

# MORMON SEX STANDARDS ON COLLEGE COMPUSES, OR DEAL US OUT OF THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION!

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To test the assumption that sexual behavior is socially rather than biologically controlled, and to see if Mormon emphasis on avoiding sexual activity out of wedlock has been effective, I have, on three occasions over a twenty-two year period (1950, 1961, and 1972), surveyed several thousand college students (8,584 total respondents). I asked the students who were enrolled in sociology classes at five large universities and two small colleges in the northwestern part of the United States, about their coitus outside marriage, heavy petting, masturbation, and homosexual experiences. I also asked them to judge the morality and sinfulness of their conduct.

It was expected that the Mormons in the group would reflect decades of Church emphasis on chastity by reporting less involvement in forbidden sexual activities and that the level of reported abstinence would be positively related to reported level of church activity. It is not surprising that the present research verifies both of these expectations. As I have reported elsewhere, although Mormons responded differently from other students, the response of Mormons in a large church university did not differ significantly from response of Mormons in state universities when age and church attendance were held constant.<sup>1</sup>

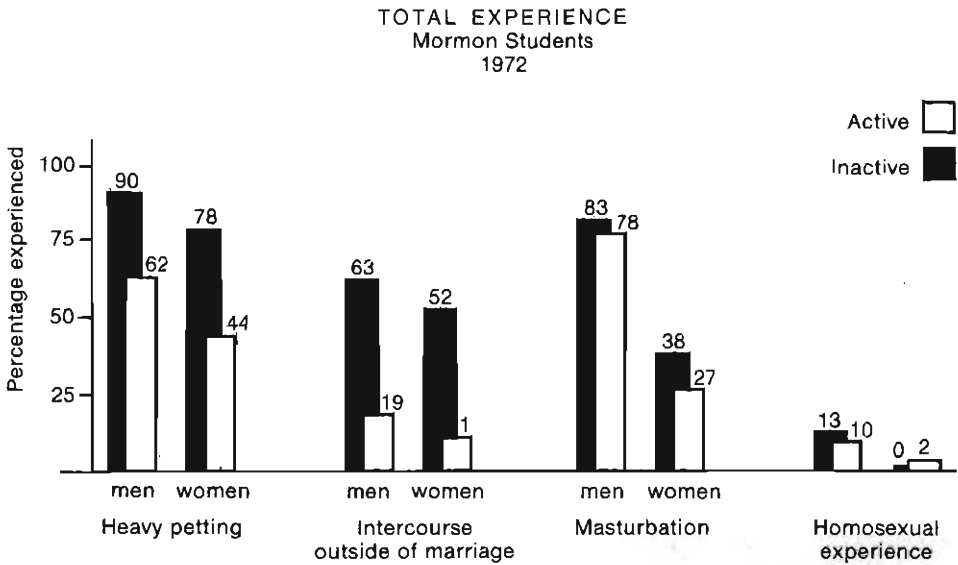
Admittedly church attendance is not the strongest indicator of commitment to religious beliefs and standards, but it does appear to be one reasonably good index. Infrequent church attenders (the "inactive") were defined as those who said they attended church rarely or never. All others were classed as frequent attenders ("active") including those who said they attended "occasionally." Dramatic differences would probably be seen if only regular attenders were compared to those who attended rarely or never.

In the latest survey (1972) Mormon students who attended church frequently show a remarkable lack of sexual experience.

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FIGURE 1



It is clear that reported participation in heterosexual petting and intercourse is closely related to church attendance, while masturbation and homosexual activity do not seem to be influenced as much by church activity. It is useful to see how these levels of sexual behavior have changed over time and to compare them with non-Mormon students. The pattern of total sexual activity is very similar to that of *present* activity, so only the latter figures will be reported.

In Table I, percentages of respondents who said that in their present conduct they did not engage in heavy petting are shown to differ greatly by both church affiliation and church attendance. Mormons of both sexes who reported frequent church attendance in 1950 were nearly twice as likely as those who were inactive to report no heavy petting, and this difference became much greater in 1961 and again in 1972. Note that greater abstinence was reported for each succeeding decade by the active Mormons, while the inactive moved toward greater indulgence, just as did all the non-Mormons (excepting the frequently attending men). By 1972 active Mormon respondents were nearly twice as likely to report abstinence as were non-Mormon church attenders. Interestingly, inactive Mormons also reported less participation in sexual activities than non-Mormons who didn't attend Church.

Judgments of the immorality of heavy petting became more liberal over time for all respondents except the active Mormons, who became stricter. The category "Do think it immoral" included only students who declared that non-marital petting was definitely immoral in and of itself regardless of extenuating

circumstances. Many who generally opposed petting would not oppose it this strongly. In 1972 only 2.6 per cent of the active Mormon women, but 24.8 per cent of the church-attending non-Mormon women, said it was definitely *not* immoral. For infrequent attenders, the percentages were 13.3 vs. 42.1. For men the percentages were similar but more liberal.

Clearly, something in Mormon culture seems to set active Mormons apart from others. It seems logical to conclude that Church teachings which reject heavy heterosexual petting account for the difference.

TABLE I  
Percent Reporting No Present Participation In Heavy Petting  
and Judging It To Be Immoral

		MORMONS		NON-MORMONS	
		Frequent Church Attenders	Infrequent Church Attenders	Frequent Church Attenders	Infrequent Church Attenders
<i>Do Not Now Participate</i>					
MALES	1950	59.8	34.5	37.3	31.5
	1961	66.7	24.5	33.5	23.4
	1972	77.4	31.4	44.1	23.6
FEMALES	1950	70.1	47.5	62.9	50.9
	1961	77.6	34.4	57.4	58.7
	1972	82.6	35.6	42.8	26.8
<i>Do Think It Immoral</i>					
MALES	1950	49.4	32.5	42.2	22.7
	1961	47.6	41.1	34.6	24.9
	1972	51.1	16.9	21.9	6.1
FEMALES	1950	49.5	32.5	43.9	25.1
	1961	46.5	31.4	48.6	41.0
	1972	56.0	26.7	13.5	7.5

The power of church influence is also shown in Table II, in which strong LDS opposition to non-marital coitus is reflected in trends toward higher chastity among active Mormons of both sexes; Mormons of both sexes who reported infrequent church attendance reported increasing heterosexual activity right along with the non-Mormons, especially in 1972.

Even so, the decline in chastity among non-Mormons was much smaller among frequent church attenders than among infrequent church attenders, the modal response for frequent attenders still being well on the side of chastity in 1972. This was not true for the infrequent attenders, however. By 1972 nearly two-thirds of the men and over half of the women indicated they were participating in premarital sex.

Judgments of the morality of coitus out of wedlock followed a pattern similar to reported levels of participation, the 1972 response being far more liberal for all but the active Mormons of both sexes.

The fact that 48 per cent of *all* non-Mormon women in 1972 (not shown in Table II) said they definitely did *not* consider coitus outside marriage to be immoral in and of itself is indicative of current trends and accentuates the Mormon difference; only 2.3 per cent of *all* Mormon women surveyed in 1972 said that extramarital coitus was definitely *not* immoral. Only 7.1 per cent of all Mormon men in 1972, compared to 61.3 per cent of all non-Mormon men, said that coitus outside of marriage was definitely *not* immoral in and of itself.

TABLE II  
Percent Reporting No Present Participation In Coitus Out of Wedlock  
and Judging It To Be Immoral

		MORMONS		NON-MORMONS	
		Frequent Church Attendees	Infrequent Church Attendees	Frequent Church Attendees	Infrequent Church Attendees
<i>Do Not Now Participate</i>					
MALES	1950	91.8	62.5	66.6	55.4
	1961	94.5	62.3	74.2	60.6
	1972	96.2	52.1	63.0	36.8
FEMALES	1950	95.6	85.0	90.4	87.8
	1961	96.7	78.8	93.9	87.1
	1972	97.0	62.2	70.8	48.8
<i>Do Think It Immoral</i>					
MALES	1950	66.8	58.0	64.3	37.8
	1961	57.0	64.3	61.7	51.2
	1972	59.2	32.4	31.4	9.9
FEMALES	1950	57.1	60.0	67.8	49.1
	1961	57.5	48.6	72.7	64.9
	1972	62.7	35.6	32.7	13.5

Table III shows differences in reported masturbation, and follows a pattern similar to the responses on heavy petting and coitus, although differences by sex are much greater in this case. The great difference between male and female response could suggest that masturbation is predominantly a biological phenomenon, but the great difference in Mormon response by church attendance and the great increase in non-Mormon female indulgence in 1972 indicate that biological factors alone do not explain their behavior. Interestingly, all re-

TABLE III  
Percent Reporting No Present Participation In Masturbation and  
Judging It To Be Immoral

		MORMONS		NON-MORMONS	
		Frequent Church Attendees	Infrequent Church Attendees	Frequent Church Attendees	Infrequent Church Attendees
<i>Do Not Now Participate</i>					
MALES	1950	34.7	29.3	31.9	32.4
	1961	50.3	29.1	34.4	36.2
	1972	65.1	28.6	32.2	23.3
FEMALES	1950	86.9	67.5	82.8	75.3
	1961	89.2	87.5	87.8	82.5
	1972	92.0	66.0	70.0	56.2
<i>Do Think It Immoral</i>					
MALES	1950	39.1	30.8	36.8	24.2
	1961	42.0	42.9	37.2	25.4
	1972	48.4	16.9	19.0	8.7
FEMALES	1950	30.4	35.0	27.3	16.7
	1961	31.5	25.7	36.9	29.3
	1972	46.4	26.7	13.5	5.6

spondents but the Mormons of both sexes who reported frequent church attendance had become more liberal in their judgment of the morality of masturbation by 1972. The active Mormons had become more strict. Church influence is clearly reflected in these data.

TABLE IV  
Percent Reporting No Present Participation In Homosexuality and Judging It To Be Immoral

		MORMONS		NON-MORMONS	
		Frequent Church Attenders	Infrequent Church Attenders	Frequent Church Attenders	Infrequent Church Attenders
<i>Do Not Now Participate</i>					
MALES	1950	97.3	95.8	95.1	95.7
	1961	98.4	98.1	98.9	97.5
	1972	98.7	94.3	98.5	97.0
FEMALES	1950	97.8	92.5	99.4	99.5
	1961	99.4	96.9	99.1	100.0
	1972	99.7	100.0	98.5	98.5
<i>Do Think It Immoral</i>					
MALES	1950	61.0	54.4	60.5	52.0
	1961	52.4	52.5	67.6	67.2
	1972	60.3	49.3	44.5	26.7
FEMALES	1950	47.2	30.0	48.8	37.6
	1961	44.7	51.4	57.9	59.5
	1972	55.5	31.1	30.1	15.6

The consistency of response over time concerning homosexuality was remarkable (Table IV). Homosexual behavior was definitely not popular with these college students. Very few women and only 10 to 13 per cent of the men reported past experimentation (except in 1950 when the figure was nearly 20 per cent for non-Mormon men).

Differences between Mormons and non-Mormons were generally negligible, and frequency of church attendance seemed to make little difference except for Mormon men in 1972. Judgment of the morality of homosexuality, however, showed a strong trend toward liberality, except for active Mormons of both sexes who remained constant (men) or became steadily less permissive over time (women).

These findings indicate that homosexual behavior is not common among college students and that it is not increasing; nevertheless, the majority of students in 1972, except active Mormons, were not prepared to say that such behavior was definitely immoral regardless of circumstances. Apparently, growing tolerance of others' behavior need not lead to greater participation in it. For college students, homosexuality remains a highly deviant activity.<sup>2</sup>

In summary, these findings show a clear trend toward greater acceptance of non-marital sexual behavior by non-Mormon college students. But Mormon students who reported frequent church attendance revealed a trend opposite to the prevailing pattern. These findings add to an ever increasing fund of knowledge demonstrating the strength of cultural influence on human behavior.

It would be a mistake to discount religious influence upon any type of behavior that may be related to church doctrine or emphasis. Just as Mormons have been shown to be markedly different in matters of sexual chastity and the Word of Wisdom, so members of other churches have been found to be different in their own ways. The tendency of social scientists to give too little credit to the importance of religion in human behavior has been due, no doubt, to a failure to recognize the fact that *commitment* is necessary for religion to be a strongly meaningful variable. Too often nominal membership is used to classify a person into a religious category for which he does not really qualify.

The view that our culture is going through a sexual revolution finds strong support in the research reported here. The "Scarlet Letter" puritanical emphasis on chastity has given way to a level of sexual freedom and tolerance which would have been incomprehensible to the Puritans. In the face of this great change, the high degree of Mormon adherence to moral standards is remarkable. It will be interesting to see how far the sexual revolution will go, and how the Mormon emphasis on chastity will fare under its onslaught in the years to come.

I expect that the fruits of chastity will be seen to be so rewarding in terms of family happiness that others will be encouraged to follow the Mormon pattern, and that the benefits of keeping sexual behavior within the limits of marriage and family control will attract increasing numbers of people to the Church. Nevertheless, the struggle toward sexual freedom for which some have been striving since the days of puritanical suppression is not likely to end in the near future. Without the pressure of religious commitment and belief in eternal life to keep them in check, many no doubt would relish the new freedom and expand it even further. Fundamentalist churches will continue to see this as a great threat to the lasting happiness of mankind—happiness based on family harmony, fidelity, and enduring love.

<sup>1</sup>Smith, Wilford E., "The Constancy of Mormon Chastity," in Glenn M. Vernon, ed., *Research on Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: The Association for the Study of Religion, Inc., 1974), pp. 624-641.

<sup>2</sup>Sagarin, Edward, "The Good Guys, The Bad Guys, and The Gay Guys." Survey Essay in *Contemporary Sociology*, 2 (January 1973), 3-13.

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I lose my respect for a man who can make the mystery of sex the subject of a coarse jest, yet when you speak earnestly and seriously on the subject, is silent.

Henry David Thoreau