

# WHAT DID THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION BRING?<sup>1</sup>

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The 'sexual revolution' took place in the second half of the 20th century. The changes were the most spectacular in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time sex became open to discuss, the contraceptive pill became available and premarital sex boomed. This cleared the road for further changes in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the legalization of abortion and acceptance of homosexuality. Sigusch (2000) sees this as a separate stage and in this context speaks of 'neo-sexual revolution'. These developments occurred almost simultaneously in all Western countries (Robinson et al 1991) and now also seep through to other cultures.

Is that progress? Some think not, including the pope, many mullahs and supporters of Christian movements such as the 'Promise Keepers'. Even in enlightened circles concerns are raised and attention is paid to less desirable aspects of the sexual revolution, such as porn on TV and the spread of the HIV virus. The paraphilia that are now coming out are not greeted with an equal amount of enthusiasm.

Efforts have already been made to take stock, usually by identifying the advantages and disadvantages. That sometimes leads to interesting insights, but it is not possible to equally consider the various effects. In this article I will do it in another way. Firstly, I will answer why the sexual revolution has taken place at all, as you cannot judge a development without considering the causes. Then I will look at the present and compare countries where sexuality is more and less liberalized. The question then remains whether it makes any difference to the quality of life as measured in the number of happy life years. This will demonstrate the correlation between causes and outcomes.

## 2 CAUSES

We know fairly well *what* has changed during the sexual revolution, but not so good *why* it all happened, let alone why the revolution took place at the end of the 20th century and ensued so quickly.

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## 2.1 Short term explanations

The usual explanations look for answers in recent history. In these cases, the sexual revolution is linked to other developments at the time, such as the increase in prosperity, the emancipation of women and the decline of the church. The impact of new technologies is also pointed out, such as invention of the pill.

In these analyses, the sexual revolution is part of a broad syndrome of associated social changes indicated by the word 'modernization' (Righart 1995). In this context the sexual revolution is not only a result of modernization, but also a reinforcing factor, e.g. because of its effect on the emancipation of women.

In itself there is nothing wrong with these explanations, but it remains to be seen whether sexual liberation would have been possible without wider societal modernization. It also remains unclear why the liberation of sexuality taken place much more abruptly than other developments<sup>2</sup>. Recent history also offers no answer to the question why the sexuality had to be freed. Why did a natural instinct such as sexuality ever become so laden with taboos? For instance, we are far less prudent when it comes to food. Also, how could that suppression be maintained for so long? Christianity is often held responsible, but that is only half the answer, because why did Christianity turn against sex? Moreover, we now know that repression of sexuality is older than Christianity (Bullough & Bullough 1995) and that it is also prominent in non-Christian cultures, such as in contemporary Afghanistan.

## 2.2 Long term explanation

Therefore, I will look back even further into history and place both suppression and liberation in the long-term development of human society. Recently, we have learned a great deal about this 'big history' of mankind (Sanderson, 1995). Placing the sexual revolution into that context helps to get a better perspective on its backgrounds, and it also helps to understand that sexual reform is not an exclusively Western affair. A disadvantage of this approach is that culture-specific fluctuations in the wider perspective remain unseen, such as civil cultural efforts in the 19th century and the recent chastity mania in the Islamic world.

### *Freedom of the hunter gatherers*

Mankind initially survived by hunting and gathering. Therefore, our distant ancestors lived in small nomadic groups. Humanity lived most of its history in this manner and today some people in far corners of the world still live this way.

This way of living imposes limitations to the development of society. There is little specialization, limited interdependence. If need be, an individual can fend for itself. The group cannot exert much pressure as dissidents can simply split from the group. The hunter-gatherer society is therefore characterized by relations on a voluntary basis. On this context one speaks of 'weak' social ties<sup>3</sup>. The strongest bond is usually the bond between the mother and her children. Inequality of power is limited. As a result, differences in prestige remain small and social classes rarely develop. Equality is usually highly valued and dominant behaviour is rejected. Thus this type of society gives the individual a considerable amount of freedom.

The relatively great amount of freedom in the hunter-gatherer society is well documented based on quantitative culture comparison. In these kinds of 'holo-cultural'

analyses data on a large amount of societies are put together in a database. These data are drawn from a variety of ethnographic and historical sources. Then correlations between social features are sought for, such as the aforementioned relationship between way of life and freedom. *Figure 1* is taken from its well-known introduction to the macro-sociology of Lenski (1995)<sup>4</sup>.

The freedom of hunter-gatherers manifests itself in the male-female relations. Marriages are usually made on personal preference and can be broken off if attraction wanes. There is a certain similarity to the modern pattern of marriage based on love.

In that context there is a certain sexual freedom. A look at the Human Relations Area Files<sup>5</sup> (Textor 1967) shows that pre-marital sex is often accepted, as well as occasional polygamy. Sex is usually not kept hidden from children. In this type of society initiation rites in which genitals are mutilated are relatively scarce.

### *Oppression in the agricultural phase*

About 10.000 years before Christ a different way of live began to develop. People started growing crops and domesticate animals. Initially, that was combined with hunting and gathering and humans would regularly move to other areas when the soil became exhausted. In this context one speaks of 'horticultural cultures'. Innovations such the plough and fertilizer made permanent settlement possible. This led to the so-called 'agricultural cultures', which have been dominant in the last three thousand years and which remain prominent to this day.

Because of the transition to an agricultural way of life, people became more depended on land and property. Succession therefore became a matter of vital importance as well as the defence of land, livestock and supplies against hungry outsiders. The constant struggle for chronically scarce resources drove people together. This had far-reaching consequences for society. Pedigree was introduced, often in patriarchal forms. Out of struggle a warrior caste usually developed and ultimately the feudal societies of the Middle Ages. Freedom was hereby drastically reduced. Power differences became larger and rules became more important. Man increasingly had to adapt to society. This development is described in a well-documented study by sociologists Maryanski and Turner (1992), according to which humanity became trapped in a 'social cage'.

Life was not improve by this. The average life expectancy was hardly higher, but general health was significantly lower than among hunter-gatherers (Sanderson, 1995: 337-341). This is demonstrated by comparative analysis of excavated dentures. The lack of freedom also seems to have been non beneficial to the enjoyment of life; contemporary research shows a strong relationship between freedom and happiness (Veenhoven, 1999) and there are good reasons to believe that we are dealing with a universal pattern.

The increased dependence on property and family also had significant implications for male-female relationships. Succession and dowry started to play a major role in the choice of partner, as well as strategic alliances with other families. The marriage of convenience thus prevailed, which regularly resulted in dramas to the likes of Romeo and Juliet.

In this context, sex became dangerous affair, especially if it resulted in children. Constant threat of famine required birth control and in the absence of reliable contraception this mainly

meant abstinence. All this forced to limit the sexual intercourse to a select group of married people, which meant that a large part of the population had to simply abstain. That was accomplished in several ways, for instance by separating the worlds of men and women, raising the marriage age and seclusion in monasteries. This included the exclusion of sexuality from public life. Sex was made invisible and not to be discussed openly. For understandable reasons that oppression was wholeheartedly supported by the clergy.

### *Liberation by industrialization*

Recently, in many parts of the world the agrarian way of life has been surpassed by an industrial way of life. This mode of existence is not only characterized by mechanization of production, but also by an unprecedented division of labour. Initially, this seemed to further restrict the freedom of man. Man was considered to become a slave to the machine, or at least slave to the monopolistic owners of the machines. It is now evident that the industrial society in many ways widened the playing field of the individual.

Because we can move within a differentiated labour market, we are less dependent on family business and heritage. The spectacular increase in prosperity also makes it less necessary to socially guard ourselves against setbacks. Society as a whole can now also easier afford to give the individual some space, especially in the private sphere. As social cohesion is now firmly embedded in functional interdependence, there is less need to let everyone think alike. Durkheim (1893) spoke in this context of transition from 'mechanical' to 'organic' solidarity. Individuality also appears conducive to creativity and that is becoming increasingly important in competition on the global market.

Industrial society not only provides a similar freedoms as the original hunter-gatherer society, but also stimulates the awareness of personal preferences, in part due to a wealth of available information and because the longer learning curve offers more opportunity to experiment (Sanderson, 1995: 345). The door of the social cage has thus slightly opened up. In *Figure 1* this is shown with an upward trend that transcends the level of hunter-gatherers.

Of course this is not without consequences for marital life. The choice of partner again became more a matter of personal preference. The marriage of convenience made place for the marriage of love and marriage became also an option for the poor. The perspective of real love was therefore one of things that attracted young people from the countryside to the city (Shorter, 1975). The wedding itself was freer, you could more easily separate and alternative forms of relationship arose.

In this situation, repression of sexuality became less functional. Sexual attraction once again became an important issue in the choice of partner and a satisfying sex life became increasingly essential to keep the marriage together. Therefore, sexual frequency rose<sup>6</sup>. Because the amount of yearning singles dropped, there was less reason to keep sex out of their sight. With the advent of contraception and safe abortion, the risk of unwanted children also virtually disappeared.

In this sense, the sexual revolution in the late 20th century is a somewhat belated response to the social change which largely took place in the 18th and 19th century. In this context, one can speak of a 'cultural lag'. Suppression of sexuality was no longer functional,

but still remained in effect for some time. Around the turn of the 20th century some sexual reformers had already occurred but had limited success. That was in part due to the then strong position of the church and the continued need for birth control<sup>7</sup>. The real breakthrough occurred in the 1960s when the pill enabled effective contraception. By then, restrictive morality had already diminished to the extent that in the next that twenty years a sexual 'revolution' could take place.

### **3 RESULTS**

The question remains whether this change can be considered to be 'progress'. The first question that arises is whether the sex life has improved. That certainly seems to be the case, but even so, the question remains whether that is not detrimental to the quality of life as a whole.

#### **3.1 Quality of the sex life**

One of the consequences of the sexual revolution is that sex has become so open to discuss publicly that survey research can be done on it. Therefore we know how often people are 'doing it', and we know that people start doing it at an increasingly younger age.

This type of research also shows that most Dutch people consider their sex life to be satisfactory. In general, people are satisfied with the frequency of sex and enjoy sex with their partner. When asked to grade their sex life, men grade their sex lives at 7.3 on average and women 7.5. When asked about positive and negative sexual experiences not all appears to be roses but positive experiences are still dominant (Van Zessen 1991: 106-111).

It cannot be said with certainty that our great-grandparents had a less satisfactory sex life, but it does seem likely. In any case, it is clear that back then people struggled more with their sex life.

#### **3.2 Quality of life as a whole**

Has the improvement the sex life also contributed to enhancing the quality of life as a whole? That question cannot be answered properly if the good life is considered in terms of living conditions. As we will never reach on consensus on this and we will easily end up in a circular logic. I therefore follow a different kind of reasoning and measure quality of life based on life outcomes.

##### *Happy life years*

The livability of a biotope for a particular species is usually measured by the length of life that is realized there. Similarly, one can measure the livability of 'sociotope' for people (societies) by looking at the average longevity as measured by the statistical 'life-expectancy'. Unlike animals, humans can also take happiness into account, as people are aware of their emotional reactions and are able to report how they feel in general. This means that the quality of life of human societies can be measured by a combination of the life expectancy and happiness of its people. Elsewhere, I have elaborated on this idea (Veenhoven, 1995, 2002). This criterion is consistent with the philosophy of 'utilitarianism' in

which the value of social systems is assessed on the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number of people'.

Like many other states of mind, happiness can be measured quite simply by interviewing. Because it is an unambiguous concept simple questions are sufficient<sup>8</sup> as answers to direct questions on happiness appear reasonably valid (Saris et al 1998; Veenhoven, 1998). Because of this happiness has become a common subject in large-scale survey research. This allows for cross national research on the average happiness. When combined with data on statistical life expectancy in the country, the number of happy life years can be calculated (Veenhoven, 1995).

If the sexual revolution has contributed to a better quality of life as a whole, this should be reflected in a difference in happy life years between more and less sexually liberated countries. This can now be tested empirically. From statistics on health we already knew how long people live in different countries and the World Database of Happiness (2004) now provides comparable data on average happiness in more than eighty countries.

### *Sexual freedom*

Measuring sexual freedom in countries is less easy. Despite an abundance of studies along the lines of the famous Kinsey report<sup>9</sup>, there is little internationally comparable data. Every country has its own questionnaires. The best comparable indicator of sexual freedom comes from the World Values Survey (WVS)<sup>10</sup>. In this study tolerance was measured by asking people what kind of people they would prefer not to have as a neighbour. Respondents could choose from different categories such as drug users, foreigners and homosexuals.

The extent to which gay men are named as undesirable neighbours seems to be a good indicator for a climate of sexual permissiveness. Attitude research in the Netherlands at least shows a high correlation between acceptance of homosexuality and acceptance of other sexual behaviour (Middendorp, 1979).

### *Correlation happy life years and freedom*

From eighty countries we know both the number of happy life years as well as the average acceptance of homosexuality. This data refers to the year 1990. They are set against each other in *Figure 2*. There appears to be a clear correlation. In the most permissive countries people live much longer and happier. The correlation coefficient is not less than +.72! That indicates that people can deal with this new freedom quite well.

However, this statistical link does not mean a causal effect; both life expectancy and happiness are also highly correlated with other country characteristics, such as economic prosperity and legal certainty. This could cause a spurious correlation, which possibly conceals a negative effect. This is checked by calculating partial correlations. After reviewing prosperity the link indeed seems weaker, but it is still significant ( $r_p = +.38$ ). The link also remains standing when reviewing other obvious variables, such as women's empowerment, human rights and secularization. Due to the limited number of cases it is not possible to keep all interfering variables constant at the same time. Therefore, it cannot be entirely ruled out that the link is spurious.

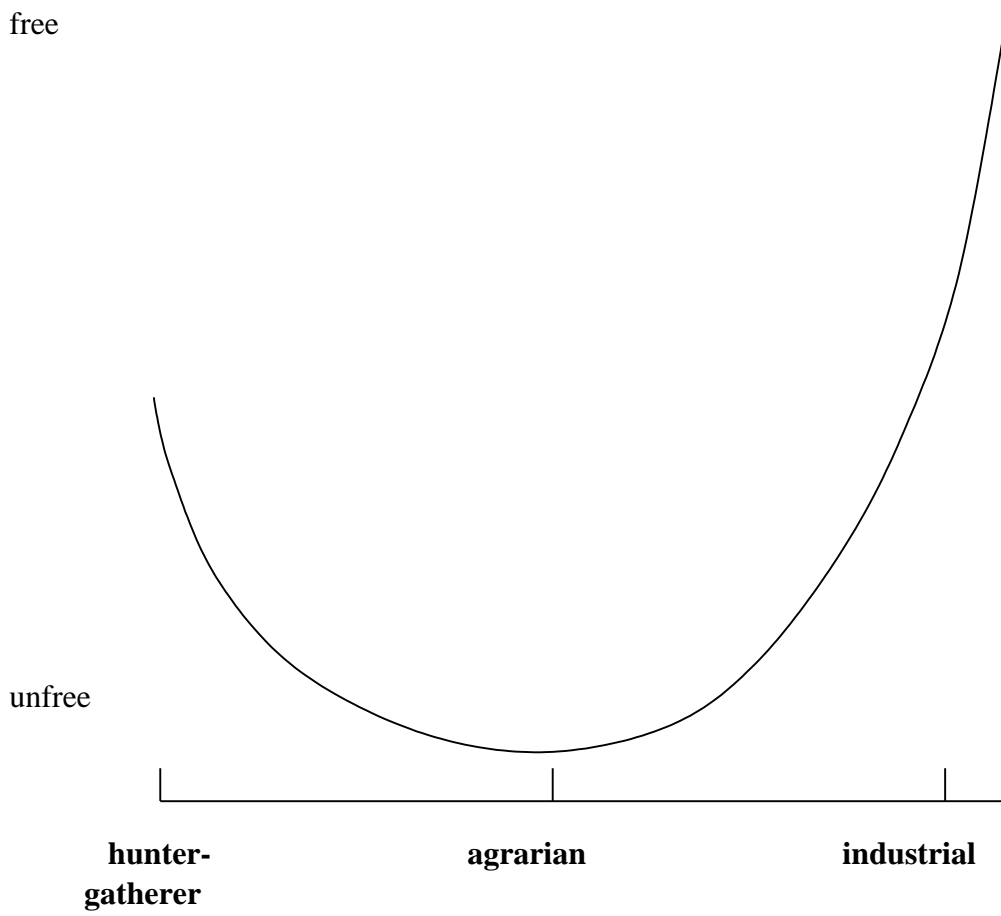
It is also possible that an effect of happiness plays a part. For example, it could be that a predominantly happy population has less need for scapegoats and is more easily able to

accept the call for freer sexuality. If so, happiness would then have to have remained the same or even diminished. However, analysis of the trend in happiness in Western countries over the period 1972-1996 shows a modest increase, even in notoriously libertine countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark (Veenhoven, 2004). This increase can of course also have different backgrounds, so it has not yet been established with certainty that the sexual revolution has really contributed to our happiness. For now, it does seem that way.

#### **4 SEX AND HUMAN NATURE**

**According to the theory, humankind evolved in a society where a significant degree of freedom was possible, even in sexual behaviour. It is therefore likely that this freedom suits human nature. When the transition to an agrarian way of life necessitated suppression of sexuality this therefore must have gone against human nature. That would not have made life more fun. It is possible that, partly as a result, life expectancy was curtailed because of it. In the industrial society suppression sexual is no longer required and the sexual revolution could bring back us back to a degree of freedom similar to that of the original societies of hunters and gatherers. It is not surprising that the people there now life longer and happier lives. Figure 1**  
**Type of society and individual freedom**

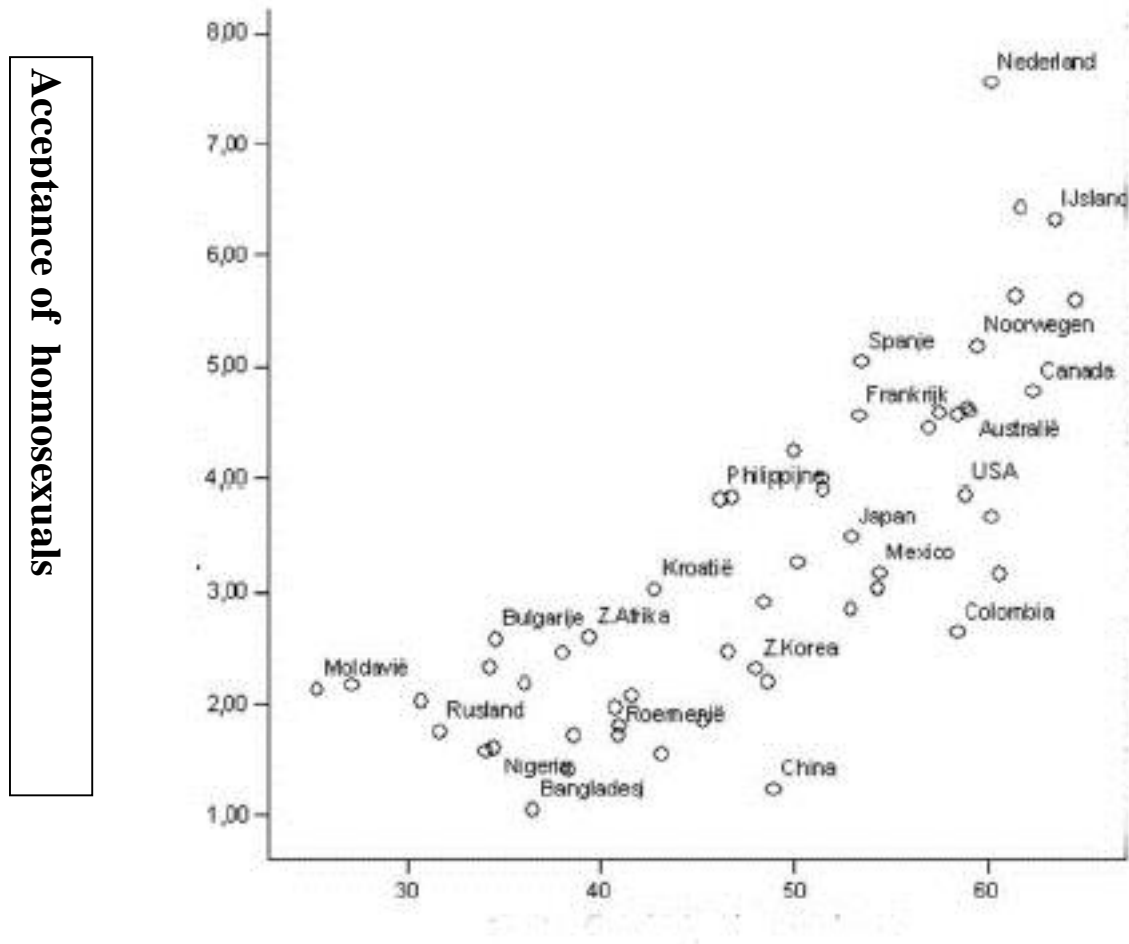
**Figure 1**  
**Type of society and individual freedom**



Derived from Lenski e.o. (1995:431)



**Figure 2**  
**Acceptance homosexuality and average life satisfaction in 80 countries in the 90s**



**1990s Happy Life Years**

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article appeared in 'De Psycholoog' van juli/augustus 2002, under the title *Bevrijde seks; tijd, cultuur en geluk* (pp 377-382).

<sup>2</sup> Modernizations such as women's emancipation, secularization and education already started at the beginning of the 20th century and gradually came in effect. The liberation of sexuality only began in the 1960s and was completed almost twenty years later.

<sup>3</sup> In organization studies that term also refers to a pattern of alternating negotiated relationships in contrast to the 'strong' relations that are assumed in formal organization models.

<sup>4</sup> This concerns the freedom of the average citizen. Freedom of elites has undergone a different development. There instead of a U- curve, we see an exponentially rising line. So elites already enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom in the agricultural phase.

<sup>5</sup> This is a data file in which the results of many anthropological studies have been brought together in order to enable comparative quantitative analysis.

<sup>6</sup> Shorter (1975) concludes this from an increase in the number of pregnancies. He draws this conclusion from the sum of infant mortality and births.

<sup>7</sup> Although the increase in prosperity allowed for more mouths to be feed, the pressure on birth control remained large, partly due to the declining economic yield of children and the increased cost of education.

<sup>8</sup> This will seem strange to many psychologists as they are used to working with questionnaires. It also makes sense if properties are 'tested' of which the individual is not aware, for instance in the measurement of intelligence. Multiple questions are also required for the measurement of properties which cannot be clearly defined, such as 'neuroticism'. However, in the case of having a satisfactory life it concerns something which is experienced consciously and can be framed into a single question. This concerns a general judgement by the individual which cannot be reconstructed from the scores on questions on other matters.

<sup>9</sup> The Kinsey (1948) report described the sex lives of Americans on the basis of interviews in the 1940s. It was the prelude to sex-representative surveys, such as the study 'Seks in Nederland' (1969 , 1983)

<sup>10</sup> In the context of this study surveys are periodically held among representative samples of the population of a great number of countries. The investigation began in 1980 with 22, mostly European, countries. The study was repeated in 1990, 1995 and 2001, and now covers more than eighty countries. The emphasis is on concepts of good and evil, but the questionnaire also includes questions on satisfaction.