

# **The New Morality: Research Bases for Decision in Today's World**

# The New Morality: Research Bases for Decision in Today's World

Harold T. Christensen

I was once asked the somewhat startling question: “Harold, are you a Mormon or a sociologist?” My answer was a quick and brief “yes,” for, though the sociologist, as scientist, looks for answers to his questions through empirical observations and objective analysis, while the Latter-day Saint leans heavily upon faith and obedience to authority, I do not believe these two approaches to truth are mutually exclusive. I am *both* a Mormon and a sociologist and I seek to harmonize these two positions—seeing them, not as contradictions, but as being complementary and mutually reinforcing. Truth is truth, whether discovered by the scientist or revealed to the religionist; and total truth by whatever route it is understood cannot be in conflict with itself. In my humble opinion, the unique mission of Brigham Young University is to combine fact with faith, to team the intellectual with the spiritual without the weakening of either—indeed to the strengthening of both.

But I have been invited to this platform to treat a specific topic from the standpoint of analysis and research. The topic is a highly important though sensitive one: sexual morality. Since most of what I shall have to say will be objective and analytical, my own value position may not always be apparent. Let me therefore make two things very clear in the beginning: (1) I personally believe in the principle of chastity; this has been my upbringing and it is my present value position. (2) If I say, as I shall, that science can provide a basis for moral decision, I will only mean that it can help—not that science alone is sufficient.

## The New Morality

The term *morality* is used commonly to designate conduct that is considered “good” or “right,” frequently conceived in terms of absolutes. But questions of ultimates and absolutes lie outside the reach of science, and the best the scientist can do with them, in fact, all he can do as scientist—is to maintain suspended judgment and apply objective analysis. Assertion without evidence is the essence of dogmatism and the scientist as well as the religionist *can* be dogmatic though to do so puts him beyond his data. Dogmatism in either camp is an unfortunate occurrence.

There probably is less consensus over sex values today than at any other time in history. The simple folk cultures of the past, with their clear and homogeneous norms, have given ground to complex civilizations such as our own, where change and heterogeneity are the order of the day. Old norms are being challenged and weakened without any real agreement as to what the replacements shall be.

Opinions range all the way from regarding sex as basically evil and at best tolerated for purposes of reproduction, to looking at it as essentially good and demanding of maximum expression both in and out of marriage. There are, of course, more moderate positions in between these two extremes.

*The Judeo-Christian tradition.* American sex norms have been rooted in the Christian movement, which in turn had its beginnings among the ancient Hebrews. The Hebrews regarded woman's sex functions as impure and coitus outside of marriage as a grievous sin—especially for the woman, who, when she offended, was sometimes even stoned to death. With Christianity came a slight softening of the code but also the addition of new elements. It was Saint Paul who promulgated the notion that celibacy is preferable to marriage, though conceding that if one cannot contain himself “it is better to marry than to burn (1 Corinthians 7:7–9). The notion that sex is sinful became particularly strong during the Middle Ages and it was then that celibate religious orders had their greatest development. With the Reformation, these interpretations became less harsh. Nevertheless, the code that was transplanted to America carried with it many restrictions: sex was regarded suspiciously as a prime source of evil, at best to be tolerated and only then within marriage and chiefly for purposes of reproduction.

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, it has been enough to say that “God has spoken.” The source and the rationale for the chastity norm it has promoted have been concepts of divine will. Followers of this tradition have not felt compelled to “prove” their position, only to believe and obey.

*The so-called “new morality.”* But the Industrial Revolution has ushered in an “Age of Science” and, in the spirit of the day, people *are* questioning and looking for proofs—even in the area of sexual behavior. Furthermore, since science sets the tone or style for this modern era, many people now do not want to appear godly or to be labeled a moralist; they prefer to “play it cool” and to be thought of as being rational, objective, and progressive. For many, it almost appears as if the “suspended judgment” value of science is resulting in a noninvolvement stance in regard to community affairs.

There is, of course, a large number of factors which explain the shift over the last half century or so toward more liberal sex codes: the demoralizing effects of modern war, the newer freedoms given to women and youth, the invention of the automobile, the perfecting of contraception, the barrage

of stimulation coming from the mass media, etc. Certainly, also, the recent Supreme Court decisions against censorship have had an effect. We simply list these developments without elaboration and without judgment, but with the realization that they all interrelate and that they get their impetus from the secular tone of this modern age.

At any rate, the lid is off. Today almost anything goes—in print, in speech, in entertainment, in behavior. Pornography (at least all but the very “hardest” of the hard core) is readily available. There are “filthy speech movements” and “free sex movements” in different parts of the country. There are topless entertainers. There are mate-swapping clubs. Hour restrictions for coeds and regulations against mixed-sex visiting in dormitory rooms are being lifted on many college campuses. Dress is more casual and more revealing. Dancing is less inhibited. Petting is more public. All in all, it is as if a pendulum had been released and swung far to the opposite side before settling to a more moderate balance; some of today’s sex practices are extremes, which are not shared by the majority and which may prove to be but temporary—though of this last, one cannot be sure.

For many, the new morality is essentially a “fun morality.” They welcome the newer freedoms for the opportunities these bring to engage in personal thrills or “kicks.” Sometimes the behavior is thought through and well rationalized, but often it is defended simply on the basis that enjoying oneself is good—and that, since sex is fun, just about all sex is good. They remain oriented to temporary pleasures and in this lose sight of the more lasting satisfactions which come from adherence to eternal values.

There are, of course, serious and responsible scholars who take the liberal position. Typical of these was the late anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski. He argued—not for complete sexual freedom to be sure—but for limited and regulated coitus outside of marriage nevertheless, justified on two counts: (1) providing, through trial and error, a safer method of selecting a marriage partner; and (2) serving as a safety valve, actually making marriage more stable by draining off some of the cruder sexual impulses and separating these from the sentiment of affection between the spouses. Malinowski, whether one judges his position as right or wrong, certainly challenged the notion of *inherent* rightness or wrongness of sex outside of marriage and helped open the way for objective inquiry.

At the level of popularization in the mass media, *Playboy Magazine* stands out. It is a sophisticated but, I think, irresponsible approach to sexual freedom and enjoyment. The “playboy philosophy,” developed in a long series of articles by the editor, Hugh Hefner, attacks conventional morality and attempts to build a rationale for sex outside of marriage. The photographs play up the seminude female figure, and these, together with the jokes and many of the articles, drive hard on the theme that sex is fun.

*Absolute versus relative values.* What has been said up to this point makes it amply clear that in the contemporary world two opposing value systems are battling it out. On the one hand, there is the traditional Judeo-Christian position of absolute or ultimate values: sex outside of marriage is wrong, period. In this view, nonmarital sex is intrinsically wrong, because God has said so; the justification transcends the reach of man: there is no need for proof and no room for argument. On the other hand, there is the relativistic or situational position: the rightness or wrongness of nonmarital sex depends upon the conditions surrounding its occurrence. In this view, morality depends not upon something intrinsic to the act nor something imposed from the realm of the supernatural, but rather upon the overall effects of the behavior within a specific setting; and, since effects can be expected to vary with the situation, the moral dimensions of a given act will be different at different times and places.

To the traditionalist holding absolute values, the new morality is nothing more than the old immorality. To the modernist holding relative values, it is the rigid insistence upon chastity that is immoral, both because he thinks that self-denial under certain circumstances may work against emotional health and because he sees the arbitrariness of the position serving to stultify free inquiry. In this age of science, it is the modernist (relativist) who seems frequently to have the better of the argument—simply because his approach is more in line with the dominant themes of the day. (This is an observation not a value judgment.)

But, does one *need* to choose between the absolutistic and relativistic positions? Isn't it possible that some values are absolute and others relative? Or, that a given act has both absolutistic and relativistic components? Perhaps the Christian moralist should welcome the supporting hand of the scientist, for the scripture tells him "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20); and, if this is so, the scientist should be able to throw new light on religious problems by definitively measuring cause and effect sequences (i.e., the "fruits"). Perhaps, also, the scientist needs better to recognize his limitations, realizing that generalizations must not go beyond the data, and that his data are limited to observations through the five senses. When the scientist demonstrates the relativity of *certain* effects he does not, by this process, prove that *everything* is relative.

The controversy over values and morality has resulted in a great deal of name-calling, from both sides. The religionist-traditionalist has been prone to speak of those who possess questioning minds as "worldly," or "liberal," or—when the thinking becomes completely irrational—even as "communists." The scientist-modernist, on the other hand, has been too quick to label those who incline toward absolutistic values as "visionaries," or "moralists," or even as "bigots." Now, there should be no objection to some

of these terms so long as they are interpreted correctly. A liberal, for example, is correctly described as one who has a broad and enlightened mind; and a moralist is only one who is genuinely concerned with problems of right and wrong. But, in the opposing camps, both “liberal” and moralist” have become dirty words: meaning, in the first instance, one who profanes the sacred; and, in the second instance, one who begs the question or refuses to face up to the evidence. It is the unjust connotations and emotional overtones sometimes attached to such labels that get in the way. It is just as unfair for advocates of the “new morality” to call those possessing a contrary opinion “moralistic” as it is for religionists to stigmatize and reject the man who thinks.

### Measuring the Consequences

What can science add to the field of morals; and, if anything, at what points can it contribute? Can there be a sociological basis for decision on proper behavior? If by “proper” is meant something that is intrinsically or eternally right, the answer to this last question is “no,” but if the meaning is simply that the behavior lines up with group norms, and hence escapes the consequences of negative group sanctions, the answer is “yes.” Though the sociologist cannot decide what is best in an absolute sense, he can determine what is most functional to the systems involved—and hence help decide what is best in a relative sense.

It should be evident, then, that the task of the scientist is not actually to set up or affirm a moral system, not, in other words, to take a moral position—even one based upon empirical evidences—but only to determine cause-and-effect relationships which can aid the nonscientist (including the scientist in his nonscientist role as a citizen) in choosing criteria for moral decisions. The scientist, being confined to empirical data, cannot touch questions of absolutistic morality; nor can he, while in his professional role, make choices among the alternatives of relativistic (normative) morality. But he can clarify the alternatives and thus contribute *something* to moral questions.

*Trends in premarital sexual behavior.* Research into the sexual behavior of young people reveals a great deal of variation from one person to the next and among the particular groups studied. Females, for example, engage in premarital sexual relations less than do males; and conservative religious groups, such as our own, hold to the chastity norm more closely than do other subgroups of the culture—especially the non-religious. But the overall trend in recent decades has been in the direction of greater premarital experience. As might be expected, an increasing acceptance of the “new morality” has resulted in a larger and larger defiance of traditional morality. Attitudinal changes have been accompanied by behavioral changes in

the same liberal direction. Particularly noticeable have been two trends: (1) toward a sexual “permissiveness with affection”—meaning that premarital relations are increasingly approved where accompanied by love and/or the promise of marriage—and (2) toward a convergence of male and female practices—meaning that, though the female still is more conservative in behavior than is the male, this difference is less than formerly.

For the United States as a whole, it is estimated from the research available that nearly one-fifth of unmarried college females and about one-half of unmarried college males have at one time or other experienced sexual relations: that in the general population approximately one-half of the females and three-fourths of the males have full sexual experience at some time before marriage; and that in the neighborhood of one-sixth of all brides are pregnant at the time of the wedding. My own research has demonstrated that in Mormon culture the proportions for unconventional sexual behavior are significantly lower than those just given.

*Premarital sex as a factor in marital adjustment.* But, if our inquiry is to reveal anything about the nature of sexual morality, it must go farther than just picturing trends in attitudes and practices. The crucial question has to do with *effects* or *consequences*. If it can be shown that premarital relations affect either positively or negatively something that is highly valued, this insight can then be used as a basis for moral decision.

There have been a dozen or so serious studies which have attempted to determine if premarital sexual experience in any way affects the outcome of the marriage. Though the results in some of these have been inconclusive, the preponderant finding has been that marriage is more successful where pre-marital chastity has been maintained. For example, back in the 1920's Gilbert Hamilton in one study and Katherine Davis in another reported happier marriages where there had been no premarital sexual intercourse. A little later Harvey Locke compared a group of happily married couples with divorced couples and reported significantly higher premarital intercourse rates for the latter. Ernest Burgess and Paul Wallin, in a careful longitudinal study, reported negative correlations between premarital sexual experience on the one hand and both engagement adjustment and marriage adjustment on the other. My own research on premarital pregnancy, though admittedly measuring only a fraction of the cases where there had been intercourse, has consistently revealed higher-than-average divorce rates for this group.

To repeat, not every study has reported this relationship between premarital chastity and marital success, and several have accompanied their findings with a note of caution regarding interpretation. Yet, the research evidence that we do have has tended to pile up on the one side, in support of the chastity norm. Perhaps a major reason for the inconclusiveness of

findings up to this point is the failure of most research to take into account the values people hold, to consider how their behavior lines up with their standards.

*A cross-cultural testing of the relativism of effects.* To throw additional light on this problem, about ten years ago I designed and carried out a research project studying certain aspects of premarital intimacy compared across three cultures: sexually permissive Denmark, moderately restrictive midwestern United States, and highly restrictive (regarding sex norms) Mormon country in the Intermountain Region of western United States. Samples were drawn from each of these cultures, and studied by means of two complementary methods: (1) anonymous questionnaires administered to university students for revealing both attitudes and practices, as well as some of the effects, of premarital sexual intimacy; and (2) record linkage, whereby official marriage, birth, and divorce records for cross-sections of the populations were matched on a case-by-case basis to provide information on child spacing and premarital pregnancy, and their outcomes in terms of divorce or non-divorce.

In Denmark—which is broadly typical of all of Scandinavia—sexual intercourse during the engagement is a tradition that goes back three or four centuries at least, and in recent years the practice has spread to include the “going-steady” relationship; now as earlier, many Danes tend to wait for pregnancy before going ahead with the wedding. In the United States, including the midwestern region—which may be taken as a fair cross-section of the whole—chastity is the code; and this prescription, though frequently violated and though undergoing considerable liberalization in recent decades, is still the dominant norm, backed heavily by a strong Judeo-Christian tradition. In Mormon country—which, of course, is part of the United States, but, because of the Latter-day Saint culture which pervades it, is unique in many respects—chastity is a highly institutionalized norm supported by strong positive and negative sanctions. With orthodox Mormons, “breaking the law of chastity” is among the most serious of sins.

Now, what were the results of our statistical comparisons? In the first place, we found, as expected, that Denmark showed up as being the most permissive on just about every measure used, both attitudinal and behavioral: our subjects there, for example, approved earlier starting times, in relation to marriage, of every level of intimacy; gave greater approval of pre-marital sexual intercourse; engaged in premarital intercourse in larger numbers; and became premaritally pregnant in larger number than subjects in either of the American samples—especially Mormon country. Differences in the attitudes and practices of Denmark compared with the United States were consistent and large, and in virtually every instance the Mormon sample showed up as the most conservative or restrictive of



the three. This seems to be clear evidence that cultural norms affect personal attitudes, and that attitudes, in turn, have a controlling influence over behavior.

But what about the effects of the behavior in relation to the respective cultural norms? Are the measurable consequences of premarital sexual behavior the same everywhere, or, are they relative to the culture? We had hypothesized the latter—with the expectation that negative consequences would be greatest where norms are strictest, simply because it is there that the unconventional behavior has greatest disapproval. This is exactly what was found. Though the research was exploratory and we make no claim of measuring *all* relevant consequences, the following were studied and found to have greatest negative effect in *Mormon country*:

1. Premarital intercourse in violation of personal standards. When percent approving was compared with percent experiencing this level of intimacy, Mormon country showed the greatest overshadowing of the former by the latter.
2. Negative feelings subsequent to premarital intercourse. Of those who had engaged in premarital intercourse, the largest percentages feeling guilt, remorse, fear, and the like, following the first experience, were found in Mormon country.
3. Concealing the act by hurrying the marriage. There was evidence that Danish couples felt little pressure to step up the wedding even when premaritally pregnant; that midwestern couples, in contrast, tended to marry right after the discovery of pregnancy; and that couples from Mormon country may have hurried the wedding once intercourse had taken place, without waiting for pregnancy to force them into it.
4. Divorce as a consequence of premarital pregnancy. Though each of the three cultures showed higher divorce percentages for the premaritally pregnant than the postmaritally pregnant, this difference in divorce rate was very slight in Denmark but very large and the greatest of the three in Mormon country.

### **Interpretations and Conclusions**

Now, if more of the Latter-day Saints who offend sexually, in comparison with offenders in other cultures, do so in violation of their own standards, and feel greater negative emotion following the experience, and unwisely or hurriedly marry in an attempt to escape the consequences, and if premarital pregnancy increases the chances of a subsequent divorce, more among the Latter-day Saints than with others—all of which are strongly

suggested by this cross-cultural research—maybe we have found something here that can be useful in moral decision.

I well remember one of our General Authorities many years ago telling the young people assembled in a stake conference at Rexburg, Idaho: “Others might be able to do these things”—he had been speaking of various personal indiscretions—”and get away with it, but you can’t because you know better.” He was telling us, in other words, that the consequences of acts depend to a considerable extent upon the standards people hold.

To recognize the relativity of certain consequences of premarital sexual behavior is not to deny God. Neither is it to claim that this is the whole story, that everything is measurable by the instruments of science. On the contrary, it is through divine sources that man has been admonished “Where more is given, more is required” (which is a relative statement); and it is a belief of Mormonism that to use one’s intelligence is to become more Godlike.

As Latter-day Saints we can take some pride in the fact that both premarital coitus and premarital pregnancy are lower among us than in the country or the world at large. This is one measure of the relative effectiveness of our standards and teachings. But, it must at the same time be recognized that our more restrictive standards, while controlling behavior up to a point, nevertheless result in greater-than-average negative effects upon those who violate these standards. “You can’t because you know better.”

Two additional “problems” related to the sexual norms of our own particular religious culture might be briefly mentioned before closing. First, of the three cultures studied, this one showed the highest percentage of respondents engaging in terminal petting, which suggests that its very strict prescription against premarital coitus may be resulting in an excess of pre-coital activity carried out for its own sake; at least there seems to be a tendency here, more than in the other cultures and especially the Danish, to draw the line separating moral and immoral sexual behavior just short of chastity. The second item to be mentioned (though not part of the research previously cited) is that age at marriage shows up disproportionately low in Mormon country; as a matter of fact, in recent years Utah has been among the highest of the reporting states in percentage of teen-age marriages. Explanations for this cultural difference probably lie in the severity of the religious sanctions in support of the chastity norm, plus heavy romantic-sexual stimulants in the general culture, reinforced by Church teaching on the importance and sacredness of marriage, and Church programs bringing young people together at early ages and somewhat continuously—plus the petting pattern just noted—all of which leave boys and girls charged emotionally and/or stimulated sexually, yet without socially approved modes of release except marriage. So they marry young to escape the pressures.

To successfully meet such problems, ways need to be explored either to remove some of the incentive toward pre-marital sexual expression found in the general culture, or to ease some of the guilt and other destructive consequences by better sex education and better gospel teaching, including perspective on the principle of repentance, or to build better understanding and powers of self-control within the individual. Perhaps there is room for improvement along all three of these lines.

But in the final analysis it is the individual, using his free agency, who decides his course of action. Chastity, or the lack of it, is, more than anything else, a matter of personal decision. It is of crucial importance, therefore, that all of us be given all of the help necessary for mature and responsible decision-making. Part of this help is of the kind provided by a great university such as Brigham Young University. It includes honest research and open discussion. Free agency works best within an atmosphere of inquiry and enlightenment. Those decisions are most sound which are informed decisions. "The Glory of God Is Intelligence."

We are taking the position that, though the social scientist, as scientist, will not moralize, he can, through his research, help bring about a better understanding of the consequences of specific personal acts and, hence, contribute something to moral behavior. There are research bases—some now discovered and others yet to be investigated—which can make moral decision less difficult in today's complex world. And, by acting upon what has been discovered—living according to the light we have been given—it may well be possible to turn the so-called "new morality" into a morality of more satisfying consequences. "Men are that they might have joy"—not just fun, or passing pleasure, but *joy*. "You can't because you know better."

But, is knowing the consequences of an act sufficient for the self-control that is needed? Evidence that knowing alone is not enough comes from what has happened in tobacco consumption during recent years. Despite the Surgeon General's report, giving detailed and convincing evidence of the harmful effects of smoking, the dip in the trend line proved slight and temporary. Large numbers of Americans go right on smoking, even knowing the risks they are taking. This same tendency may apply to premarital sex; knowledge alone may not be enough. Still, on the other side of the coin, there is evidence that the causal nature of human behavior *can* be taught in the schools, even at the very young ages, and that objective thinking produces desirable results. A social scientist by the name of Muuss reported that where this method—objective teaching based upon research discovery—supersedes the traditional judgmental approach, the child is "less punitive, less anxious, more tolerant, more democratic, more responsible, more secure, has fewer conflicts, and has better school adjustment."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the thing that is needed most in meeting the problem of a new morality is the teaming of facts and faith, of information and inspiration, of science and religion: science to provide the evidence; religion to provide the meaning and the motivation.

---

Brigham Young University Forum Address, June 29, 1967.

Dr. Christensen is professor of sociology at Purdue University.

1. R. E. Muuss, "Mental Health Implications of a Preventive Psychiatry Program in the Light of Research Findings," *Marriage and Family Living*, XXII (1960), 155.