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**“Redefining and Measuring Sexual Revolution, with
an Example from the IPUMS Census Data,
1880-2000.”**

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Abstract

In this paper I redefine the concept of sexual revolution and suggest two new measurements for the process. I review prior definitions and measurements of sexual revolution. I redefine sexual revolution in response to a Victorian script linking the public statuses of marriage and childbearing to the privacy of sexual experience. I measure sexual revolution as resistance to this script. In particular, women break the link between sex, marriage, and childbearing, and make sexual behavior public by being wives without children or being mothers without ever marrying. I demonstrate the historical relevance of these measurements in the United States by using IPUMS census data from 1880-2000. I compare metropolitan and non-metropolitan populations, black and white populations, and the populations of four metropolitan areas (Boston, Richmond, Indianapolis, and San Francisco) with respect to sexual revolution. The results indicate that these new measurements of sexual revolution both correspond with and confirm past research on sexual revolution and point towards the possibility of further research.

Past research on sexual revolution has made valuable contributions to defining and understanding the process. Yet research is hampered by the lack of a well-defined concept of resistance, and the further lack of coherent and comparable measurements of the process of sexual revolution. Here I attempt to redefine sexual revolution as resistance to a particular Victorian script linking marriage, sex and childbearing. This redefinition of sexual revolution allows me to construct broadly comparable measurements of the concept over time. I demonstrate the descriptive power of these measurements, and indicate their usefulness in both confirming past findings, and pointing towards new and interesting research question. I begin with a review of other definitions and measurements below.

Previous Work

Historians and sociologists have developed a variety of definitions for describing sexual revolution. In turn, these definitions inform the measurement of sexual revolution. The historian Daniel Scott Smith (1978, Smith & Hindus 1975) defines sexual revolution in both a narrow and broad fashion. Narrowly, he describes sexual revolution as a ‘sustained increase in nonmarital coitus.’ More broadly, sexual revolution consists of a ‘qualitatively more positive evaluation of sex as a human activity.’ He touches upon other possible aspects of sexual revolution, including divorce and a corresponding redefinition of marriage (Smith 1978).

Smith attempts to measure sexual revolution primarily through examination of the historical incidence of premarital pregnancy. He examines the timing of marriage in relation to the timing of first childbirth. Where the length of the timing between marriage and childbirth is less than the approximate length of pregnancy, Smith assumes premarital sex was likely

involved. Using this measure, Smith examines historical variation in premarital sexual behavior. Smith turns to a variety of other materials to support this measurement, including ‘illegitimacy rates’ (rates of nonmarital childbearing), premarital coitus rates (as recorded in early sex surveys), and qualitative data, primarily including media representations of sex.

John Modell (1989), promotes an emancipatory definition of sexual revolution. Sexual revolution involves a change in behavior, including greater premarital and nonmarital sex. Sexual revolution also involves a change in attitudes, with greater sexual liberalism. Modell makes the case for two linked periods of sexual revolution in 20th Century America, including the early decades of the 20th Century (especially the 1920s) and the period from the mid-1960s through the late 1970s.

Modell (1989) uses many of the same measurements as Smith, crediting his work in the process. Modell relies upon the premarital pregnancy measures established by Smith, but also pointedly considers these measures in the context of the legitimization process. He contrasts those periods of time where premarital pregnancies were legitimized by marriage with those periods where premarital pregnancy resulted in nonmarital childbearing (O’Connell & Moore 1980). Modell also uses early sex surveys, including the Kinsey data (Reed 1978) & Terman data (Terman 1938), to compare results.

Kevin White (2000) describes sexual revolution within a larger cultural framework of rebellion against Victorian (and neo-Victorian) sexual norms in the United States. White emphasizes that the Victorians were not necessarily repressed, but they certainly attempted to keep sex both private and under control. Sex was not discussed in public, except in its relationship to the necessary function of childbearing within marriage. As a result, he describes a process of resistance to these norms, culminating in the term ‘sexual revolution’ in the 1960s,

as resistance became associated with the revolutionary language of the critical left (White 2000). He measures the concept of sexual revolution, then, by qualitatively examining discourse surrounding sex and the creation of a homosexual identity through the 20th Century.

In the contemporary context, sociologists have frequently entered the fray of identifying sexual revolution. Christensen & Gregg (1970) call for an empirical verification of the distinction between behavior and attitudinal changes. They design a survey of two college campuses in the United States, and one in Denmark, to measure changing values (including tolerance of premarital sex, tolerance of pornography, and tolerance of non-virginity in a partner) and sexual behavior (timing and incidence of premarital sex) between birth cohorts. Correspondingly, King, et al (1977), and Robinson, et al (1991) describe sexual revolution in terms of both a rise in premarital sex and a corresponding liberalization of attitudes about premarital sex. A variety of sociological studies also note the gendering of sexual revolution. Revolution in sexual behavior is particularly noticeable for women. They also consider the morality of having multiple sexual partners within the purview of sexual revolution. They measure sexual revolution in their contemporary environment through quantitative sex surveys of the student populations in selected universities. They include questions about the premarital sexual behavior, attitudes about the morality of premarital sexual behavior, and attitudes about the morality of having multiple sexual partners (King, et al 1977, Robinson, et al 1991). They also explicitly link the process of sexual revolution to a re-evaluation of women's sexual behavior.

With the exception of White's work, previous definitions of sexual revolution have tended to focus on the rise in premarital sex. There are two problems with this definition. The first is that implicit in the concept of 'revolution' is a notion of some sort of oppression to

overthrow. While this often remains implicit in the writings of historians and sociologists, making the oppression explicit would help in defining the social change taking place. As Smith, and other writers have pointed out, premarital sex has often risen and declined over time (Smith 1978, Smith & Hindus 1975). Yet this does not necessarily imply a sexual revolution in each case. An understanding of the context for resistance is required in describing a revolution.

The second problem with this definition is that a revolution is also a public phenomenon. Premarital sex most often led to marriage in many historical settings, even if defined through ‘shotgun weddings’, covering the traces of any publicly normative transgressions. For a revolution to occur, it must be public. While premarital sex often varies in the historical record, these variations did not necessarily become public. A definition of sexual revolution, then, needs to both define the context of resistance, and define resistance as public.

Previous measurements of sexual revolution have also demonstrated flaws. In the historical record, the focus on premarital pregnancy represents an enormous leap forward in attempting to measure sexual revolution. Unfortunately, it focuses on the previously discussed, and problematic definition of sexual revolution. Moreover, as Modell (1989) cautions, and O’Connell and Moore (1980) lay out in detail, the process of legitimization of premarital pregnancy also changes. Periods with high levels of premarital pregnancy, but high rates of legitimization of these pregnancies may indicate a low degree of public acceptance of premarital sex. The degree of legitimacy, in effect, may function (in an inverse fashion) as a better indicator of sexual revolution than the level of premarital pregnancy itself.

Other surveys, most notably the sex surveys first carried out by Terman (1938), and Kinsey (Reed 1978), and later by a variety of sociologists from the 1960s onward, attempt to measure premarital sexual behavior and attitudes directly. These efforts are notable, but

unfortunately they often correspond to very limited samples. The representativeness of Terman and Kinsey are highly questionable, and the latter surveys are largely obtained only from student bodies on college campuses. This leaves little room for substantive comparison and causal analysis at the national, or even local level. The chart in Appendix A roughly summarizes some of these survey results by corresponding census year.

Finally, historians like White, and to a somewhat lesser extent Smith and Modell, make use of qualitative data, particularly archival media sources, to explore sexual revolution. In more recent cases, even quantitative analyses of media are used to examine changing sexual norms (Herold & Foster 1975). These data certainly provide information about the public aspect of sexual revolution. Unfortunately, the comparative basis for causal analysis, and relationship to behavior is less well established.

Redefining Sexual Revolution

Here I attempt to redefine sexual revolution in a coherent fashion, incorporating both the context for resistance, and the public nature of resistance. In the process, I attempt to redefine a method of measuring sexual revolution over time.

Theoretically, I attempt to make the case for defining sexual revolution as resistance to a particular cultural script (Townsend 2002). Like White (2000), I identify this script as Victorian, or neo-Victorian. There are two key aspects to the script. The first is that marriage, sexual experience, and parenthood link together in a conceptual framework separating young adulthood from adulthood (see also Frykman & Löfgren 1987 for in depth description of the construction of Victorian culture in Sweden). Young adults are expected to enter these statuses virtually

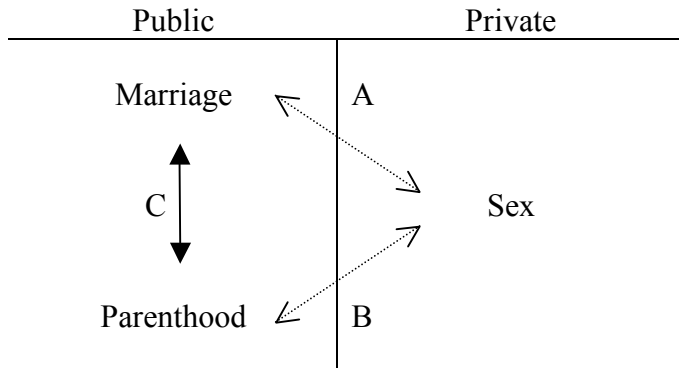
simultaneously within the life course. The second aspect is that within this trinity, marriage and childbearing serve as public demonstrations of adult status, while sexual activity remains private and ‘controlled’ by the other statuses (Barker-Benfield 1972).

Sexual revolution, then, involves an unraveling of this script. The link between sex and childbearing breaks. The link between sex and marriage breaks. As a result, the link between childbearing and marriage also breaks. Correspondingly, in the process of each of these shifts, sexual behavior moves from the private to the public evading social control (Reed 1978).

Measuring Sexual Revolution

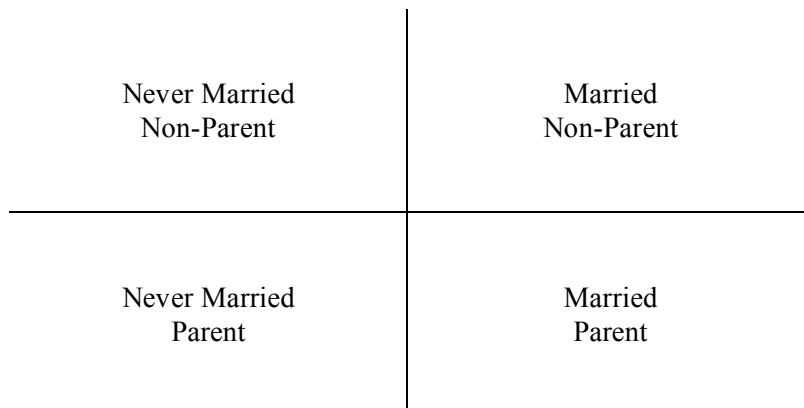
To measure sexual revolution, then, I return to the trinity of marriage, sex, and childbearing. Sex takes on a private role within this trinity, but has public consequences, binding parenthood to marriage, and marriage to parenthood. The sexual revolution breaks down this trinity. The public binding of marriage and parenthood is crucial in this regard. Breakdowns in this binding both provide evidence of weakness in the trinity and, crucially, make the role of sex in the trinity public. The rise of marriage without parenthood provides public evidence of a change in sexual relations in the link between sex and childbearing. The rise of parenthood without marriage provides even stronger public evidence of a change in sexual relations, this time in the link between sex and marriage. This is conceptually demonstrated in figure one below. A change in the private links A or B will be noted by a change in the public link C, between marriage and parenthood.

Figure 1. Victorian Script Linking Marriage, Sex, and Parenthood



Marriage and parenthood represent distinct statuses that are joined in the Victorian trinity with sex. The public link between marriage and parenthood is established sequentially, and nearly simultaneously in the life course. Individuals are expected to move from being never married non-parents to being married parents. The private link to sexual experience binds these two statuses together. Yet large populations in transitional categories, married non-parents and never married parents, constitute a direct threat to the Victorian trinity. They make sexual interaction public by virtue of implying a broken link between sex and parenthood (married non-parents) or sex and marriage (never married parents).

Figure 2. Public Statuses



Relatively small populations of married non-parents are to be expected since sexual experience is presumed to occur only after marriage. Individuals are likely to remain in the married non-parent category for somewhere between nine and twenty one months. This insures that relatively few people will remain in the married non-parent category at any given time. Larger than expected populations in this category relative to the married with children category imply non-procreative sexual interaction within the marriage. As with sociological studies, I focus especially on women's sexual behavior (King, et al 1977, Robinson, et al 1991). This can be measured by looking at the proportion of married women without children for younger women (where any children they had would be expected to remain in the home).

In contrast to the married non-parent population, anyone in the single parent population implies a more direct threat to the Victorian trinity. Single parents mean that sex without marriage has occurred. Sex is again made public with the breaking of the trinity. This can be measured by looking at the proportion of mothers who've never married.

As I demonstrate below, these two measures have a number of advantages over other measures of sexual revolution. First, they directly measure public resistance to Victorian and neo-Victorian scripts as defined through the relationship between marriage and parenthood. Second, they are easily measured through census records, and correspondingly as representative of the sexual revolution within the general population as the Census itself. The measurement of these variables across census years can also be used to provide historically comparable and consistent measurements of sexual revolution across a long period of time. They can also be used to compare the course of sexual revolution between different subpopulations (by geographic area, class, race, etc.).

Measuring Sexual Revolution in the USA, 1880-2000

I use collected census microdata from the publicly available IPUMS files to measure these two variables; the percent of wives without children, and the percent of mothers never married, for the population aged 25-29. I focus on this narrow age range here to insure any own children ever born will be likely to remain in the household, hence public, and to avoid the more chaotic interrelationships between college and marriage at younger ages 20-24. However, I will return to this younger age group in future studies to compare trends between those ages 20-24 and 25-29. I separate and compare the white and black populations separately in this regard. White and black populations likely experienced sexual revolution from Victorian culture somewhat differently. Indeed, blacks may never have accepted (or been accepted by) Victorian culture. For consistency, I also exclude the population in group quarters, and those with Spanish surnames (1880-1960) or self-identified as Hispanic (1970 onward). I also separate the population and compare trends in metropolitan and non-metropolitan settings. Census data recording marital status and the presence of ‘own’ children in the household is available, and separable by metropolitan area, for the years 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. The samples for years 1880, 1900, 1920, 1940, 1950, 1960, and 1970 are one percent nationally representative samples. The 1910 sample is a smaller 1-in-250 nationally representative sample. For 1980, 1990, and 2000, I use the larger nationally representative 5% samples. A much anticipated one percent sample from the 1930 data will also soon be made available by the Minnesota Population Center.

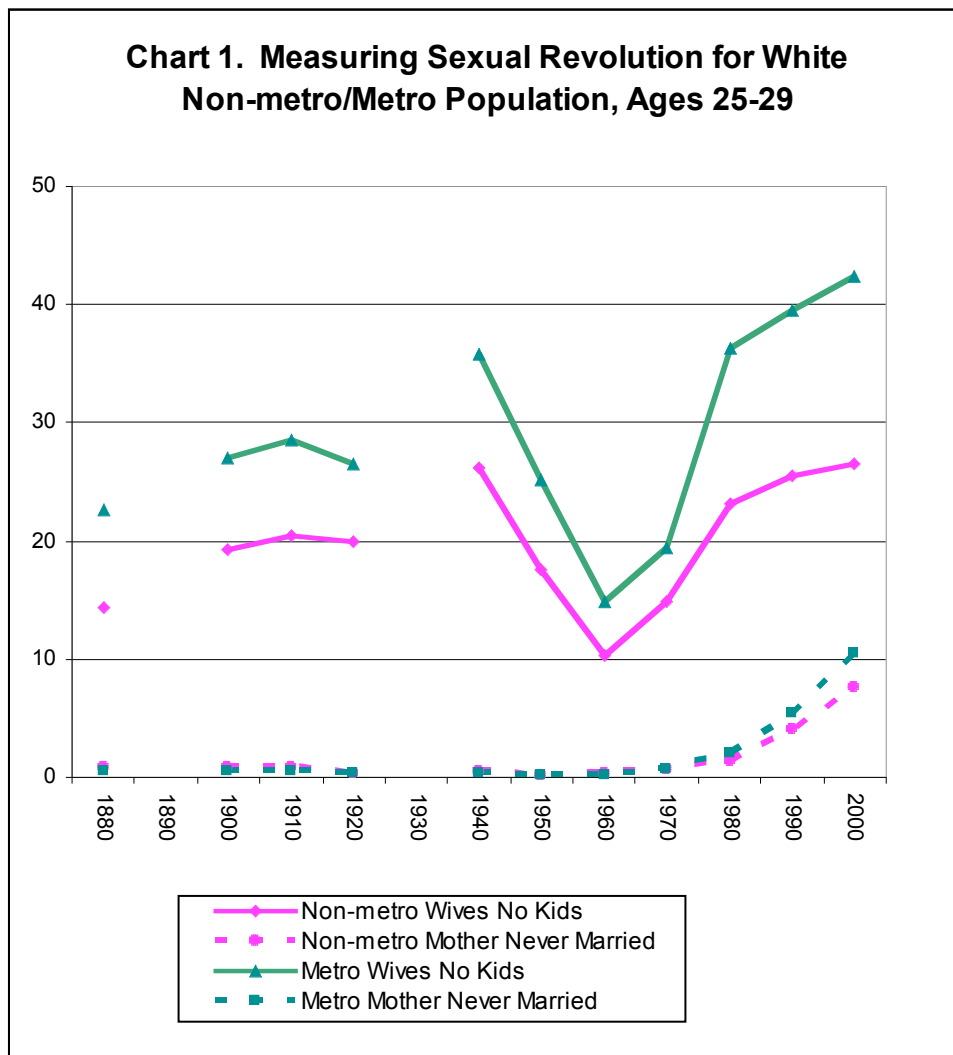
The charts below demonstrate the course of sexual revolution in U.S. history, as measured by the variables constructed above. Chart one compares the two measurements,

percent of wives without children, and percent of mothers never married, for the population of white women, age 25-29, in metropolitan and non-metropolitan settings. Together the two measurements indicate at least two periods of marked sexual revolution, each different in character. The first period covers the time period from 1880 to 1940. During this time, non-procreative sex gained particularly public prominence. This likely follows a rise in the acceptability of ‘companionate marriages.’ An early peak may have occurred around 1910, to be followed by a later peak in 1940. Unfortunately, without the 1930 census data, it remains difficult to measure aspects of the sexual revolution through the 1920s, a period of great historical interest. The peak in 1940 may indeed represent a peak surrounding the end of the Great Depression. On the other hand, it may represent a decline from an earlier peak in 1930, following the roar of the 1920s. What seems clear throughout this period is an increased affinity for non-procreative sex. This increased affinity is made public through a rise in the proportion of wives without children. The implied break in the relationship between sex and childbearing publicly challenges the Victorian trinity, constituting sexual revolution from older norms.

In contrast to this first period of sexual revolution, the arrival of the baby boom represented a sharp return to something resembling Victorian behavior. This neo-Victorian return to combining the public status of marriage and childbearing is evident in the data from 1940-1960. The nature of joint public status again returned sex to its private place within the Victorian trinity.

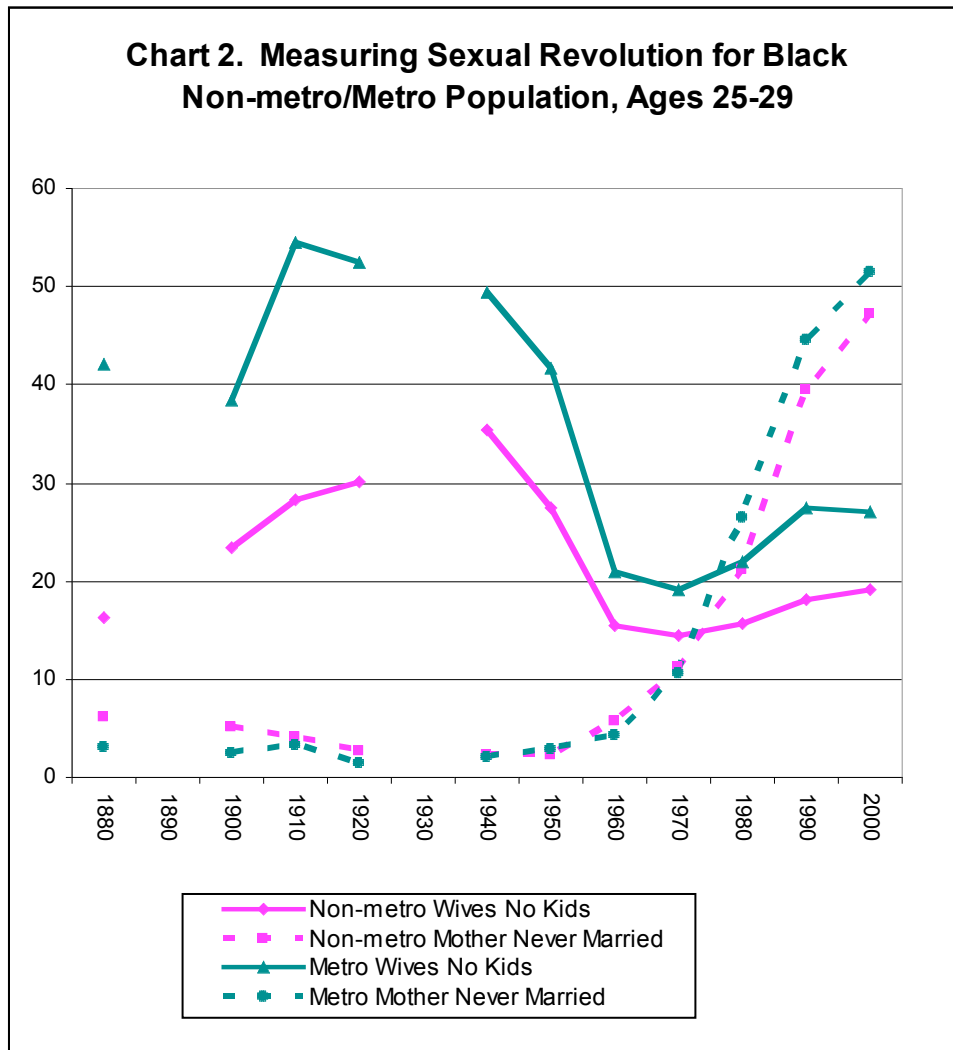
A second, and more defined period of sexual revolution takes place from 1960-2000. This time, both the bonds between sex and childbearing, and the bonds between sex and marriage are broken. Sex becomes increasingly public in the presence of both marriage without childbearing and childbearing without marriage. The data reveal the sharpest phase of the

revolution occurring between 1970 and 1980 for the population of white women age 25-29, but it continues on afterwards through the 2000 census. Many people date the most important phase in this second sexual revolution as the period between 1965 and 1975 (White 2000, Robinson, et al 1991). This is reflected in the Census record here. Again, a comparison with the younger age group might also prove useful in future research.



The differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan patterns of sexual revolution

are also notable in chart one. Metropolitan areas were much more likely to witness public displays of non-procreative sex through the first period of sexual revolution. This seems to support the notion that the acceptability of non-procreative sex, along with the availability of contraceptives, is likely linked to new social movements within metropolitan areas (Reed 1978 Chudacoff 1999).



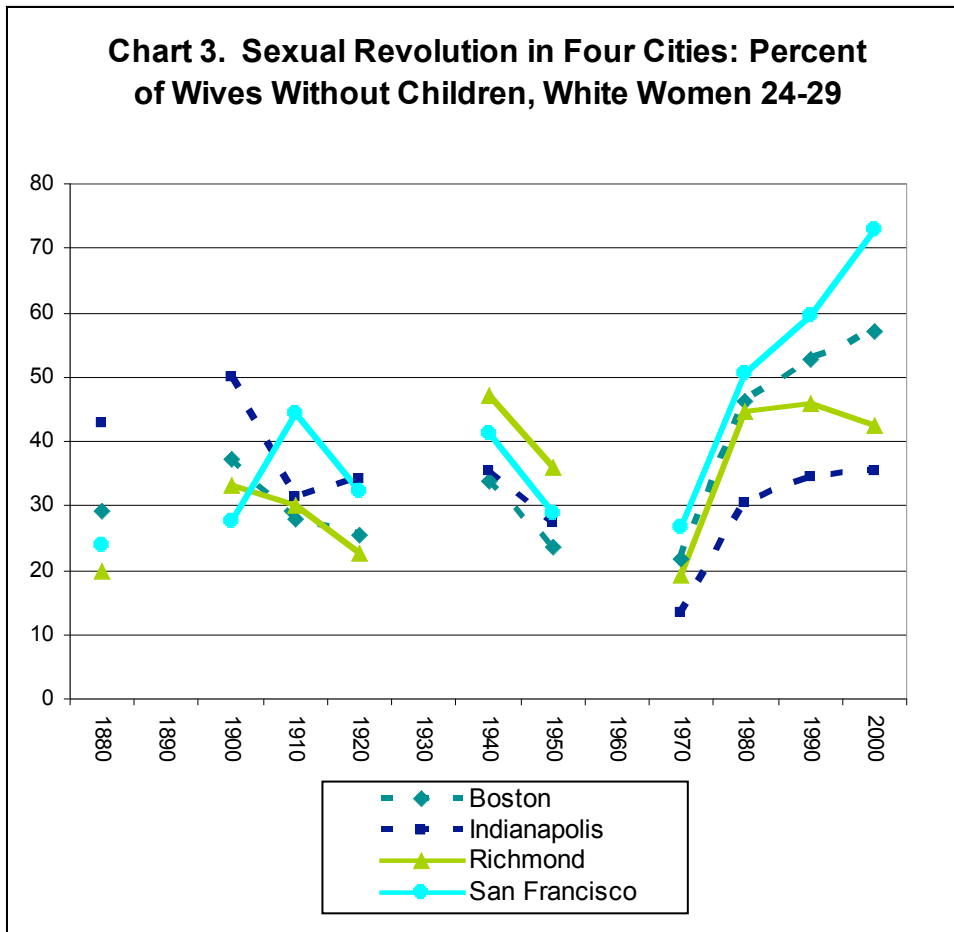
In chart two, I measure sexual revolution for the black population. There is some

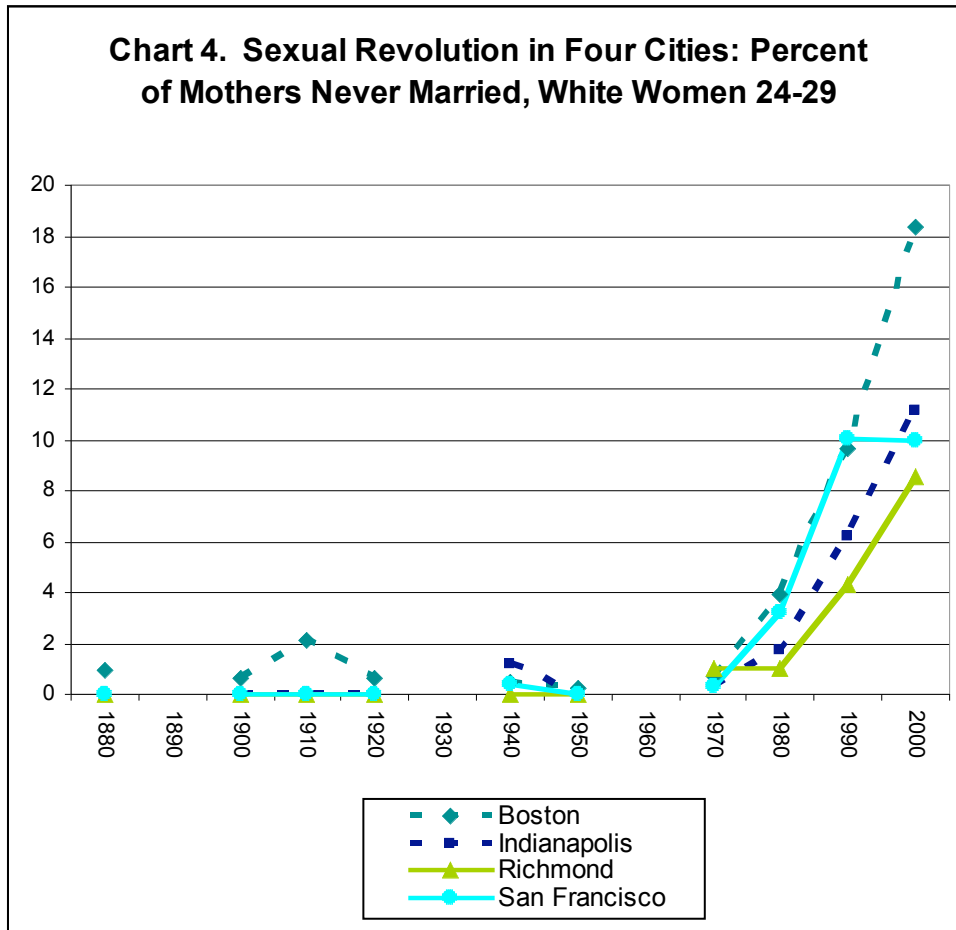
evidence that the Victorian script was never as commonly held for blacks. In particular, both measurements of sexual revolution are noticeably higher for the black population in 1880. More black women were married without kids, and more black women had children while never marrying. Despite this, the patterns of change over time for the black population are closely related to the white population in notable ways. There is a similar jump in the percent of married women without children in both the black and white populations between 1900 and 1940. For the black population, this seems to peak in 1910, where it peaks much later in the white population, in 1940. Unfortunately, again, the lack of 1930 data proves a drawback for comparison.

Like the white population, the black population also seems to have experienced a return to childbearing within marriage during the baby boom. However, even early on in this period, the percent of mothers never married began to rise for the black population. From 1960 onwards, this break in the relationship between marriage and sex constitutes the most serious challenge to the Victorian script for blacks, overwhelming the break between sex and childbearing, which rises again after 1970.

Due to the ease of construction, I am able to further extend the measurement to examine sexual revolution for particular metropolitan areas. In charts three and four below, I examine the course of sexual revolution for Boston (MA), Richmond (VA), Indianapolis (IN), and San Francisco (CA). In chart three, I trace the percent of married women without children in the white population, age 25-29 for each city between 1880 and 2000. Patterns of change are broadly similar between each city, with two exceptions. While publicly non-procreative sex steadily declined in other cities between 1900 and 1920, it rose to a peak in 1910 in San Francisco. Then, from 1980 onwards, Richmond and Indianapolis provide far less resistance to

Victorian sexual script than Boston and San Francisco. The comparison between cities is notable both for the broad similarity between cities, indicating a national culture of sex, and for the differences between cities, indicating some regional variation in acceptance of scripts. In particular, it seems possible that regional divergences in approaches to non-procreative sex may also be taking place.





In chart four, I trace the percent of mothers never married for white women ages 25-29. Again patterns are broadly similar, with some regional variation. This time, patterns in Boston seem indicate an early revolution in publicly displaying sexual behavior outside of marriage, peaking in 1910. This pattern may link up to the strength of the Women's Rights movements in this area. From 1970 onwards, Boston again leads in this form of sexual revolution, separating sex from marriage. Yet while all cities move toward this pattern, San Francisco, interestingly flattens out, failing to see further revolution in this regard between 1990 and 2000.

The two measurements of sexual revolution I propose seem to both reflect the broad historical record on sexual revolution, and add new elements to the discussion. By proposing

measurements of sexual revolution in a broadly comparable way, I am able to describe the process, and significantly move towards furthering the study of both the causes and consequences of resistance to Victorian sexual scripts. While these two measurements measure the sexual revolution as I have defined the concept, their correspondence with other measurements reflecting other definitions of sexual revolution is a subject for further research. In particular, their relationship to acceptance for pornography and public displays of homosexuality, as other instances of sex made public, may be interesting to measure.

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Appendix A

