

4 Was sex shaken up in the 1960s?

Introduction

I feel I must protest at the proposed institution of a 'sex clinic' in Sheffield. The doctors say that their desire is to prevent the birth of unwanted children, but surely they must realise that by the widespread issue of contraceptives they are removing the only natural barrier to illicit sex – the fear of conception – and encouraging a moral delinquency which is already woefully out of hand.

'Annus Mirabilis' by Philip Larkin

Sexual intercourse began

In nineteen sixty-three

(Which was rather late for me) –

Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban

And The Beatles' first LP.

LP

Short for 'long playing', a type of vinyl record consisting of numerous tracks

See Chapter 5 for how Penguin's publication of D.H. Lawrence's book *Lady Chatterley's Lover* caused a major upset in 1960.

This letter was published in the *Sheffield Star* in September 1966, criticising the setting up of a clinic that offered contraceptive advice to unmarried women. One of the first of its kind outside London, the clinic was established by two female doctors who deliberately catered for young people. It was a project without state support or funds – all the staff worked for nothing in the first year and the premises were secured with a £500 loan from a well wisher. Both women faced widespread condemnation, especially from the Churches. One of these women was my mother.

This is the story people usually tell of the 'swinging sixties'. Traditionally it's a decade when the rebellious young overturned the conservative morals of their parents. Before this 'revolution' it is often said that there was 'no sex before marriage', couples stayed together, with the man in charge of the household. Homosexuality was illegal. Afterwards there was sexual freedom, easy divorce, legal abortion and tolerance of homosexuality. Women now raced out to work and the homely traditions of women 'having tea on the table when dad gets in' seemed lost forever. In this decade, it used to be thought, attitudes to sex and to the equality of the sexes were severely shaken up.

Yet it is not as simple as this. The opponent of the sex clinic in the letter above described himself as a 'young person and a university student' and he was supported by sixth formers calling for 'self control not birth control'. In response, the clinic was defended by letters from the older generation. Sex certainly shook up society in the 1960s but it was not a simple story of young versus old. Some historians have argued that the real upset happened in the 1970s while others suggest that the changes were gradual and on-going; more evolutionary than revolutionary. Historians of women's and gay history have argued that little progress with equality and justice was made at all. Evidence on these issues is partial, patchy and sometimes prejudiced. Your challenge, to assess the nature and extent of social change, is therefore a difficult one.

Enquiry Focus: Was sex shaken up in the 1960s?

The focus of this enquiry is the extent to which attitudes and behaviour in matters of sex, gender and sexuality really did change in British society in the post-war years and in particular whether the 1960s was the decade when sex was shaken up.

It requires consideration of the following key issues:

- 1 The nature and extent of changes in sexual attitudes and behaviour, including legal changes
- 2 The impact of new forms of birth control
- 3 Changing views of women's employment
- 4 Women's liberation
- 5 Evolving attitudes to homosexuality.

As you work your way through this chapter, annotate your version of the 'shockometer' below, marking where you judge each of topics 1–5 should be placed on it.

To reach your judgement on where each topic should go on the 'shockometer' first make notes:

- a explaining attitudes *before* the 1960s and whether change was taking place
- b identifying the key changes in the 1960s and how great they seemed to be at the time
- c on the extent of further changes after the 1960s.

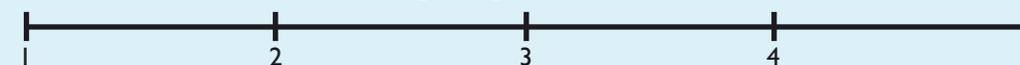
Then use your notes on a–c to judge where each of 1–5 should go on the 'shockometer'.

Was sex being shaken up in the 1960s?

Tremor: a minor change, with only a partial, limited impact

Shake: a more substantial change with some more long lasting effects

Quake: a major change with several long term and important effects



Shakes and quakes in sexual attitudes and behaviour: was there a 'seismic shift' in the 1960s?

1960s Britain witnessed a seismic shift in attitudes towards sex and sexuality. The contraceptive pill made casual sex easier and safer. The 1957 Wolfenden Report recommended the decriminalisation of homosexuality, finally legalised in 1967, and abortion and divorce were made easier. All this led to the idea of a 'permissive society'.
(From the Tate Britain website)

The reputation of the 'sexy sixties' is endorsed in this blurb for an exhibition of 1960s art in 2004. But how far is this reputation deserved? We'll begin with changes in the law as this decade was noted for important new legislation, which may indicate significant shifts in public attitudes to sexual matters.

Changes in the law: spotlight on two shaky moments

Abortion Act 1967

Abortion was legalised in the first 28 weeks of pregnancy provided two doctors confirmed it was necessary on medical or psychological grounds. Four previous attempts to change the law on abortion had failed, as it was such a divisive issue and strongly opposed by the Catholic Church. One 1965 survey, however, showed that 70 per cent of the public supported reform and it was also endorsed by the Church of England. Feminists argued that it was a 'woman's right to choose'. **Backstreet abortions** and the distressing **thalidomide** case in the early 1960s led most people to agree.

Impact

There was a big increase in the number of abortions from 4/1000 live births in 1968 to 17.6/1000 in 1975. Research showed that single girls who had abortions were more likely to be inexperienced than **promiscuous**, so there was little evidence that the new law was encouraging casual sex. Opposition to legal abortion remained strong with one professor shocking his audiences with a bottle of foetuses when speaking on the issue. Attempts to repeal the Act failed nevertheless.

In the 1970s and 1980s, access to abortion remained difficult for many women, despite the new law. Most doctors were male and some disapproved of abortion, making it difficult to win consent from two doctors in some areas of the country. Feminists stated that the 1967 Act still gave men unacceptable power over women. By the twenty-first century it was estimated that one in four women had had an abortion during their lifetime, suggesting the practice had become widespread and more generally accepted.

Divorce Reform Act 1969

Previously divorce had been based on proving guilt or fault in one partner, leading some couples to set up fake examples of adultery or to gather or pay for evidence themselves, in order to end their marriages. The new law enabled marriages to be dissolved on the grounds of 'irretrievable breakdown' or a seven-year separation. The Anglican and Methodist Churches approved the new 'no fault' divorces as did a majority of the public. But there was some concern that wives and children would suffer when marriages ended after the desertion of the man who then had no obligation to care for his family. Baroness Summerskill, a leading Labour politician and feminist, called the new law a 'Casanova's Charter' for this reason.

Impact

The divorce rate rose sharply. In 1965 there were 2.8 divorces/1000 married adults. By 1976 this had risen to 9.6 and five years later it reached 12, giving Britain one of the highest divorce rates in Europe. Women were recognised as equal partners in marriage and a further law, in 1970, required women's work inside and outside the home to be taken into account in all divorce settlements.

Women were more likely to suffer financially after divorce than men. Despite their legal rights to property and maintenance, women heading single-parent households had lower incomes than their ex-husbands. Widespread social disapproval of divorce persisted, more often directed at women than men.

The divorce rate reached a peak in 1995 with a third of marriages ending in divorce within fifteen years. By this time divorce had become much more socially acceptable. Since an important test case in 1996, the rights of women who have been home-based have been legally recognised and divorce settlements have helped women to live independently after separation.

Changes in public attitudes

While legal changes are clear-cut – they happen or they don't – there is a lot of controversy about how far sexual attitudes and behaviour genuinely changed in the 1960s and the idea of a 'sexual revolution' is strongly contested.

It is tempting to compare the sexual habits of the 1960s with those of the twenty-first century and reach the conclusion that the older generations were naively well behaved.

'Today's women have three times more sex than their mothers' declared a *Daily Mail* headline in March 2010, comparing numbers of sexual partners in the 1960s to today. But this modern comparison is neither helpful nor accurate, assuming as it does that more partners means more sex. The fuzzy black and white televisions of the 1960s would not impress in our current high-tech world, yet they transformed British homes all the same. Judgements about the 1960s need to be made in terms of what happened before and after.

'If only he'd made love to me instead of using me like a chamber pot.'
(Anonymous respondent to a survey in 1949)

backstreet abortions

Illegal abortions carried out by unqualified people, usually in their own homes, often resulting in illness or sometimes death for the woman

thalidomide

A drug given to pregnant women to ease morning sickness in the years 1958–61. Unfortunately it was later found to have caused severe birth defects in babies

promiscuous

Having casual sexual relations with many different partners

▽ **Table 4.1:** Births outside marriage (% of total births) 1951–81 (from OPCS)

	1951	1961	1971	1981
Births outside marriage (UK)	5.0	5.8	8.4	12.8

▽ **Table 4.2:** Divorce in England and Wales 1951–81 (from OPCS)

	1951	1961	1971	1981
Number divorcing (per 1000 married people)	2.6	2.1	6.0	11.9

▽ **Table 4.3:** UK marriage rates 1951–81 (from OPCS)

	1950	1960	1970	1980
Marriages per 1000 unmarried men	58	62	81	60

▽ **Table 4.4:** Key findings of Michael Schofield's research 1965–73 (see also page 91)

Sexual Behaviour of Young People (Schofield, 1965)	By the age of 16, 14% of boys and 5% of girls were sexually experienced.
	By the age of 18, 34% of boys and 17% of girls were sexually experienced.
Sexual Behaviour of Young Adults (Schofield, 1973) (a follow-up of the same interviewees)	At aged 21, 75% of men and 71% of women were sexually experienced.
	40% had either no experience on their wedding day or only experience with their spouse-to-be.
<p><i>The conclusion must be that sexual intercourse before marriage is quite common and acceptable among young people, although it does not appear to start quite as early as some people think or fear. When these young people do seek sexual experience, in the majority of cases it is with someone they know very well, and it is often with someone they love and will marry.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Schofield, p. 162)</p>	

▽ **Table 4.5:** Geoffrey Gorer survey *Sex and Marriage in England Today* (1969)

<p><i>One-quarter of male respondents and two-thirds of females were virgins on their wedding day. 20% of men and 25% of women were married to the person they had first had intercourse with.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Hall, p. 173)</p>

Above is a range of statistical evidence for you to consider. Table 4.1 confirms a significant rise in the number of illegitimate births although this is continuing a trend started in the 1950s. The divorce rate (Table 4.2) did

rise, but this may be largely due to a liberalisation in the law, making it much easier to end marriages. The most significant change in the 1960s was the notable rise in the marriage rate (Table 4.3), suggesting traditional values were enduring. The research evidence in Tables 4.4 and 4.5 does not suggest a huge rise in casual sex in the 1960s, more a continuing belief that it should only take place in the context of a long-term relationship. Therefore the statistics suggest that the 1960s was a time of significant change but these changes were gradual and ongoing rather than revolutionary.

Were the 'swinging sixties' the time of most change?

So far we've looked at what was happening in the 1960s but how much change had been happening before this – and how much took place afterwards? It's only by examining the degree of change before and after that we can assess the importance of the 1960s.

Flirty forties and fifties?

This was apparently a time of careful conservatism:

- People were marrying younger, more often and staying together longer. This was the heyday of marriage and nuclear families.
- Nice girls were expected to say 'No' until they had a ring on their finger but bridegrooms were not expected to be virgins.
- Women were expected to play a passive role in sex and contraception. One survey found a third of women rarely enjoyed sex.
- Pre-marital sex was frowned on; a British Medical Association booklet that appeared to be giving advice to unmarried couples caused an outcry in 1959 and had to be withdrawn.
- Attitudes were still strict: a Royal Commission decided against easier divorce and a majority of the public thought homosexuality was sinful.
- In working-class communities particularly, the man was regarded as the main breadwinner and master of the home.

but

- Sex was talked about more openly; a best-selling book of 1959 urged women to overcome the problem of frigidity.
- Attitudes were beginning to change: a 1956 *Daily Mirror* survey showed that 50 per cent of readers agreed with abortion on request.
- Rates of illegitimacy and divorce started to rise in the 1950s.
- Young men and women, especially in the cities, were becoming more liberal and experimental in sexual matters.

Saucy seventies and eighties?

These appear to be decades of even more major change:

- More liberal laws on divorce, abortion and homosexuality were passed in the late 1960s, only making an impact in these decades.
- The pill only became easily obtainable for all from 1974 when it was provided on the NHS, free of charge, and from GPs.

- Illegitimacy and rates of teenage pregnancy increased significantly.
- The rate of marriage declined from 1972 at the same time that more unmarried couples decided to live together. By the early 1990s less than 1 per cent of first intercourse took place within marriage.
- The first illustrated paperback sex guide, Alex Comfort's *Joy of Sex*, which was published in 1972, became an instant bestseller.
- Gay and feminist organisations became well established and active in these years.

but

- Traditional attitudes to sex and relationships remained strong. A British Social Attitudes survey of 1987 revealed that a quarter of people interviewed thought that pre-marital sex was wrong and nearly three-quarters condemned homosexual relations. Polls in the 1990s showed that most people were still seeking one partner for life and valued sexual fidelity.
- Although marriage happened later, it continued to be popular and those who divorced were not put off marrying again.

Feminists such as Julie Burchill have argued that the advances of the 1960s did little to help women's rights.

Most writers of sex manuals up until 1972 were middle-aged men with some scientific or medical background. A good proportion had strong religious convictions and most promoted traditional views of marriage and sex. Many writers made the assumption that women should play a passive role, such as the best-selling *Power of Sexual Surrender* (1958), which claimed that women should happily embrace the sexual demands of their husbands while accepting their primary role in life as wife and mother.

Then, in 1972, along came Alex Comfort's *Joy of Sex*. The title said it all – this was an illustrated and detailed guide which promoted the pleasure of sex for its own sake. Comfort described it as 'the first sexually explicit book for the coffee table'. An instant bestseller, for many the book brought the sexual revolution into ordinary homes.

The freedom that women were supposed to have found in the 1960s largely boiled down to easy contraception and abortion; things to make life easier for men, in fact.

(Julie Burchill)

It is now time to review whether sex was shaken up in the 1960s, using the information on changes in the law and social attitudes given above.

- 1 Consider the following questions and then use them to make your judgement on the 'shockometer'.
 - a How much had sexual attitudes and behaviour begun changing before the 1960s?
 - b What were the key changes in sexual attitudes and behaviour in the 1960s and how great did they seem to be at the time? (Remember to include changes in the law.)
 - c Were the changes in sexual attitudes and behaviour even greater after the 1960s?
- 2 Use your notes on a–c to decide where you judge the topic 'Sexual attitudes and behaviour' should go on the 'shockometer'.

Did the pill cause a 'sexplosion' in the 1960s?

Personal story

My mother was appalled to discover that she was expecting me in the autumn of 1958. Who could blame her? She was only 31 yet had already had six children and a miscarriage in eight years. I was proof that neither a **diaphragm** nor a condom was as reliable as hoped. After I was born she went to great lengths to organise **sterilisation**, still disapproved of by many doctors. If her married life had started ten years later, the pill would have helped my parents to limit their family to two or three and I would not have put in an appearance at all.

So did the development of the contraceptive pill revolutionise contraception and sexual behaviour in the 1960s? The following two quotations suggest that it did.

Gavin Hodge, a hairdresser, comments in a book of memories of the 1960s:

There were two phases to the 1960s: pre-pill and post-pill. My sister, who was growing up in the late 1950s, didn't have half the freedom: if you got into trouble back then, you had to get married or you ended up down a **back street** with a coathanger. Then the pill came along – it gave women the freedom to be the equal of their boyfriends. There was a lot of moral debate at the time but, as far as I could gather, most girls couldn't care less about that: they just wanted to get their hands on it. We smoked a bit of dope, did a bit of acid, but the major drug of the 1960s was the pill.

Brian Masters is the author of *Swinging Sixties*, which was published in 1985. He was a young man in the 1960s who later went on to work as a writer and biographer.

People copulated on the slightest pretext after an acquaintance of some minutes. Sexual partners were snapped up and discarded without ceremony, provided that they had the newly available contraceptive pill in their pocket or handbag.

diaphragm

An inter-uterine device (IUD), a form of contraception that could be inserted into the uterus

sterilisation

An operation to make women infertile, often involving closing the fallopian tubes.

back street

This is a reference to backstreet abortions (see page 68). These were carried out by local 'experts' who charged large sums of money to end pregnancies unofficially and illegally. They often had no medical training and the procedures often caused illness and sometimes death

**Swinging
sixties** + **the
Pill** = **sexual
revolution**

The evidence for a 1960s sexual revolution based on the pill seems overwhelming. It has been acclaimed as the biggest medical advance of the twentieth century and there is no doubt that it brought massive changes to sexual relationships. In particular:

- It gave women control over their own fertility. Research by Kate Fisher has shown that up until the 1950s men were primarily in charge of contraception. The pill reversed these roles.
- It separated contraception from the sexual act. This made sex more spontaneous and birth control far more convenient. Condoms and IUDs were never very popular because they required preparation before sex could take place.
- It raised expectations of contraception as the pill was far more reliable than any previous methods. This greatly reduced the risk of unwanted pregnancy. For women this could be liberating; it allowed them to pursue careers and become more financially independent. For men, it made it easier to pressurise girls to have sex and to avoid any long-term commitment.
- It changed the lives of single women. Before the pill, many teenage brides were pregnant, the resultant marriage forced on the couple to preserve the girl's reputation. Single motherhood was simply not an option and backstreet abortions were expensive and risky.
- It became the major form of contraception for most British women. A 1985 survey revealed that only 5 per cent of women aged 16–29 had never used it.

Yet many modern historians challenge this view of a very rapid transformation. The two quotations on page 73 were noticeably from city-dwelling men and so are unlikely to represent the views of the majority. There is strong evidence that the real impact of the pill was not so great:

- In the 1960s the most popular form of birth control remained the condom. These were readily available; from 1965 they could be bought at Boots, the High Street chemists. Even by 1969 only 15 per cent of married women under 45 were using the pill. It was not until 1974 that it was available free to all women through the NHS and not until 1975 that GPs routinely prescribed it.
- At first the pill was mainly used by better educated, young and middle-class women such as university students.
- Many working-class women did not wish to take over responsibility for birth control from men. Men liked controlling fertility and many women still wanted to play a more passive and more 'feminine' role in the sexual relationship.
- It is unlikely the pill led directly to increased sexual promiscuity. Rising rates of pre-marital sex predate the widespread availability of the pill. Added to that, surveys suggest that promiscuity and teenage pregnancies were far more prevalent among those not aware of birth control.

It took a while for some women to understand how to use the pill. One woman put it in her ear before having sex!

The problems of contradictory evidence

So what was sex and birth control in the 1960s really like? An exciting time of liberation and revolt as memoirs and anecdotes might suggest? Or cautious continuation of post-war trends as modern researchers assert? And why are views so different?

There can be no simple answer but here are some possible explanations to mull over. Information about sexual attitudes and behaviour is very limited and sometimes unreliable. People were inhibited about talking about their intimate lives and it is also probable that what they said in surveys differed from their private actions. This was particularly true of working-class couples and rural communities. Furthermore, published memoirs, diaries and letters of this era are dominated by those who set the trends and fashions such as models, pop stars and writers and by the educated middle class; all were much more radical in their views and behaviour than most of the public.

Finally, in his book *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society and Politics*, Mark Donnelly has shown how modern views of the 1960s are often shaped by:

- **Hindsight** Later values and attitudes colour our view of the decade. In the late 1960s, for instance, condoms remained the main method of contraception. It is only when looking back that the arrival of the pill seems so significant.
- **Modern-day attitudes** In the twenty-first century sexual attitudes and behaviour are much more relaxed and it is tempting to highlight the steps towards this more liberal future when studying the past. This encourages stereotypical judgements, such as the view that most young people were breaking the traditional sexual rules when most were actually quite restrained.
- **Political viewpoints** Those on the right tend to seize evidence of family breakdown and look back nostalgically on previous decades as times of old-fashioned family values. Examples from the 1960s are used as warnings of the dangers of too much moral laxity as a lesson for modern times. Those on the left highlight the new sexual freedoms gained by women and young people. They see the 1960s as a time when the authority of the conservative elites was rightly challenged. Therefore both those on the left and the right tend to emphasise the extent of change rather than continuity.

Assessing the impact of the pill is very tricky as these pages show.

- 1 Consider the questions below to help you to decide where to place the 'Impact of the pill' on the 'shockometer'.
 - a How far did the pill change sexual behaviour? Think about which groups of people were most or least affected by this new form of contraception.
 - b Was it in the 1960s that the pill had its greatest impact? Assess the evidence that it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the pill made a major difference to sexual behaviour.
- 2 Use your notes on a–b to decide where you judge the topic 'The impact of the pill' should go on the 'shockometer'.

Was women's work in a whirl?

What were women doing in the 1960s and 1970s?

My mum was working part time as a GP, helping to run a birth control clinic and being mother to six children.

Bella Keyzer was reluctantly working on the trams as her gender barred her from the wartime welding job on the shipyards she had loved. She was finally able to take this up again in 1975 when the law on sex discrimination was changed.

Margery Hurst was running the biggest secretarial agency in the world. Abandoned with a small baby by her husband after the war, she set up her own business, Brook Street, providing much needed typists for London firms.

Sandie Shaw was becoming a pop idol, known for singing in bare feet and setting fashion trends. On her marriage in 1968 she signed away her fortune to her husband and recovered little of her money on her divorce two years later.

Yvonne Pope had a job as an air traffic controller, working towards her ambition to become a pilot for a major airline. She achieved this in 1975.

May Hobbs was working night shifts, cleaning offices in London. Pay and conditions were so poor she struggled to support her family and pay the rent. She set up a union and organised a cleaners' strike in 1972.

Ravinder Randhawa, daughter of an immigrant factory worker and cleaner, fulfilled her parents' dreams by graduating from university and starting a teaching job. Then she fulfilled her own dream by quitting teaching and earning a living as a writer.

Mary Quant was developing her highly successful fashion business, beginning to export designs to the USA and selling lots of mini skirts.

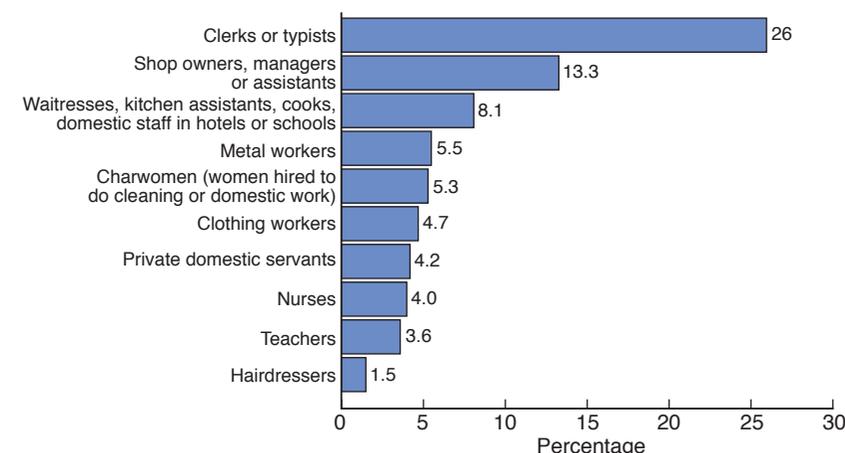
Kath Fincham was campaigning for trade union rights for women. In 1969 she led a march for bus conductresses to win the right to become drivers.

Barbara Castle was a cabinet minister in the Labour government from 1965. Her responsibilities at different times covered transport, trade unions and employment.

Daphne Steele was working as matron at a hospital in West Yorkshire, having arrived from Guyana in 1951. She was Britain's first black matron.

Dorothy Hodgkin was becoming one of the world's most respected chemists, winning the Nobel Prize in 1964.

Yet how typical were the women on this page? Were most women, by contrast, happy to stay at home in the traditional roles of wife and mother? The two statistical summaries on page 77 provide an overall picture.



A professor of chemistry interviewed about the education of girls commented in 1964 that, 'In my experience most girls simply don't have the right sort of brains for chemistry.'

◁ The most common jobs for women in 1966 as a percentage of all working women.

	1951	1961	1971	1981
Women in labour force (% of total labour force)	31	33	37	40
Women in labour force (% of women aged 20–64)	36	42	52	61
Women employed part time (% of women aged 20–64)	12	26	35	42
Married women in labour force (% of all married women aged 15–59)	26	35	49	62

These statistics indicate a steady increase in the proportion of women going out to work between 1951 and 1981. The biggest rise was for married women, with many of them taking up part-time jobs. The 1960s decade shows significant increases in women working but this is clearly part of a trend started in the 1950s and which continued in the 1970s. The largest increases in female employment were in the clerical and retail sphere. Businesses had 'typing pools', employing large numbers of mostly young women using the new electronic typewriters to process their documents. Many married women worked part time in the newly created supermarkets or had jobs as receptionists, telephonists or cleaners. The 1960s expansion of university education opened up more professions for women but this did not have an immediate impact. Only a minority of dentists, doctors, architects or accountants were female and this remained true for decades to come.

Clearly, women's lives changed after the war but opportunities differed according to class and race. Asian and Afro-Caribbean families were more reliant on women's earnings although they often worked in low-paid jobs. Some poorly educated working-class girls had limited job opportunities compared to young women in middle-class families with university and professional careers on the horizon. On the whole, women became healthier, wealthier and better educated. They worked in the home and outside and, by the mid-1970s, were not condemned for doing so. **Companionate marriage** was the ideal for most couples. By this time women had rights to equal pay, to employment choices, to protected income on divorce and to maternity leave.

Women were not awarded degrees from Cambridge University on equal terms with men until 1948. In 2002, for the first time, more women than men gained places for a degree course at Cambridge.

companionate marriage
A view of marriage as a partnership of equals, with husband and wife both able to pursue careers and share chores and childcare

Changes in employment law: two more shaky moments

Equal Pay Act 1970

What it said

Women should be paid the same as men in equivalent work. Employers were given five years to implement it.

What it did

Five years after the Act was implemented the average hourly pay of all women workers was 59 per cent of men's – the same as it was in the 1960s. The British workforce was highly sex segregated – around 80 per cent of men and women worked in jobs that were dominated by one gender and in these employment areas the new rules had little impact. Employers found ways round implementing them by redefining jobs to make comparisons more difficult. The Act only worked effectively in areas of employment where men and women worked side by side in similar roles, such as factory production.

In 1983 the law was toughened up so that work of 'equal value' had to receive equal pay. This Act had more impact – by the mid-80s women were getting 74 per cent of the pay of men.

Sex Discrimination Act 1975

What it said

It was unlawful for an employer to discriminate against a worker on grounds of sex or marital status.

What it did

In theory, it opened up many employment opportunities previously closed to women such as engineering, printing and transport. In practice it was difficult and expensive for women to pursue their cases in the courts. In 1976 only five out of twenty sex discrimination cases were successful.

From my own experience I feel there is much to be said for being away from the family for part of the day.

(Quotation from 27-year-old housewife, Margaret Thatcher, defending working wives in 1954. She became Britain's first female prime minister in 1979)

Did this mean that women were now equal to men? It seems this took much longer, if it ever happened at all. While laws on employment and rights changed, traditional behaviour did not. Female teachers won equal pay with men in 1961 yet their average pay deteriorated in the following ten years. Were they passed over for promotion or did they choose lower hours and lower status in order to put family first? Very few men helped in the home; it was women who cleaned the toilets and met the children from school. A 1980s survey showed that most men and women believed that married women should prioritise the demands of the home before paid work. There were more female workers, graduates, employers and campaigners in the 1960s and 1970s. But in British homes, there needed to be more male nappy changers, cooks and cleaners for gender roles to be seriously shaken up. It was not until the twenty-first century that surveys suggest this was beginning to happen.

Now reflect on the main trends in female employment and assess how far women's work changed and when these changes occurred.

- 1 Make notes in answer to the following questions and then use them to make your judgement on the 'shockometer'.
 - a What were the key changes in women's work between 1950 and 1980?
 - b How far did these changes occur in the 1960s rather than before or after?
 - c What was the nature and extent of these changes? Note differences between age groups, ethnicity and class.
- 2 Use your notes on a–c to decide where you judge the topic 'Female employment' should go on the 'shockometer'.

Did feminism make an impact?



◀ Protestors at the Miss World contest in 1970.

Active feminism: the Women's Liberation Movement

The 25 million viewers who switched on the Miss World contest in 1970 were in for a surprise. Televised live, the contestants paraded in their national costumes and evening dress. In their swimsuits they obediently followed the instruction to face the wall so that their rear views could be assessed. The American celebrity, Bob Hope, took the stage and made some jokes. And then the feminists made their move. The Albert Hall in London was disrupted with whistles and rattles; flour and tomatoes soon littered the stage. Banners were unfurled. 'We're not beautiful, we're not ugly, we're angry,' the protesters announced. Women's Liberation had arrived in British family living rooms.

This incident raises one of the key issues for the women's movement of the time. For the so-called 'second wave' **feminists** of the 1960s and 1970s, Miss World was a showpiece for the exploitation of women by the profitable and male-dominated entertainment business, Mecca. A few months earlier women had gathered in Oxford at the first National Women's Liberation Conference to agree their four key goals (see the table on page 82). The year 1970 proved pivotal in the development of women's rights.

In the 1960s women had supported campaigns for reform in the laws on divorce and abortion and welcomed greater opportunities in education. In 1963 Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, created a furore in the United States by claiming that intelligent women were unhappily trapped in their lives as wives and mothers. Yet this book had limited impact on most British women in the 1960s, with many young women choosing to marry and have children in their early twenties, apparently welcoming conventional domesticity.

In Britain, there can be little doubt that it was in the 1970s that the Women's Liberation Movement hit the headlines and made a real impact. Feminists led campaigns for equal pay and job opportunities, attacked sex shops and pornography and brought to light the suffering of women through domestic violence and rape.

But were most British women angry? At its peak, the Women's Liberation Movement probably only attracted around 10,000 activists. It became increasingly divided during the 1970s, with Marxist, lesbian and other splinter groups developing different views on issues such as the family, marriage and work.

feminists

First-wave feminists were those who campaigned for changes in the law such as equal pay, whereas second-wave feminists turned their attention to other issues such as the family and sexuality

Cultural feminism: the impact of feminist writing

While some feminists promoted the rights of women through marches and campaigns, others tried to change attitudes by writing. One key publication was Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*.

Germaine Greer and *The Female Eunuch*

Written in a forthright style, Greer's breakthrough work called on women to reject the traditional passive roles assigned to them in conventional family life and to fight for sexual and economic independence. Greer was an Australian academic who loved to shock: she admitted to wearing no underwear and carrying around a velvet bag full of coloured condoms.

Extract

Maybe I don't have a pretty smile, good teeth, nice tits, long legs, a cheeky arse, a sexy voice. Maybe I don't know how to handle men and increase my market value, so that the rewards due to the feminine will accrue to me. Then again, maybe I'm sick of the masquerade. I'm sick of pretending eternal youth. I'm sick of belying my own intelligence, my own will, my own sex. I'm sick of peering at the world through false eyelashes, so everything I see is mixed with a shadow of bought hairs; I'm sick of weighting my head with a dead mane, unable to move my neck freely, terrified of rain, of wind, of dancing too vigorously in case I sweat into my lacquered curls. I'm sick of the Powder Room. I'm sick of pretending that some fatuous male's self-important pronouncements are the objects of my undivided attention, I'm sick of going to films and plays when someone else wants to, and sick of having no opinions of my own about either. I'm sick of being a transvestite. I refuse to be a female impersonator. I am a woman, not a castrate.

Impact

This book was an instant sensation after its publication in 1970, selling a million copies worldwide and never going out of print. The book influenced many women to re-think their lives, especially in middle-class households.

Below is one woman's reaction:

I read it in 1973, when I was thirteen and it shaped my whole life. I can remember very clearly the light bulb moment, while reading it, when I realised that if I didn't make my own money, I would always have to ask my husband for the cash if I wanted to buy a new dress. And that I might have to be nice to him and agree with things he said, that I didn't believe in, and have sex with him even if I didn't feel like it, and make what he wanted for dinner even if I didn't want it, to get that money. Ping!

(Maggie Alderson)

In order to put this book in context, it is worth considering what most British women were reading in the 1960s and 1970s. Romantic fiction was the most popular choice and these were boom years for the publisher Mills and Boon. These stories always focused on finding a suitable man, with the heroine playing a submissive role. One of their leading writers wrote a description of her typical hero in 1970:

... they're lean and hard muscled and mocking and sardonic and tough and tigerish and single, of course. Oh and they've got to be rich and then I make it that they're only cynical and smooth on the surface. But underneath they're well, you know, sort of lost and lonely. In need of love but, when roused, capable of breathtaking passion and potency. Most of my heroes, well all of them really, are like that. They frighten but fascinate. They must be the sort of men who are capable of rape: men it's dangerous to be alone in the room with.

(Violet Winspear)

Most of the best-selling women's magazines also seemed blithely unaware of feminist thinking. In 1969 more than 30 per cent of women were reading either *Woman* or *Woman's Own* on a weekly basis. Around 60 per cent of non-beauty articles in the three leading women's magazines in the 1960s were on the themes of 'Getting and Keeping your Man'. A survey of *Honey* readers in 1978 showed that what they truly wanted was 'a husband, a home (preferably detached and in the country), and two children'. It was enough, the editor remarked, to make Ms Greer pack her bags and go home to Australia.

Study of female reading habits raises as many questions as it answers. Readers of Greer tended to be better off and better educated; already half persuaded by feminism. Thousands of women curled up on their sofas to escape into the world of Mills and Boon or enjoy a light-hearted article in *Woman*. Many of them were middle aged and on middle or low incomes. But readers have minds of their own. Few women walked out on their families to follow a feminist vision of equality. Fewer still believed that their lives would be transformed by romance with an exotic stranger. Both Greer's call to action and the Mills and Boon fantasy served as strong contrasts to the everyday reality of most women's lives.

Perhaps the real achievement of the feminists in this era was to raise awareness of women's issues. Sensitive social issues such as rape were publicly discussed. Secretaries gained the confidence to speak out against their boss's sexual harassment. Women began to challenge the sexism of advertising. Few women, even by the end of the 1970s, were actively involved in the feminist movement. Bra burning never really took off. Yet feminism gave women a more confident and louder voice in British society.



△ A traditional Mills and Boon book cover from the 1970s.

Alex's voice rubbed against her like warm velvet. Deena had to consciously hold in a shiver, while she attempted a cool, sophisticated expression.

(from *A Fool For Love*, a Mills and Boon title)

Fay Weldon, the novelist, talking about courtship in the 1950s: 'We were meant to be virgins but seldom were. Then, as now, women were searching for Mr Right, a man who was their superior in status, wealth and education.'

A divisive issue of the 1970s: the Wages for Housework Campaign

If the government paid housewives a salary, feminists argued, they could become truly independent and receive the respect their work merited. Other women's campaigners argued that this would confirm the view that domestic chores were women's work and allow men off the hook! Partly due to these disagreements, the campaign never really took off.

Key developments

1963	Betty Friedan's <i>The Feminine Mystique</i> was published in the USA.
1970	The Women's Liberation Movement met for the first time at Ruskin College, Oxford. They passed unanimous resolutions on four key demands: equal pay; equal education and opportunity; 24-hour nurseries; free contraception and abortion on demand. Germaine Greer's <i>The Female Eunuch</i> was published. Disruption to the Miss World contest.
1971	The National Women's Liberation Movement organised their first march in London. Erin Pizzey set up the first refuge for female victims of domestic violence in Chiswick in London. From around this time feminists drew attention to the issue of male violence towards women, especially rape and wife battering.
1972	The first edition of <i>Spare Rib</i> , the feminist magazine, was published.
1975	There were more than 1500 women's liberation groups meeting around the country.
1979	The Southall Black Sisters was founded to fight domestic violence and unfair legal treatment for black women.

Use these pages to evaluate the impact of feminism on British society

- 1** Consider the following questions and then use them to make your judgement on the 'shockometer'.
 - a** What were the main developments in the feminist movement in the 1960s?
 - b** In what ways did (i) active and (ii) cultural feminism make progress in the 1970s?
 - c** What were the limitations in the progress of feminism to 1980?
- 2** Use your notes on a–c to decide where you judge the topic 'Impact of feminism' should go on the 'shockometer'.

When were attitudes to homosexuals shaken up?

In March 1954, at the Winchester Assizes, three men were found guilty and sentenced to prison. The defendants were a lord, his cousin and the *Daily Mail's* diplomatic correspondent. The sensational trial had attracted a huge crowd of press and public. The police, worried about the men's safety, kept them in their cells for two hours, hoping people would disperse. They didn't. But when the men finally emerged from the court house on their way to prison, they were greeted with claps and cheers.

Until 1967 any act of homosexuality was illegal in the UK. Lord Montagu of Beaulieu and his two friends had just been convicted of gross indecency yet the public reaction suggested that the law was out of tune with public opinion. Yet some have argued that homosexuality was legalised before the general public approved:

... the Sexual Offences Act ... gave a lead to public opinion that was still stuck in the dark days of the 1950s, kick-starting a transformation in attitudes that would become a revolution.

(*The Guardian*, 28 July 2007)

Government policy, gay activism and shifts in public opinion have all played a part in the changes listed below. Although the most important legal change came in 1967, changes in people's attitudes altered much more slowly.

A shake up in the law?

- The government-sponsored Wolfenden Report (1957) recommended that homosexual acts in private between consenting adults should no longer be an offence. The government chose not to act.
- The Sexual Offences Act was passed in 1967, allowing homosexual acts in private. It did not cover Scotland and Northern Ireland, set an age of consent of 21 (compared to sixteen for heterosexuals) and homosexuality was still illegal in the armed forces.
- A police clampdown followed the Act with a doubling of incidents of public indecency between males and a trebling of prosecutions in the years 1967–76.
- Homosexuality was only legalised in Scotland in 1980, Northern Ireland in 1982, and in 1992 on the Isle of Man.
- By 2005, homosexuals were legally protected from discrimination, could enter civil partnerships and had the same age of consent as heterosexuals.

A shake up in public attitudes?

- 5000 copies of the report were sold immediately. It was supported by the Archbishop of Canterbury, seven national newspapers and the British Medical Association.
- Leading Christians condemned permissive attitudes to homosexuality at the National Festival of Light in 1971, an event organised to improve public morality.

- The outbreak of AIDs in the early 1980s still led to hostile press coverage and increased homophobia.
- In 1987 Margaret Thatcher and other Conservatives condemned liberal views of homosexuality which they believed was being promoted in schools.
- In 1969 research suggested only 12 per cent of the public had a tolerant view of homosexuality. Later social attitude surveys show that 62 per cent thought homosexuality should be tolerated in society in 1983, rising to more than 70 per cent by 2007. A study of homosexuals in 2006, however, showed that 40 per cent had been victims of abuse.

A shake up in homosexual behaviour?

- In 1958 a group of mainly middle-class men set up the Homosexual Law Reform Society to campaign for a change in the law.
- The Gay Liberation Front was set up in 1971 to actively campaign for gay rights. The first Gay Pride rally involving 1000 people took place in London in the following year.
- From the 1980s public figures, such as the gay MP Chris Smith, began to talk more openly about their sexuality.
- By 2005 there was an open and active 'gay scene' in most UK cities.

Shaking up people's lives: the life stories of two gay actors

Sir John Gielgud (1904–2000)

Gielgud was a distinguished Shakespearean actor, who was knighted in 1953. Shortly after this he was arrested in a public lavatory in Chelsea on a charge of **importuning**. He pleaded guilty, was fined £10 and hoped, by using the name 'Arthur' and wearing horn-rimmed glasses, he had escaped press attention. But he was not so lucky. A journalist recognised his distinctive deep voice in court and the story hit the headlines.

Gielgud briefly contemplated suicide, thought his career ruined and that he would have to immediately quit acting. His fellow actors encouraged him to carry on and his mother forgave him as long as the incident was 'never mentioned again'. The public reaction was divided: he received several abusive letters and a cold reception on stage in Edinburgh but in London he was given a standing ovation.

Gielgud had several long-term relationships with men during his successful career as actor and director. He secretly gave money to the gay rights group Stonewall but refused ever to talk publicly about his sexuality. Finally, in 1988, he allowed the comment in theatre programme notes that he had been living happily with his partner Martin Hensler for many years. Gielgud died in 2000. The day after his death theatre lights in London's West End were dimmed in his memory.



△ Sir John Gielgud playing Hamlet.

importuning
Requesting homosexual or immoral acts

John Inman (1935–2007)

Inman was an actor who became well known for his roles in comedy and pantomime in the 1970s and 1980s. He was best known for his role as Mr Humphries in the popular sitcom *Are You Being Served?*, which was set in an old-fashioned department store. His character was deliberately **camp**, in contrast to Gielgud's more circumspect approach, although Mr Humphries's sexuality was never directly mentioned. Although the BBC had been worried about the inclusion of such an overtly 'camp' character, Mr Humphries proved a great success. He was voted the funniest man on television in 1976 and also won the BBC Television Personality of the Year award.



△ John Inman (left) as Mr Humphries in the sitcom *Are You Being Served?*

Some gay activists found the stereotypical portrayal of Mr Humphries offensive and picketed one of his shows in protest. Inman justified his role, insisting that it was not over the top and that Humphries was just 'a mother's boy'.

Inman entered into a civil partnership with his long-term partner Ron Lynch in 2005 and under the new laws was able to leave him a substantial legacy on his death in 2007.

camp
Acting or behaving in an openly effeminate way

You now need to sum up when and how far attitudes to homosexuality have changed.

- 1 Consider the following questions and then use them to make your judgement on the 'shockometer'.
 - a What evidence is there that attitudes to homosexuality had begun to change before the 1960s?
 - b How significant were the changes in the 1960s decade? Consider the law, public attitudes and the actions of homosexuals themselves.
 - c What evidence is there that the main changes have happened since the 1960s? Use the same headings of law, public attitudes and the actions of the gay community.
- 2 Use your notes on a–c to decide where you judge the topic 'Attitudes to homosexuality' should go on the 'shockometer'.

Review: Was sex shaken up in the 1960s?

The 1960s were *the* pivotal decade. Until then there were no certain methods of contraception under the control of women. The discovery and subsequent availability of oral contraception, intra-uterine devices and, at the end of the decade, long-term injectables and implants, were fundamental to subsequent changes in social attitudes. It became possible to separate reproduction and sexual intercourse. For the first time, women were no longer under the dominion of men. All previous legislative attempts to bring equality had failed individual women as long as the possibility of pregnancy was beyond their control. The Abortion Act (1967) logically closed the last loophole to sexual equality with men.

These facts took most of the decade to percolate through into changed social attitudes. In 1960 bearing a child outside marriage was social suicide. Sex was only acceptable within marriage. By 1970 not only was it accepted as normal within a long-term relationship between men and women but it was no longer illegal for those of the same sex.

The 1970s cemented these attitudes not only with legislation (free family planning within the NHS from 1974), changes in the professional attitudes of the medical profession and young people being free to seek advice without parental consent but also with single parenthood no longer being shameful (the closure of 'Mother and Baby Homes'). The foundations of all these changes were laid in the scientific advances of the 1960s.



△ The author's mother, Dr Libby Wilson, in 2012.

This is my mother's verdict on the importance of the 1960s. As a retired family planning doctor, and the mother of six children, she might be regarded as an expert witness. But do other experts agree with her view?

That there were immense changes in British sexual attitudes and behaviour in the late twentieth century is indisputable. There is compelling evidence of radical shifts in patterns of marriage, illegitimacy and female employment. Public opinion and British law softened on homosexuality, divorce and abortion. The 1960s were a pivotal decade for changes in the law yet it was often not until later decades that social acceptance followed suit. There is still no general agreement, however, about the nature, pace and extent of change. Why?

When evaluating complex issues such as this, students seek uncomplicated and clear historical judgements. It is much simpler to plan an essay when one historian strongly supports one viewpoint and another strongly disagrees. But historians are not like tennis players, hitting shots to catch their opponent out. It is rare for them to adopt completely opposing views. More often they work collaboratively, passing the 'historical ball' about, adding different perspectives and materials to create a more complete picture of the past. Moreover, criticising a historian because their research only covers one angle or view suggests a flawed understanding of how historians work. Few set out to provide history

students with a comprehensive account of an era or topic; most have the more modest aim of throwing light on one particular area or aspect of the past. It is then unsurprising that general judgements are rarely agreed.

Read the points below to understand why historians might emerge with different views.

- 1 The particular specialism or perspective of the historian.** Usually academic historians choose one area of history to study in depth, following their own skills and interests. In the field of sexual history, for instance, there may be historians whose focus is mainly medical, studying national health surveys and clinical records, while another may be looking at the cultural angle, considering how sexual issues were addressed in the arts and media.

Example: Matt Houlbrook's book *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis 1918–1957* (2006) tells the story of the lives of homosexuals in London, uncovering new evidence about the gay community in the capital, and revealing new evidence in a completely fresh approach to sexual history.
- 2 The evidence base and the main sources of information used.** Some historians make great use of statistical evidence, such as national data, while others rely more on personal evidence such as diaries and letters.

Example: For her study of teenage sexuality, *Feminism and Youth Culture* (1991), Angela Robbie researched teenage magazines in the 1960s and 1970s to understand adolescent views and ideas. This gave her a rich well of information about teenage girls' sexual attitudes at that time.
- 3 The methodology, how the historian conducted his or her research.** While all professional historians accept the same general code of conduct, such as using evidence honestly and including correct references, there are great differences in how they might conduct their research. In the field of sexual history, some historians have relied mainly on general surveys using a full range of national and local records while others may choose to rely mostly on one kind of source such as family planning records.

Example: Kate Fisher, in her book *Birth Control, Sex, and Marriage in Britain 1918–1960* (2006), was the first British historian to use oral history as the main research basis for a book on sexual history. She argues persuasively that these recorded interviews provided evidence that challenged written records and gave new insights into the intimate lives of couples.
- 4 The values and beliefs of the historian.** Historians are individuals with their own political, moral and religious outlook. These beliefs sometimes influence their writing directly and obviously and sometimes in more subtle ways. Committed feminists, for instance, strongly promoted the study of women's history from the 1970s onwards, with the desire to address the gender imbalance of historical writing in the past.

Example: Sheila Rowbotham is a pioneer of the Women's Liberation Movement and a committed Marxist. Her book *Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States in the Twentieth Century* (2000) is written from this perspective, tracing the struggle of working-class women in particular to fight injustice and oppression.

Good history students will read the writings of many different historians before reaching their conclusions. The process of reaching these judgements is more like selecting a range of items from a buffet than choosing one dish from a menu. All the research above contributes to a picture of sexual and social change while none on its own gives you a concrete or comprehensive view of the key question you are exploring. Once again, this highlights the complexity of modern social history and the need to reach several qualified judgements rather than attempt an overall generalisation.

Returning to the issue of whether the 1960s was the key decade of social change, these points are illustrated by the studies of the two historians below. They concern different aspects of social and sexual changes in this period and offer contrasting views of the nature and extent of change.

Extract 1

The introduction of reliable contraception is one among many changes that increased the control of fear, and allowed a greater experience of pleasure and increased emotional aspirations. There have been substantial improvements, amounting to a transformation, in the lives of English women over the past two centuries. The generation of women who came of age in the 1950s and the early 1960s lived through a period in which this process came to a head and female sexual **mores** were transformed.

(from *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex and Contraception in England 1800–1975* (2004), a study of the links between sex, fertility and women's lives over nearly 200 years)

The author

Hera Cook is an academic at the University of Birmingham who specialises in the history of women, children and sexuality. In her research she relied heavily on fertility statistics, sex manuals and surveys. She studied in depth the impact of contraception on relationships, placing great weight on the ability of women to control their own fertility for the first time with the advent of the contraceptive pill.

Comment

Cook is particularly focusing on the impact of the pill, putting this in the context of a long overview of women and birth control over time. Her study of national data over time leads her to conclude that there was a major transformation in women's lives in the post-war decades.

Extract 2

Studies of the way sex roles have changed in recent years show that they have undergone no radical reversal. Most changes (such as the increasing employment of women) have been superficial, failing to affect the traditional balance of relationships between the sexes and the traditional definitions of gender roles.

(from *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) in which the author used evidence from biology and anthropology to examine issues of sex and gender in a range of different societies and times)

The author

Ann Oakley is a sociologist who specialises in issues of sex and gender. She was one of the most outspoken feminist writers and researchers in the 1960s and 1970s. Oakley was the first researcher to investigate housework as a serious academic study. She challenged the underlying assumptions of many writers that physical gender differences necessarily led to set roles and behaviour for men and women.

Comment

Oakley considers the role of women in a much broader context, using her studies of anatomy and anthropology. Writing in 1972 she has a strong feminist view of changes that were happening in the years just before she wrote the book. From this perspective, it is not surprising that she concludes that progress towards sexual equality has been insignificant.

It would make no sense to state that one of these views is right and the other wrong nor to comment that one is 'reliable' and the other not. One writer is focused much more on sexual behaviour while the other is considering gender roles. The value of their writing would depend on the question you are asking. For this chapter's main question, 'Were the "swinging sixties" the time of most change?', neither extract gives a straightforward answer although both help you to answer it. Hera Cook adds weight to the view that the pill transformed the private sexual lives of many women. Ann Oakley confirms the frustrations of feminists that true sexual equality was still a faraway goal in 1972. That neither interpretation gives you a simple verdict is just a reflection of the complexity of history. From these two studies you might reasonably conclude that:

- 1 Contraception had a major impact on the sexual and emotional lives of women from the early 1960s onwards.
- 2 Women's opportunities, especially in the workplace, did not greatly change until after the 1960s.

This illustrates how historians can help you to make a series of judgements that complement each other to build a strong conclusion.

It is now time to review the chapter's main question: Were the 'swinging sixties' the time of most change? Go through the following before reaching your final judgements:

- 1 Review all the points on your shockometer to sum up:
 - a which changes occurred in the 1960s
 - b which were part of a preceding trend
 - c which developed later.
- 2 Review and consider the comments on interpretations given in this chapter.
- 3 Instead of trying to come up with one general judgement, write down three or four conclusions about how far the 1960s were the time of most change. Consider the nature and extent of change, such as which aspects changed the most and the least and which women were most affected by them.

mores
Customs or characteristics

A closer look at statistics and surveys

Statistics are often judged to be the most reliable form of historical evidence. They are, apparently, factual and objective, mostly coming from trustworthy sources such as governments or research surveys. Of course, it is possible to manipulate and edit figures just like text, but this is usually thought to be a problem only when the numbers are the product of pressure groups or dictatorships.

But is it all as simple as that? The study below shows the dangers of using statistics uncritically.

A study

These are the responses of a mass observation street survey of 1949 asking whether people were in favour of birth control.

Approve	63%
Disapprove	15%
Other (mixed feelings, refused to reply, don't know or irrelevant)	22%

So we can confidently conclude that, even by 1949, a comfortable majority of British people supported the option of birth control. Or can we?

Putting aside the possible lack of balanced representation that might be expected from a random street survey, an earlier question in the same survey raises doubts about the validity of the responses. When asked what birth control meant, only 71 per cent of the answers were correct. Some thought it meant giving birth, others that it was abortion. More than 95 per cent of those who did not know what it meant had left school before the age of fourteen. This raises questions about whether the responses above provided an accurate reflection of working-class views. Those who answered confidently were more likely to be middle class, a group that was generally more liberal in social attitudes anyway. Does this make the evidence invalid? No, the responses of more than 2000 people selected at random provide invaluable information for historians. It's just a reminder that all evidence, including statistics, needs to be used with care and caution.

When using statistical evidence, there is a range of factors worth considering when weighing up the evidence provided:

- Selection of sample (i.e. those completing the survey): voluntary or compulsory, self selection or random selection.
- The range and representation of the sample, i.e. class, region, age, ethnicity, gender, religion.
- The methods used by the researcher, e.g. oral or written records, anonymous or identified responses, the phrasing of the questions posed.
- The purpose of the survey, e.g. commercial or academic.

The following examples highlight some of the strengths and limitations of statistical evidence. This simply confirms that numerical data must be treated cautiously and critically like all historical evidence. And like all historical material, its value depends largely on the question the historian is asking.

Examples

National government data

- 1 Social Attitudes surveys: From 1983 the government commissioned an annual Social Attitudes survey which covers attitudes and beliefs on a range of issues from a random sample of the population.
- 2 The government collects large amounts of data through registration of births, marriages and deaths, the electoral roll (which records information about all people who are entitled to vote) and the census. The census is a compulsory survey completed every ten years (the years ending '1') by every household, leading to more than 90 per cent of people providing information about their jobs, families and living standards. Until 2001, it asked no questions about opinions, lifestyle choices or beliefs. Government data is collected by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) which publishes regular reports such as *Social Trends*.

Comment

Government data can be especially useful as the state can make everyone provide information for the purpose of providing an accurate national overview. For objective information about trends across the country, these statistics are hard to beat but the nature of the survey questions mean they have limited use for understanding changes in intimate and private matters.

Academic research survey

Michael Schofield, a Cambridge-educated psychologist, conducted his academic research project, *Sexual Behaviour of Young People*, in two phases: a study of teenagers in 1965 and a follow-up study of the same cohort published in 1973. Supported by government and academic bodies, the survey was based on more than 1800 interviews with a representative sample of teenagers from different areas of the country. Only around 15 per cent of the randomly chosen sample refused to answer the questions which covered a range of intimate and personal matters. He claimed his report was the 'most thorough and valid sexual research ever carried out in this country'.

Comment

The rigorous research methods used for this project, in particular the random nature of the sample and very high levels of compliance, mean that the findings are widely accepted. For historians studying teenage sexual behaviour between 1965 and 1973 Schofield's data is undoubtedly an invaluable source. Yet Schofield's work does not provide a comprehensive picture of teenage sexual habits. He has been criticised for neglecting homosexual relations and sexual activity that was not full intercourse. So while the methods make this evidence particularly valuable, the questions asked limit the scope of the evidence provided.

Magazine surveys

From the 1970s reader surveys became a common part of best-selling magazines such as *Woman's Own*. Their purpose was mainly to provide an interesting follow-up feature for readers. Large numbers of women would respond, for instance in 1975, 10,000 women sent their answers to 'Your Marriage – the Truth at Last' in *Woman's Own*. The process was completely anonymous and the questions often personal, explicit and probing, e.g. would you marry a different man if you could? Experts were often used to summarise and analyse the results. Magazine circulation varied greatly according to class and age. *Woman* and *Woman's Own* achieved circulations of more than 2 million weekly in the 1960s

and 1970s, their readers mainly being women on average incomes in the 25–40 age bracket.

Comment

The anonymous nature of these surveys and the style of questions asked provided information about the private relationships of married couples that is hard to match from other sources. These surveys provide useful insight into the attitudes and behaviour of lower- and middle-class women in their twenties and thirties. It should be remembered, however, that the survey respondents were willing volunteers, not a random sample, and therefore may not be typical, even of women's magazine readers. The reliance on willing volunteers and the limited range of the magazine circulation means that this evidence needs to be treated with some caution.