A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Attitudes Toward Marital Infidelity

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This is one in a series of articles comparing sexual intimacy within and across three modern western societies. The societies involved are: Denmark, with its relatively liberal or permissive sex norms; Midwestern United States, with its somewhat typical or average sex culture for the country of which it is a part; and Intermountain United States, with its rather conservative or restrictive sex norms due to Mormon influence.

Some generalizations from the earlier reports, which are relevant to our cross-cultural emphasis, are as follows: Every statistical measure that was used showed the Danish culture to be the most permissive and the Intermountain culture the most restrictive regarding premarital intimacy, with the Midwestern culture in between though generally closer to the Intermountain than to the Danish. With respect to attitudes, Danish respondents more frequently approved of premarital coitus, approved of earlier starts in relation to marriage of each level of intimacy (necking, petting, and coitus), thought in terms of a more rapid progression from the beginning of intimacy in necking to its completion in coitus, and favored a longer period of coital activity prior to marriage. With respect to behavior, many more persons in the Danish sample actually engaged in premarital coitus and the incidences of both illegitimacy, and premarital


The contrasting sex norms of these three cultures are described in the previous articles just cited. For the sake of anonymity, the three samples will be referred to throughout this paper simply as “Danish,” “Midwestern,” and “Intermountain.”
pregnancy followed by marriage, were substantially higher there. With respect
to effects or consequences, premarital coitus among respondents in the Danish
sample was more likely to occur because of desire and to have pleasant feelings
associated with it, accompanied by a lower level of guilt; in addition, Danish
respondents who were involved in a premarital pregnancy were less likely to
hurry up the wedding or to terminate their marriage by divorce. In all of these
things\(^1\), Denmark stood off by itself, so to speak; the great gap was between it
and the two American cultures – which were quite similar to each other, though
with the Intermountain almost always showing up as the most restrictive.

Thus, there is a certain amount of evidence that the more permissive the
culture regarding premarital sexual intimacy, the higher will be the actual
occurrence of such intimacy but the lower will be any negative effects deriving
therefrom. And, conversely, the more restrictive the culture, the lower will be
the actual occurrence but the higher will be the negative effects. Apparently
negative consequences are more likely when behavior is out of line with the
surrounding value system.

**Problem and Procedure**

Whereas the earlier publications discussed above have dealt with certain
attitudes, behaviors, and consequences of premarital sexual intimacy, this report
is to focus solely upon attitudes regarding marital infidelity, or, in other words,
adultery. As will be explained below, data limitations will prevent us from
dealing with either behavior or the consequences of behavior here. Nevertheless,
the same three cultures will be examined and the cross-cultural theme will be
maintained. Furthermore, by describing attitudes toward marital infidelity,
we hope further to complete the overall picture in our three cultures of patterns
of sexual intimacy outside of marriage, and by this indirection to add to an
understanding of the roles of married mates.

**Related Literature.** Generally speaking, societies regard premarital intimacy
as much less of a problem than they do marital infidelity, for while the former
does not usually involve deception and may in some cases actually prepare for
marriage, the latter usually does involve deception and hence makes a mockery
of the marriage contract. Virtually all societies recognize this difference. Mur-
dock, for example, working from the Human Relations Area Files at Yale
University, reports that non-incestuous premarital relations are permitted by
about 70 percent of the 158 societies for which information on this point is
available. But regarding adulterous relations he says:

Taboos on adultery are extremely widespread, though sometimes more honored in
the breach than in the observance. They appear in 120 of the 148 societies in our sample
for which data are available. In 4 of the remaining 28, adultery is socially disapproved.

\(^1\) Except that divorce comparisons were between the Danish and Midwestern only, since
data were lacking for the Intermountain.