every circumstance, it is enjoyable for the vast majority and the assumption that it is at least somewhat enjoyable is a reasonable first approximation; insofar as it is not true of some people or circumstances the theory does not apply to them. Sex is, however, more enjoyable for some people than for others, in part because there are biologically based differences in the strength of sex drives (Kinsey *et al.*, 1953:377-378; Whalen, 1966). Furthermore, the past reinforces the future so that experienced people enjoy sex more; past pleasures of all types are in general reinforcing, making future behavior of the same sort more enjoyable and that applies to sex as well, since it is a typical primary reinforcer (Plissock and

Ferster, 1968:136; Hardy, 1964; Skinner, 1938).

Whenever sex is more enjoyable for any one of these or other reasons, people will have more to gain from it and, therefore, will be more inclined to participate; *i.e.*, will be more permissive. In this regard, several hypotheses are proposed. (1) Those who find sex more enjoyable will be more permissive, other things being equal. They will, by definition, find its utility greater and also will have been more strongly reinforced in the past, and so will enjoy it more in the present since past experience provides at least some reinforcement. (2) People will be more permissive when their potential partners are more sexually attractive or have other characteristics which make interaction more enjoyable. (3) People with more numerous sexual experiences in the past will be more permissive in the present. The assumption is that past sexual experiences have generally been enjoyable, hence current sexual behavior will be more strongly reinforced, so the utility of sex is higher and experienced people will be more permissive (Kinsey *et al.*, 1953:314-321). People also learn new skills and techniques, learn what they like and how to get it, learn how to please their partner, overcome anxiety and embarrassment and, in general, get better with practice. (4) Attractive people will find sex more enjoyable and will be more permissive. Since attractiveness is esteemed, attractive people will get offers from more desirable partners and, with better opportunities, are likely to have more sexual experiences, which are reinforcing. Therefore, attractive people's sexual behavior is more strongly reinforced and they will, it is predicted, enjoy sex more and be more permissive. We have data to test two of these hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* Those who find sex more enjoyable will be more permissive, other things being equal.<sup>1</sup>

*Hypothesis 2:* Attractive people will be more permissive.

### *Sex and Marriage*

Past sexual involvement not only reinforces

<sup>1</sup>The qualification "other things being equal" applies to this and all subsequent hypotheses. The hypotheses are sometimes stated in categorical terms for stylistic convenience but they are, of course, all relational; *i.e.*, of the form "the more X, the more permissive and the less X, the less permissive."

sexual enjoyment itself but also makes further social involvement with that particular partner more rewarding for several reasons. (1) Past sexual pleasures, like other pleasures (e.g., Pliscoff and Ferster, 1968), reinforce everything associated with the whole experience, including the partner (Hardy, 1964). (2) Sexual relations are embedded in friendships and diverse social relations which are themselves enjoyable and so reinforce further contacts with the partner. (3) Establishing a relationship generally involves substantial investments: *i.e.*, adjusting to a new partner, learning to please him or her sexually and psychologically, and teaching him or her to please you requires time, effort, and psychological risk. These investments make a continuing relationship more enjoyable as time goes on and so, on the average, more enjoyable than starting over with a new partner.<sup>2</sup> (4) Finding a new partner is, in general, neither easy nor swift; the search costs are substantial. Locating appropriate people, arranging introductions, getting to know them and the like, also necessitate investments of time and energy in socializing and involve painful risks of rejection. In addition, it is difficult to maintain a close relationship with an established partner while simultaneously searching for a replacement, so there may be substantial costs in pleasures foregone in the (often lengthy) interval between the end of one relationship and the beginning of another. All of these things make continuing an established relationship more rewarding than starting anew and so, it is predicted here, sexual involvement makes long term commitment and eventually marriage more likely. There is clear evidence that once begun, sexual involvements become increasingly more enjoyable, are likely to continue, and often lead to marriage (e.g., Clark and Wallin, 1965; Kinsey *et al.*, 1953:336; Sorenson, 1973:209-212).

The crucial implication is that sex is linked to marriage and, therefore, sex, like love (Goode, 1959), must be regulated—not because of its innate characteristics but because it leads to marriage and marriage is a crucial feature of people's lives. That gives everyone a strong incentive to control his or her sexual behavior in a way that maximizes

<sup>2</sup>However, some people value novelty, which tends to offset this.

the long term rewards from marriage. It also leads to social controls on sex since marriage is a key element in the organization of society. Since it impinges on the interests of parents, friends, relatives, churches and governments, they react by trying to control marriage and that means controlling sex. There is very strong crosscultural evidence for this (Murdoch, 1949:268-272, and Chapters 9-11). Social controls in time, however, may show little trace of their original purpose since norms are preserved as part of routine socialization into the traditional culture and espoused by institutions which have their own dynamics and their own interests to serve. People who are more fully socialized into traditional values and more strongly influenced by traditional institutions are more likely to hold traditional sexual views; in Western societies, religious believers and social or political conservatives are, on the whole, more fully socialized into the prevailing conservative tradition than are people with more liberal views. Therefore, it is predicted that:

*Hypothesis 3:* People who reject traditional religious beliefs will be more permissive.

*Hypothesis 4:* People with more liberal social and political beliefs will be more permissive.

Since sexual involvement would increase the probability of marriage, the desirability of marriage is a crucial factor in the initial decision to become sexually involved. The value of being married to a particular partner depends on his or her status, wealth, friends, tastes, values, personality, and other characteristics, with benefits in future years somewhat discounted due to their remoteness in time. It is predicted, therefore, that people will be more permissive toward premarital sex when it might lead to a particularly desirable marriage.

But marrying one person also entails "opportunity costs" since it precludes marrying someone else; even a stable affair considerably reduces opportunities for other affairs and marriages. That gives people an incentive to delay sexual involvement for a while, until they know whether or not a lasting relationship with that partner is more rewarding than the alternatives. However, these calculations of long term costs and benefits are not so crucial for people who attach relatively little importance

to marriage; they have less reason to delay, since delay helps only if it ensures a more desirable spouse, while the immediate gratifications from sex remain large. So the balance between immediate rewards and long term opportunity costs is tilted in favor of immediate gratification and such people will, it is predicted, be more permissive.

People who prefer small families should generally attach less importance to marriage and family, and hence be more permissive, since a small family provides greater opportunities for nondomestic gratifications by easing the emotional burdens, reducing the workload, and shortening the period in which there are dependent children in the household. For women, having a career or some other major involvement outside the home should have the same effect since it provides an alternative source of gratification. A wife's career probably reduces a man's dependence on the family as well, because his wife will not depend on him as heavily for companionship and support, they are likely to have fewer children, and he is likely to be career-oriented himself. Therefore, two more hypotheses are predicted:

*Hypothesis 5:* People who prefer small families will be more permissive, in the absence of information about a potential partner.<sup>3</sup>

*Hypothesis 6:* People who favor women's careers will be more permissive, in the absence of information about a potential partner.<sup>3</sup>

This theory deals with only one aspect of sex; there is, of course, much more—much that is spontaneous, emotional, uncalculating and far removed from the rational and calculating considerations dealt with here. But such considerations do explain a good deal about who is permissive and who is not and it is with that part of this large and complex topic that the theory is concerned. We now turn to the data with which to test the theory's predictions.

<sup>3</sup>If it is known that the partner would make an unusually desirable spouse, then people who greatly value marriage would be *more* permissive than those who prefer small families or favor women's careers, not *less* permissive, since they have more to gain by the potential marriage and sexual involvement makes marriage more likely. In normal circumstances, such information is not immediately available and so the original prediction holds but in exceptional circumstances the prediction is reversed.

## DATA AND METHODS

The data are from both student and national samples. The student data, especially collected for this study, have better measures and pertain to that stage in the life cycle crucial to these issues; that is, the stage at which one is old enough to be sexually active, independent enough to make decisions, but not yet (or only recently) married. Data from nonstudents at a similar stage in the life cycle would be desirable. However, other research suggests that students are similar to nonstudents, both with regard to sex and other topics (Reiss, 1967; Kelley, 1974: Chapters 3 and 5) and, in any event, nearly half of all 18 to 21 year olds were in college at the time of this research (United States Bureau of the Census, 1975: Table 227). The national data cover a much more diverse population in age, education and marital status. They show that the basic pattern of results at a single university can be generalized to nonstudents in the population at large.

The Berkeley data are from a stratified random sample of students registered at the Berkeley campus of the University of California in the spring quarter of 1970. The sample was stratified on sex and year in school but the results reported here are weighted to represent the true proportions of each group. The completion rate of 60 percent (668 usable replies, 355 women and 313 men, from a drawn sample of 1,112) was reasonable even though unusually severe budget restrictions prevented more than a single mailing and a telephone follow-up. The sample appears to be representative of the population; there is no appreciable bias with respect to basic characteristics that can be checked with institutional data except for the somewhat higher response rate of graduate women and the weighting has been adjusted to compensate for that. A variety of results from this study are strikingly similar to those obtained in an earlier survey with a very high completion rate.<sup>4</sup> Because of the weighting,

<sup>4</sup>These data are from interviews with a simple random sample of the same population; the completion rate was 85 percent and the sample is clearly representative. Correlations among six comparable attitude scales (shown in Kelley, 1974:169) differ from those in the present study by only .06 on the average, in spite of appreciable differences in item wording.

statistical tests are only approximate.<sup>5</sup> Because the theory deals with attitudes toward premarital sex, most of the analysis is confined to unmarried students; the weighted N's are 205 and 301 for unmarried women and men, respectively, and the unweighted N's are 268 and 218.

The national data are from the National Opinion Research Center's 1972 General Social Survey. This is a national sample of the noninstitutionalized population of the United States, 18 or older, conducted in the spring of 1972. It is a multistage area probability sample to the block level with quotas based on age and sex within blocks (NORC, 1972:49-53). There are 1,613 cases. The sampling variability is somewhat higher than in a simple random sample; NORC's experience suggests that it is comparable to a random sample of about 1,000 (NORC, 1972:52-53) and that figure has been used in significance tests.

#### *Scale Construction*

Scales for the national data will be described later. Scales in the Berkeley study were conceptualized in advance, pretested, and subjected to item analysis in both the pretest and final data. In the pretest, items which caused difficulties and those with hopeless marginals were dropped and the remainder factor analyzed, typically once with the other items in the same scale and a second time with items from several conceptually related scales. Items were selected if they had high loadings on "their" factor (at least .5) and also had appropriate loadings on other factors.<sup>6</sup> After the final data collection,

<sup>5</sup>Although the underlying sample is random, the results are based on unequal weighting of the strata and exact statistical tests are not readily available. The conventional procedure of adjusting the weights is followed so the weighted N is equal to the actual number of interviews and then statistics are computed in the usual way.

<sup>6</sup>Whatever its defects in exploratory contexts, factor analysis provides a sensitive test of the hypothesis that a group of items all measure a single underlying trait. There is, in particular, no problem about rotation since only one factor is of interest. In addition to the conventional focus on correlations among items that all measure a single trait, the basic hypothesis underlying factor analysis has clear implications for the relationships with items measuring other traits (e.g., Hauser and Goldberger, 1971:87-95); testing them provides an additional and stringent test of scalability that is particularly useful for short scales. Practical experience has consistently shown that using factor analysis with ordinal data

the scales were reanalyzed in the same way separately for men and women. There were few modifications and the resulting scales are highly reliable.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Attitudes and Behavior*

The theory deals with both attitudes and behavior but the link between attitude and behavior is, of course, complex, problematic and the subject of a large and specialized research tradition (e.g., Acock and DeFleur, 1972; Schuman and Johnson, 1976); going into these complexities would take us too far afield. Note, however, that the link between sexual attitudes and behavior is even more problematic than between other attitudes and behavior since sex requires the cooperation of two people simultaneously and that, of course, may be far from easy to arrange. Nonetheless, the correlation between attitude and behavior is substantial in these data, .50 for unmarried women students and .45 for men, which compares not unfavorably with attitude-behavior correlations in other, simpler contexts.

#### *Measurements in the Berkeley Data*

Attitudes toward premarital sexuality in both student and general populations have been widely studied (notably Reiss, 1967: 15-32, 218-220) and a reanalysis of Reiss' definitive national sample data shows that there are remarkably strong and well formed attitudes centering on the acceptability of sexual relations (and petting) for both sexes when engaged, when in love, and with strong affection. In a principal axis factor analysis, the loadings on the first factor average .78, a very high figure suggesting that a single common factor accounts for correlations of about .61 between items (Kelley, 1974:174-177); views concerning women's behavior are virtually identical to those concerning men's. The *premarital permissiveness* measure used in the Berkeley data (shown in Panel A of

presents few risks and substantial advantages, since it and other general linear model techniques are famously robust (Bohrnstedt and Carter, 1971; Goldberger, 1968; Labovitz, 1970).

<sup>7</sup>Items were first recoded into the same range (e.g., 1 for the most conservative to 3 for the most liberal response) and then summed to give the scale scores. More elaborate scoring procedures produce identical results.

TABLE 1. ATTITUDE MEASUREMENT IN THE BERKELEY DATA.<sup>a</sup> CORRELATIONS FOR WOMEN (ABOVE DIAGONAL) AND MEN (BELOW) SEPARATELY; DECIMALS OMITTED. FAVORABLE ANSWERS IN PARENTHESES

Items	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<u>Panel A. Premarital Permissiveness</u>					
(1) I would want to be a virgin myself when I marry. (strongly disagree)	—	76	57		
(2) I would want the person I marry to be a virgin. (strongly disagree)	69	—	53		
(3) Sexual intercourse is entirely too intimate to be engaged in with anyone I am not seriously in love with. (strongly disagree)	56	54	—		
<u>Panel B. Enjoys Sex</u>					
(1) I really enjoy sex. (strongly agree)	—	55			
(2) Strictly from the physical point of view, sex isn't all that enjoyable. (strongly disagree)	31	—			
<u>Panel C. Attractive, Sexy</u>					
(1) Without being unduly modest, would you say that you are: Unusually attractive, good looking? Quite attractive? Fairly attractive? Not too attractive? (unusually attractive)	—	71	60		
(2) And in comparison with other students here at Berkeley, are you considered: Very much more attractive than average? Much more attractive? More attractive? About average? Less attractive than average? (very much more)	65	—	55		
(3) How sexy would you say you are? (very sexy)	50	52	—		
<u>Panel D. Favors Careers for Women</u>					
(1) A woman should be concerned primarily with her family and her home. (strongly disagree)	—	60	48	41	
(2) A woman should devote almost all her time to her family. (strongly disagree)	60	—	53	44	
(3) A married woman should not attach much importance to a career. (strongly disagree)	49	49	—	40	
(4) Even after the children are old enough for school, the wife should not really take up a full time career outside the home. (strongly disagree)	38	43	44	—	
<u>Panel E. Political Liberalism</u>					
(1) Would you say that American policy toward Russia has, on the whole, been too hard or too soft? (hard)	—	36	37	32	37
(2) How would you feel about it if the war in Vietnam resulted in a clear-cut military victory for the Vietcong? (very pleased)	42	—	76	30	41
(3) And what if there was no clear military victory for either side but the Vietcong took over the government of South Vietnam within a year or two? (very pleased)	45	82	—	24	33
(4) . . . Force unions and employers to give many more jobs to Blacks? (strongly support)	32	42	43	—	49
(5) And how much influence should Black pressure groups have? (much more)	38	44	44	56	—
<u>Panel F. Religious Liberalism</u>					
(1) I know God really exists, and I have no doubts about it. (strongly disagree)	—	52	64		
(2) There is no survival of any kind after death. (strongly agree)	66	—	59		
(3) The idea of God is an invention of the human mind. (strongly agree)	67	59	—		

<sup>a</sup>Measures of sexual behavior and preferred family size are described in text. They are based on single items.

Table 1) deals with the central issue of sexual intercourse. The correlation between items is quite high, averaging .62 for women and .60 for men, and the reliability is quite satisfactory (.83 and .82, respectively, estimated by the Spearman-Brown formula).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>There is little evidence of a double standard; as in national data, the correlation between standards applied to oneself and to one's partner is very high and women are held to only fractionally more conservative standards.

We are concerned with *current* sexual behavior and so use a behavioral measure that reflects this. For present purposes, this is preferable to alternative measures. Measures of experience (*e.g.*, nonvirginity) refer to events which may have occurred in the past in very different circumstances while cumulative measures (*e.g.*, number of sex partners) are even worse because older respondents have had more time to acquire experience. The

choice is, however, not critical since reasonable alternatives would lead to the same conclusion.<sup>9</sup> The question we used to measure current *sexual behavior* specifically asks:

What is your own sexual situation, currently?

1. I have intercourse regularly with one partner and occasionally with others.
2. I have intercourse regularly with one partner exclusively.
3. I have intercourse frequently but not with one regular partner.
4. I have intercourse sometimes but not regularly.
5. My sex life does not include intercourse at present.
6. I don't have a sex life at present.

Answers to this question show that, roughly speaking, about 10 percent of the respondents have intercourse with others in addition to their regular partner, 40 percent have regular and exclusive intercourse with one partner, 15 percent have intercourse only irregularly, 20 percent have sex without intercourse, and 10 percent have no sex of any sort.

Our measure of how much people enjoy sex uses a pair of straightforward items (Table 1, Panel B). The items are quite highly correlated for women and adequately correlated for men. They show very similar correlations with other variables and very clear factor loadings in several factor analyses with a variety of other items and so seem to form a reasonable scale.

Three transparent items measure *sexual attractiveness* (Table 1, Panel C). They probably provide a reasonable reflection of reality. This is a mail questionnaire and they generally get reasonably honest answers to sensitive questions; note also that the second question explicitly asks for *other* people's opinions but is nonetheless very closely correlated with the more subjective questions. The correlation between items is high (.62 for women and .56 for men) and the scales' reliability is quite satisfactory (.83 and .79, respectively).

<sup>9</sup>Various measures of sexual behavior are in practice highly correlated with each other and have very similar correlations with other variables. Our measure is highly correlated with nonvirginity (.71 for women, .63 for men). The key correlation with sexual attitudes is around .30 with all behavioral measures—the correlations involving current nonvirginity, nonvirginity at age 18, nonvirginity at 20, and cumulative number of sexual partners differ from .30 by an average of only .05 (Kelley, 1974:182-184).

Views about *women's careers* are clearly organized, with inter-item correlations averaging .48 for women and .47 for men (giving the scale a reliability of .79 for both).<sup>10</sup> The items are shown in Table 1, Panel D.

A single item measures *preferred family size*. It is one in a series of questions on what students expect their lives to be like when they are 40:

Do you want to have children by then, or not?

1. Definitely not.
2. Probably not.
3. Like to have one child.
4. Like to have two.
5. Like to have. . .

Preferences are only one of the many factors affecting fertility, so the correlation with actual family size is doubtless far from perfect, but it nonetheless provides a reasonable indicator of fertility plans and a rough prognosis for future family size—indeed, in national data it is the best short term predictor of fertility (Westoff *et al.*, 1961:236).

The main dimension underlying general social and *political liberalism* seems to be sympathy toward traditional outgroups (blacks, foreigners, Jews and women) and emancipation from traditional verities (Roof, 1974:647-648 and Table 1; Kelley, 1977b). Racism and jingoism are central to our measure, a reliable 5-item scale shown in Table 1, Panel E (correlations between items average .40 for women and .47 for men and reliabilities are .77 and .82, respectively).

Our *religious liberalism* scale, shown in Table 1, Panel F, was borrowed from Stark and Foster (1970). It avoids issues in dispute between denominations, measuring instead respondent's general degree of disagreement with traditional religious beliefs. It is quite reliable (average inter-item correlations are .58 and .64 for women and men, respectively, and the scale reliabilities are .81 and .84) and all items have similar correlations with other variables.

*Other variables.* Because parents' attitudes are closely correlated with the variables we are dealing with, excluding them might bias the results and therefore a measure of *mother's liberalism* and one of *father's*

<sup>10</sup>This measures subjective orientations rather than career plans, which is preferable since the scale can be used for men as well as for women. Using a measure of plans for women gives results virtually identical to those reported in the text.

*liberalism* have been included.<sup>11</sup> A more detailed treatment is impossible since children's reports of all but the most basic facts about their parents' beliefs are extremely unreliable (e.g., Furstenberg, 1967). However, in another study by the author (Kelley, 1974:Chapter 5), data were collected directly from both parents and students and, where comparable measures were available, results essentially the same as those reported here were found; note, in particular, that parents' specific attitudes on sex do not have any direct effect on their children's sexual attitudes or behavior, so excluding them does not bias the results reported here.

A number of likely variables have no appreciable effect on sexual attitudes or behavior and so can be ignored; these include mother's and father's education, family income, and the student's household role preferences, economic ideology, attitudes toward women's liberation, and others. Personality, opportunity, chance and many other variables doubtless affect sexuality but surely are not appreciably correlated with our independent variables, so omitting them does not bias the results (Wonnacott and Wonnacott, 1970).

#### *Specifying the Model*

*Estimation.* The model was estimated using conventional ordinary least squares regression (OLS) procedures (e.g., Duncan, 1966; Wonnacott and Wonnacott, 1970). This assumes that, to a reasonable approximation, the data can be treated as interval and the relationship between variables as linear and additive. Experience has consistently shown that this approximation involves little loss of information (e.g., Goldberger, 1968; Labovitz, 1970; Middleton, 1973) and some considerable experimentation with tabular analysis of the present data leads to the same conclusion. Standardized partial regression coefficients (paths) are reported, since the variables have no natural metric.

<sup>11</sup>The question was:

To come back to your father's values and outlook, are (or were) his political and social views: radical, liberal, moderate, conservative, or reactionary?

A parallel question was asked for mothers. These simple questions produce results close to those obtained with attitude scales answered by the parents themselves (Kelley, 1974:Chapter 5).

This facilitates comparisons between variables; comparisons between men and women are, however, affected by differences in their standard deviations but these differences are too small to be of any practical importance.

*Causal order.* The only crucial assumption is that the explanatory variables are causally prior to sexual attitudes and behavior (or at least that reciprocal effects are small enough to be ignored without undue bias). This seems reasonable, since there are clear theoretical rationales for each effect and few persuasive reasons to expect major influences in the opposite direction.<sup>12</sup> Causal order among the independent variables is not crucial since the theoretical predictions are tested in a regression equation with permissiveness as the dependent variable and the others independent and this is not affected by the causal order, if any, among the independent variables.

## RESULTS

The basic results are presented in Table 2. Panel A gives the simple product-moment correlations between permissive attitudes and the various theoretical variables and Panel B gives the analogous correlations with permissive behavior. The corresponding standardized partial regression coefficients (paths)<sup>13</sup> show whether or not the theoretical variables have net effects on sexual permissiveness controlling for each other and the various control variables. The regressions for attitudes are shown in Panel C and those for behavior in Panel D.<sup>14</sup> The regression coefficients for parents' liberalism are not shown since they are neither large nor central to the main point.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup>An exception would be that permissive behavior may influence enjoyment of sex, a matter to which we return.

<sup>13</sup>They are not corrected for attenuation due to measurement error; while that is preferable (e.g., Bohrnstedt and Carter, 1971:130-140), I have no reliability estimates for permissive behavior and the other single item indicators. This should not lead to erroneous conclusions since most of the key variables, highly reliable scales and indirect effects which are most vulnerable to measurement error (Blalock, 1961:146-150), are not important here.

<sup>14</sup>The full correlation matrix on which these results are based is given below as Appendix Table A.

<sup>15</sup>The correlations involving mother's and father's liberalism are appreciable (averaging .22 with permissive attitudes and .09 with behavior). But the regression co-

TABLE 2. CORRELATIONS (PANELS A AND C) AND REGRESSIONS (PANELS B AND D) PREDICTING SEXUAL ATTITUDES OR BEHAVIOR FOR VARIOUS POPULATIONS (DECIMALS OMITTED)

Dependent Variable and Population <sup>a</sup>	Theoretical Variables							% of variance explained
	Enjoys sex (1)	Attractive, sexy (2)	Religious liberalism (3)	Political liberalism (4)	Wants small family (5)	For women's careers (6)	Permissive attitudes	
Product-moment Correlations								
<b>Panel A: Permissive Attitudes</b>								
(1) Unmarried women students	39	30	45	51	32	38	—	
(2) Unmarried men students	39	21	33	40	24	29	—	
(3) All students	c	c	36	44	22	33	—	
(4) National sample: Early in the life cycle	c	c	39	40	11	27	—	
(5) National sample: Late in the life cycle	c	c	33	18	18	16	—	
<b>Panel B: Permissive Behavior</b>								
(6) Unmarried women students	43	37	27	22	19	15	50	
(7) Unmarried men students	30	29	05*	22	01*	06*	45	
Standardized Partial Regression Coefficients <sup>b</sup>								
<b>Panel C: Permissive Attitudes</b>								
(8) Unmarried women students	24	17	19	28	15	11*	—	(47)
(9) Unmarried men students	30	10	17	18	15	10	—	(35)
(10) All students	c	c	20	31	09	12	—	(26)
(11) National sample: Early in life cycle	c	c	31	31	04*	15	—	(29)
(12) National sample: Late in life cycle	c	c	31	14	10	13	—	(17)
Graduates versus undergraduates								
(13) Unmarried undergraduate women	24	18	17	27	14	14	—	(50)
(14) Unmarried undergraduate men	33	12*	13	11*	22	12	—	(39)
(15) Unmarried graduate women	32	13*	25	22	15*	04*	—	(42)
(16) Unmarried graduate men	27	05*	20*	27	00*	08*	—	(31)
<b>Panel D: Permissive Behavior</b>								
(17) Unmarried women students	23	20	04*	-05*	07*	-02*	33	(36)
(18) Unmarried men students	08*	17	-08*	06*	-07*	-04*	42	(27)

<sup>a</sup>Unweighted N's are 268, 218, 668, 365 and 1,144 for lines 1 to 5, respectively, and 181, 149, 87, 69 for lines 13 to 16.

<sup>b</sup>Mother's and father's liberalism is controlled in the regressions for students but their (small) coefficients are not shown.

<sup>c</sup>Not available in the national data and so, to facilitate comparison, omitted from the corresponding student data on lines 3 and 10.

\*Not significantly greater than zero at  $p < .05$ , one tailed  $t$  test.

### Tests of the Theory

Before going into detail, a brief overview is useful. The theory predicts that all the correlations shown in Panels A and B of Table 2 should be positive and all 48 are, with 37 significant at  $p < .05$ . So in all, the data appear at first glance to offer substantial support for

the theory and we turn now to a detailed consideration of them.

*Hypothesis 1.* This predicts that people who enjoy sex will be more permissive and it is clearly supported by the data. The correlations with both permissive attitudes and permissive behavior are substantial and statistically significant at  $p < .05$  (column 1, lines 1, 2, 6 and 7). Controlling for the other eight variables, the partial regression coefficients remain large and statistically significant for attitudes and for women's behavior, although not for men's behavior (column 1,

efficients are negligible and not statistically significant (averaging .04 for attitudes and zero for behavior), indicating that the influence of parents' attitudes is entirely indirect (see Kelley, 1974:Chapter 5 for a detailed analysis).

lines 8, 9, 17 and 18). Kinsey's data support the hypothesis as well, although there are no control variables in his analysis (Kinsey *et al.*, 1948:364; Kinsey *et al.*, 1953:315-316).

There is, however, a question about causal order. The link between enjoying sex and sexual attitudes is probably not a problem since enjoyment is surely a cause of permissive attitudes, if only because enjoying anything is a good and simple reason for thinking favorably of it. There is, moreover, little reason to think that holding permissive attitudes toward sex will greatly affect enjoying it, at least in societies where guilt and conflict are not very important.<sup>16</sup> However, the relationship between enjoying sex and permissive behavior is reciprocal, if the theory is correct. Enjoying sex should be a cause of behavior for straightforward reasons but, conversely, past behavior presumably reinforces sexual enjoyment, so there is a reciprocal link as well. Without detailed information on the past, this is difficult to disentangle but some rough calculations suggest that the reinforcing effect of past experience accounts for an appreciable part of the relationship between enjoyment and behavior for men but not women.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the evidence for Hypothesis 1 is clear for attitudes and for women's behavior although less clear for men's behavior.

*Hypothesis 2.* The prediction is that attractive people will be more permissive and the data clearly support that. The simple correlations with both attitude and behavior are substantial for women, reasonably large for men, and statistically significant for both (column 2, lines 1, 2, 6 and 7). Controlling for other variables, the direct effects on both attitude and behavior are still fairly large and

<sup>16</sup>This might happen if people with permissive views felt less conflict over sex but, in practice, conflict (measured by a good 2-item scale) is only modestly correlated with permissiveness (— .18 for men and — .12 for women) and enjoyment (— .29 for men and — .18 for women), so any reciprocal effect must be very small, at most, .05 for men and .02 for women.

<sup>17</sup>Number of sexual partners provides a crude measure of past experience and, for both men and women, is correlated with behavior (about .36) and enjoying sex (about .22). Controlling for this and other variables (attractiveness, permissive attitudes, marriage), the effect of enjoying sex on behavior is still .14 for women and .05 for men. That is, however, a very conservative estimate since it neglects the true effects that enjoyment had on past sexual behavior.

statistically significant for women; for men, the effect on permissive attitudes is small but statistically significant while the effect on permissive behavior is reasonably large and significant (column 2, lines 8, 9, 17 and 18).

*Hypothesis 3.* The prediction is that people who are less religious will be more permissive. This well documented hypothesis (*e.g.*, Giese and Schmidt, 1968:280-294, 306-317; Kinsey *et al.*, 1953:306, 308-319; Reiss, 1967:43-47) is further supported by the present data (column 3). The effect on attitudes is clear. The effect on behavior is weaker, especially for men, and it is entirely indirect. Unless religion leads to attitudinal changes, it has no effect, at least in a college environment where peer pressures and overt sanctions are weak and easily avoided.

*Hypothesis 4.* The prediction is that people with more liberal political attitudes will be more permissive and the data clearly support the hypothesis (column 4). The influence on attitudes is quite strong for women and substantial for men. The correlations are large and statistically significant. The net effect, controlling for the eight other variables, is quite large for women (it is, in fact, the largest single effect for them), appreciable for men, and statistically significant for both (lines 8 and 9). The effects on behavior are weaker and indirect. The correlations are appreciable and statistically significant (lines 6 and 7). However, controlling for other variables shows that the effects on behavior are entirely indirect: political liberalism leads to more permissive attitudes and that, in turn, leads to more permissive behavior but there are no effects beyond that (*i.e.*, the direct effects shown in lines 17 and 18 are not significantly different from zero). This confirms some earlier work using less extensive controls (Bayer, 1977:34; Giese and Schmidt, 1968).

*Hypothesis 5.* The prediction is that people who prefer small families will be more permissive and the data offer substantial, but not unequivocal, support (column 5). The effect on permissive attitudes is clear, although not especially strong. The correlations are appreciable and statistically significant for both men and women and, controlling for other variables, the net effects are all appreciable and statistically significant as well. The effect on behavior is reasonably clear for women; the correlation is appreciable and statistically significant and, control-

ling for other variables, there is an indirect effect and a very small (and not statistically significant) direct effect. For men, however, the predicted effect on behavior is absent; neither the correlation nor the direct effect controlling for other variables is significantly different from zero and both are in the direction opposite to that predicted.

*Hypothesis 6.* The prediction is that people who favor women's careers will be more permissive and the evidence generally supports this (column 6). For women, the correlations with both attitude and behavior are substantial and statistically significant; for men, the correlation with attitudes is substantial and significant but that with behavior is small and statistically insignificant, although in the predicted direction. Controlling for other variables, the effect on permissive attitudes is decidedly modest (significant for men, not for women) and there is no direct effect on behavior, and, at most, a tiny indirect effect.

*Replication: Year in School.* Graduates and undergraduates represent very different populations—undergraduates are younger, less experienced, more conservative in politics and religion, less committed to careers, and predominantly from California while graduates are older, more liberal, more experienced and predominantly from other parts of the country. The analysis was repeated, therefore, for each group separately. For simplicity, only the net effects on sexual attitudes controlling for other variables are shown and the results clearly support the theory (lines 13 to 16). Twenty-three of the 24 coefficients are in the predicted direction (the other is zero). For undergraduates, 10 of the 12 effects are statistically significant at  $p < .05$  while for graduates, where the sample size is very small, <sup>18</sup> five of 12 are significant.

#### *Replication in a National Sample*

There is, of course, no assurance that results for students would hold for people in the nation at large so the analysis has been replicated here with national data. These data have measures of four of the six theoretically important variables.<sup>19</sup> *Permis-*

<sup>18</sup>The number of undergraduate women (174) and undergraduate men (149) is reasonable but the graduate groups are very small (87 and 69, respectively).

<sup>19</sup>Opinions on specific issues are organized into more general attitudes in much the same way among students

*sive attitudes* are measured by the single item, "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?"<sup>20</sup> There is no behavioral measure. Church attendance provides a passable, if clearly imperfect, proxy for *religious liberalism*. *Political liberalism* is measured by a good 6-item racism scale with reliability of .83. Preference for a *small family* is measured by a single item: "What do you think is the ideal number of children for a family to have? None? One? Two?" Support for *women's careers* is measured by the item, "Do you approve or disapprove of a married woman earning money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her?" The results are shown in Table 2, lines 4, 5, 11 and 12. For comparison, student results paralleling the national analysis, both in terms of the variables included in the model and the fact that males and females are combined, are shown on lines 3 and 10.

The predictions are clearly confirmed in the national sample, particularly those at an early stage in the life cycle (unmarried or married without children) when these issues are of more immediate concern, rather than a later stage (married with children);<sup>21</sup> in fact, results for students and the general public at an equally early stage in the life cycle are strikingly similar.<sup>22</sup> All eight correlations are

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and the general public. In the nation at large, such opinions are organized similarly among people with different amounts of education, of different ages, with different occupations, and living in different regions (Kelley, 1974:Chapter 2).

<sup>20</sup>To increase comparability, the student results reported on lines 3 and 10 of Table 2 are based on two corresponding items (numbers 1 and 2 in Table 1).

<sup>21</sup>Parallel analyses also were run for four life cycle stages: unmarried, married without children, married with children still at home, married with children away from home. The correlations were very similar for the first two groups and the last two and they were therefore combined. The similarity with students is not a matter of age. I combined men and women for simplicity and because there are not enough cases in the early life cycle group for separate analyses. Sex differences are not large, so this simplification does little damage. Including additional control variables (education, occupation, ethnicity, region and others) does not affect the conclusions.

<sup>22</sup>There are 365 (unweighted) cases early in the life cycle and 1144 late in the life cycle. To increase compar-

in the predicted direction, all are similar to those of the students in magnitude, and all are statistically significant (lines 3, 4 and 5). Controlling for the other four variables, the net effects are all in the predicted direction, most are similar to the student effects in size, and all but one are statistically significant (lines 10, 11 and 12).

### DISCUSSION

The variables we have been considering have substantial effects on sexual attitudes and appreciable effects on sexual behavior. Taken together, they explain a large fraction of the variance in permissive attitudes—47 percent for unmarried women students, 35 percent for men, and (even leaving out two of the variables most important in the student analysis) 29 percent for people in the general population early in the life cycle. They also explain an appreciable fraction of the variance in behavior. But the most important of these variables (enjoyment of sex, attractiveness, political liberalism) are only rarely considered in research on sexual permissiveness and two others (views on small families and women's careers) are almost never used. The evidence presented here strongly suggests that they could make useful additions to the standard set of variables currently in use.

Taken together, these data provide substantial support for the theory. Reinforcement is the fundamental mechanism and that part of the theory is strongly supported with all the effects in the predicted direction and most very strongly so; that is, attractive people and those who enjoy sex are more reinforced and, therefore, much more permissive in attitude and in behavior. The theory also predicts that sexual involvement, because it is reinforcing, makes the formation of stable bonds, love and eventually marriage more likely, which gives people an incentive to regulate their sexual behavior by taking into account the long term consequences. Among other things, this implies that people who prefer small families, favor women's careers, or for other reasons attach less importance to the family will be more permissive. Although these are minor and remote consequences, evidence supporting them is important both in the absence of more direct

evidence and because they are not obvious consequences of other theories. Since sex makes marriage more likely, parents, relatives, churches and governments will attempt to regulate it, which implies that people who are more influenced by these institutions, or more fully socialized into their traditional values, will be more conservative. This is clearly true but it provides only modest support for the theory since it could be true for other reasons. All in all, the data provide strong support for the reinforcement mechanism at the heart of the theory and considerable support for the other aspects of it.

Although many other factors are important, this theory nonetheless explains much about who will be permissive, with whom, and when, linking the private idiosyncratic and seemingly transient decisions about sex to marriage, social structure and social stratification. The theory predicts that people who find sex more enjoyable, who are themselves sexually attractive, or find more sexually attractive partners are more willing to begin sexual relationships and that in turn makes them more permissive in the future. Once begun, sexual involvement makes your partner more rewarding to you, and you more rewarding to him or her, so the relationship is more likely to continue; sex makes love and marriage more likely. Rational calculations of self-interest and strong social controls arise, it is argued, because of the potential for marriage; because of it, you will be more permissive toward a partner whose socioeconomic status, personality, appearance, or other characteristics make him/her a more desirable spouse, but if you yourself rank high in status, personality or appearance, you will be less permissive since getting involved forces you to forego attractive opportunities in the marriage market. And you will be less permissive as long as you are uncertain about your partner's desirability as a spouse and willingness to marry. As evidence accumulates, you become increasingly permissive toward a partner who can be expected to attain high status and steadily less permissive toward one whose prospects are poor. People who expect to have small families, who favor women's careers, or who attach less importance to the family for other reasons can afford to pay less attention to marriage and enjoy sex for its intrinsic pleasures. Thus, sex, it is argued, is not just a fleeting pleasure, nor entirely un-

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ability, women and men students are weighted equally, reflecting the sex ratio in the national sample.

calculated, but has crucial and lasting consequences and it is these consequences which explain why individuals make rational calculations about sex and why societies attempt to control it.

Even more speculatively, these results offer an explanation for recent changes in sexual norms and suggest continuing liberalization in the future. General social and political views have grown more liberal since the turn of the century and we have seen that political liberalization leads to sexual liberalization. There may also be a parallel decline in religious belief, which would have the same effect. Also, marriage and the family are perhaps becoming less important in the United States—women have been working outside the home in steadily increasing numbers since the turn of the century (Sweet, 1973:58) and preferred family size has declined dramatically in recent years—and we have seen that both increase sexual permissiveness. In themselves, these effects are modest but they are probably only part of a larger trend. Any parallel increase in the psychological importance of careers, friendships, leisure activities, or other things outside the family, or any decrease in the importance of children, will, according to this theory, also increase permissiveness. In short, changes in politics, religion, family and women's roles appear to be increasing sexual permissiveness and the trends show no signs of abating.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Changes in attitudes will be gradual but changes in behavior will probably be slow at first, followed by a sudden increase, as is typical of contagion phenomena. As people's attitudes change, it will be increasingly easy to find partners and eventually people who are not permissive will have difficulty finding partners willing to wait. Recent changes in the United States may be following this pattern (*e.g.*, Reiss, 1977).

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APPENDIX TABLE A. CORRELATIONS, MEANS, AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR THE BERKELEY DATA FOR UNMARRIED WOMEN (ABOVE DIAGONAL) AND UNMARRIED MEN (BELOW) SEPARATELY<sup>a</sup> (DECIMALS OMITTED)

Variables	Enjoys sex (1)	Attractive, sexy (2)	Religious liberalism (3)	Political liberalism (4)	Wants small family (5)	For women's careers (6)	Permissive attitude (7)	Permissive behavior (8)	Mother liberal (9)	Father liberal (10)
<u>Theoretical variables</u>										
(1) Enjoys sex	-	281	258	154	060	053	387	433	012	161
(2) Attractive, sexy	300	-	118	117	030	056	303	370	059	043
(3) Religious liberalism	110	001	-	394	177	306	452	269	200	239
(4) Political liberalism	261	132	289	-	264	452	511	219	267	400
(5) Wants small family	-005	-070	186	190	-	375	317	194	083	258
(6) For women's careers	016	067	352	338	297	-	377	153	144	225
<u>Dependent variables</u>										
(7) Permissive attitudes	393	208	332	402	244	292	-	498	239	287
(8) Permissive behavior	303	290	054	222	007	060	453	-	078	191
<u>Control variables</u>										
(9) Mother's liberalism	-051	022	215	253	083	197	182	056	-	475
(10) Father's liberalism	044	090	172	178	058	191	153	054	575	-
Means (women - men) <sup>b</sup>	-0.15	0.60	-0.44	0.16	-0.28	1.17	-1.19	0.13	-0.05	-0.05
<u>Standard deviations</u>										
Women	1.72	2.16	2.92	3.18	1.19	3.27	3.34	1.69	0.84	0.89
Men	1.42	1.68	3.35	3.70	1.15	3.11	2.96	1.65	0.86	0.89

<sup>a</sup>Unweighted N's are 268 and 218 for women and men, respectively; weighted N's are 205 and 301.

<sup>b</sup>Since the scoring includes an arbitrary additive constant, only the difference in means has significance.