

Levels and Determinants of Attitude Toward Sex Education in America

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Abstract

This paper examines the views of American people on the sex education in public schools through the analysis of the 2002 General Social Survey. The likelihood of being in favor of sex education in public schools was predicted in logistic regression models. The results show that the majority of respondents approved the teaching of sex education in public schools (88% in favor versus 12% against). However, there were significant differences by respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, with most variations observed across levels of education. Respondents with high school degree and those with at least college education were respectively three and four times more like to be in favor of the teaching of sex education in public schools than those without high school degree (odds ratios, 3, 4 versus 1), net of the effects of other variables. Nonetheless, there also significant ideological, cultural, local, and socioeconomic differences.

INTRODUCTION

Despite recent decline in teen sexuality and pregnancies (Darroch and Singh, 1999), the United States remains one of the developed countries with the highest teenage pregnancy rate (Singh and Darroch, 2000). To ensure the continuation of this decline, young people need to know how to protect themselves through a range of strategies that include sexual restraint and contraceptive use for those who are sexually active. Regardless of the sexual path they follow, young people's understanding of their sexual and reproductive system, as well as the social consequences associated with their sexual activity is one of the key ingredients of their future sexual health and even socio-economic status achievement.

Unfortunately, sex education is still a controversial issue in the United States. More specifically, sex education is not taught in all public schools, and even where it is taught, the contents of the instruction are varied and uncoordinated. According to a 1998 report, 20 states require their schools to provide both sex education and sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and/or HIV/AIDS education, 15 states require their schools to provide only STD and/or HIV/AIDS education, and 16 states do not require their schools to provide any of these educations (Donovan, 1998). But it should be noted that even those states that mandate such teaching, there is no guarantee that all schools will abide to the state requirements. In addition, there are consistent gaps between teachers' opinion on sex education and the actual instruction they provide in the classrooms (Darroch, Landry, and Singh, 2000). Nonetheless, most parents still look to sex education as the best way to give their children practical skills on sexuality matters (Eisenberg, Bearinger, Sieving, Swain, and Resnick, 2004).

Yet, much of what we know today about Americans' view on sex education comes from studies that were conducted in the classrooms (The Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000). Although such research helps understand the content of instruction, students' perceptions and needs, and parental views, it does not provide the complete view of the American public. Moreover, the decisions to change a curriculum, teaching methods, and the overall organization of school systems are usually influenced by citizens from all walks of life. In fact, some key persons who make such decisions may or may not have children of their own.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the views of the American public on the sex education in general. I use data from the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS 2002), a nationally representative sample survey of adult Americans, to explore the level of acceptance for sex education and the factors that determine these individual views. I hypothesized that educational attainment would be positively associated with support for sex education in public schools.

OPPOSING VIEWS ON SEX EDUCATION

Much of the debate over sex education in America and elsewhere evolves around two positions. First, there are those who contend that teaching about human sexuality will shun public awareness that attempts to institutionalize the sexual revolution or sexual liberation (Davis, 1972; Shornack and Shornack, 1982). Proponents of the counter-sex education argue that the increase in teenage pregnancies, for example, is primarily the results of family breakdown brought about by the increasing urbanization, poverty, and marital instability. In other words, the social changes underway in our society today are the key factors of adolescents' sexual permissiveness and out of wedlock pregnancies.

Those who embrace this position contend that parents should be the ones to teach their children about sexual behavior and family relations. Shornack and Shornack (1982) argue that the first love objects should be the parents, and sex should remain charged with affect; that girls should be protected rather than “liberated” (p. 540). Such position is also echoed in a survey research that showed that many parents want to be the primary sex educators for their children (Alexander, 1984).

The opposing view is that sex education is not only necessary but should be required in order to prepare children to adulthood. Responding to the Shornacks’ article, Scales (1983) clearly showed that sex education has beneficial effects on young people and society at large. He also showed that sex education is not a new phenomenon and that in many cases such education is required and sometimes designed by local communities based on their local needs (p.288). Different survey data support the overall view that most adults support the teaching of sex education (Landry, Darroch, Singh, and Higgins, 2003). However, little is known about the characteristics of those who favor versus those who oppose sex education in public schools.

In this paper, I contend that attitude toward sex education depends on level of education. Formal education by broadening knowledge allows individuals to hold more objective views on several issues, including sex education in public schools. In addition to education, I also examine the influence of age, political orientation, religion, and region of residence on attitude toward the teaching of sex education in American public schools. More specifically, I expect younger people, democrats, non-Christians, and those living in the New England region to hold more positive attitude toward sex education than respondents with other characteristics. Finally, I control for the effects of

race, sex, number of children, and social class because these factors may influence people's views on social issues.

Given the nature of the data used here, our focus is not on the kind of sex education the individuals want to be taught in schools, but on the general question of whether one supports or opposes the teaching of sex education in public schools. Certainly knowing what people want to be taught would enhance our understanding of the public opinion on attitude toward the teaching of sex education, but such information is not available in our data.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

Our analysis is based on the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS) data from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). Like many of its predecessors, the GSS 2002 is a national probability sample of the civilian adult population of the United States. This survey consisted primarily of face-to-face interviews. Nonetheless, questions regarding respondents' sexual experience were self-administered after respondents have completed the face-to-face interviews. For that module, respondents were given a short questionnaire, which they were requested to fill out and put in a sealed envelope and hand in to the interviewer. For this paper, I focus our analysis on information gathered from face-to-face interviews. A total of 2,765 people were successfully interviewed during the face-to-face part of the 2002 General Social Survey.

Variables

The dependent variable is the public's view on the teaching of sex education in public schools. The information for this variable derives from the question: "Would you

be for or against sex education in the public schools?” Response categories were “for,” “against,” and “don’t know.” Our focus is on socio-demographic characteristics that determine the tendency to support the teaching of sex education in public schools. The key explanatory variable in this analysis is respondent’s education. Respondents were divided into three categories based on their educational attainment: “no high school degree,” “high school degree,” and “college and beyond.” Again, I expect those with higher education to be more in favor of sex education in public schools than their counterparts with lower educational attainment.

I also include four socio-demographic variables (age, race, sex, marital status and number of children) and four social institution-related variables (political orientation, social class, religion, and region of residence) as control variables. The inclusion of number of children is useful to see whether those who have children differ in their attitude toward sex education in public schools than those who do not have children. Also, social class is an important variable here because it will help us explore the potential influence of socio-economic structure on attitude toward sex education.

Analytical procedures

The analysis is undertaken in two stages. First, I present the characteristics of respondents in our study sample and then discuss bivariate the associations between attitude toward sex education and explanatory variables (education and the other eight control variables). Second, I explore the net effects of each of these variables on the attitude toward support for sex education in multivariate analysis. I coded our dependent variable – attitude toward sex education – into two categories: in favor and not in favor.

Therefore, I used logistic regression equations to predict the likelihood of being in favor of the teaching of sex education in public schools.

To test the hypothesis that education leads to favorable attitude toward sex education, I ran three different logistic regression models. The first model includes only education. The second model includes education and the four socio-demographic variables (age, race, sex, marital status, and number of children). The last model is the full model in which all the variables are included. This approach helps see how much of the educational effect on attitude toward sex education is affected by the presence of other socio-demographic characteristics and variables related to social structure and ideology.

RESULTS

Characteristics of the sample and bivariate associations

The characteristics of respondents are given in Table 1. This table contains information on all the 2,765 respondents, although there are missing data on some variables for certain respondents. About three fourth of people were White, one tenth were Black, and the rest (about seven percent) were made of other races including those with multiple racial background. There were slightly more females than males. Overall, these data are similar to those published by the Census Bureau, suggesting that this sample is a good representation of the American population.

<< Table 1 about here >>

I assessed the level of support for sex education in two ways. First, I looked exclusively at respondents who answered the sex education question only (Table 2). Then I examined all respondents, included those who did not answer the sex education attitude

question (Table 3). The results for the attitude toward sex education show that most people who answered the question were in favor of sex education in public schools; little more than 88 percent of respondents were in favor of sex education as opposed to only 12 percent who opposed (Table 2). Even when I considered also those who did not answer the question, still those in favor of sex education outnumber those who were against it (Table 3). Overall, the strength of bivariate associations are similar in both tables (Tables 2 and 3), suggesting that there is no significant bias for excluding missing data from analysis in this context. Therefore, I focus our discussion to data in Table 2.

<< Tables 2 about here >>

<< Table 3 about here >>

The data in Table 2 show that the bivariate relations between attitude toward sex education and explanatory variables were statistically significant for education, age, marital status, political orientation, religion, and region of residence. As hypothesized, these data show a strong association between level of education and attitude toward sex education. Those with higher educational attainment had more positive views about sex education in public schools than those with lower education. For example, whereas about 91 percent of those with high school degree and more were in favor of sex education, only about 74 percent of those without high school degree did so.

As for socio-demographic variables, only age and marital status had statistically significant associations with attitude toward sex education. Clearly, there is a negative association with age; younger people were more likely to support sex education than older people. Hence, almost 95 percent of individuals aged 18-29 were in favor of sex education as compared to 79 percent of those in our oldest age group (70-89 years). As

one would expect, unmarried respondents were more in favor of sex education than ever married people; about 93 percent of never married respondents were in favor of sex education, compared to 87 percent of married respondents and 85 percent of formerly married people. This finding suggests that unmarried people are more concerned about sex education than those who were married. This is probably because sexual behavior of unmarried people requires more precautions than that of their married counterparts. Interestingly, there are no significant bivariate effects of race, sex, and number of children.

Among the four institution-related variables in Table 2, three were statistically significant. As can be expected, respondents who identified themselves as democrats showed more support for sex education (92%) than those who were independent (88%); republicans were the least to support sex education in public schools (84%). The importance of religion is also revealed in these data. The main religious denominations under the Protestant and Catholic umbrella were less in favor of sex education in public schools than other groups. Interestingly, Catholics were slightly more supportive of sex education than Protestants. As for region of residence, the data in Table 2 show lower support for sex education in the southern parts of the country and higher in the northern regions. I found no significant bivariate association between attitude toward sex education and social class. The next question is: Will these associations hold in multivariate models?

Multivariate analysis

Because our dependent variable has two categories (for and against the teaching of sex education in public schools), I ran multivariate logistic regression model predicting

the likelihood that a respondent will be in favor of the teaching of sex education in public schools. I ran three models to observe the subsequent changes in attitude toward sex education as each set of explanatory variables is added into logistic regression equation. The results are presented in Table 4; values in parentheses are odds ratios.

Overall, the data in Table 4 are consistent with the results from the bivariate analysis. Model I, which contains only the education variable, shows that, compared to those who did not have high school degree, those with high school degree and those who have been to college were significantly more like to support sex education in public schools. I added the other five socio-demographic variables into Model II. The educational effect remains statistically significant in the presence of these other variables, suggesting that the formal training is an essential factor of positive attitude toward sex education in the United States. Among the five socio-demographic variables added in this Model II, only age is statistically significant. The logistic regression coefficients associated with age show that there was more opposition toward sex education in public schools among older Americans. In other words, younger people were more in support of sex education than their older counterparts, net of the effects of other socio-demographic variables (Model II).

<< Table 4 about here >>

Model III contains all variables from Model II, plus the three institution-related variables. Education remains statistically significant in this model, supporting our hypothesis that educational attainment is associated with support for sex education in public schools. Age remains also significant in this full model, fact that reinforces the view that younger generations are more open to sex education than the older ones. As I

found in bivariate analysis, there is a statistically significant effect of political orientation on attitude toward sex education in this country.

All the institution-related variables added in Model III were statistically significant, but the most important predictors of the attitude toward sex education in this set were political orientation and region of residence. As can be expected, I found that democrats were the most likely to be in favor of sex education, whereas the republicans were the least like to support it; independent were somewhere between. In terms of region of residence, compared to the northeastern part of the country, there was more opposition to sex education in the South. This southern regional effect was also echoed in studies that examined the content of sex education (Landry et al., 2003).

Finally, religious affiliation and social class had marginal effects on attitude toward sex education. Our data show that compared to those who identified themselves as member of the lower class, only those who were in the working class category were marginally statistically significantly in favor of sex education. The religious effects indicate that there is no significant difference in attitude toward sex education between Protestants and Catholics in this country. The only group that is significantly statistically different is the “Other” category, which is associated with more favor attitude toward sex education than Protestants and Catholics. The “Other group” includes people in other denominations (most non- Christians) and those without religious affiliation (no religion). This finding suggests that for some people, Christian religion appears as a deterrent factor of support for sex education in the United States.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Sex education is still a controversial and challenging issue in this country. There are those who argue that teaching sexual matters in public schools is propaganda to diffuse sexual revolution (Alexander, 1984; Shornack and Shornack, 1982). Those who support this view suggest that parents and families should be the ones to teach their children about sexual and family matters. In contrast, there is another view that sex education is not only necessary but also needed in order to combat teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Scales, 1983; Landry et al., 2003). I acknowledge that sex education alone is not the panacea for reducing the burden of unsafe sex and unwanted pregnancies among our young people (Singh et al., 2001), but its role has been clearly documented in previous research (Darroch et al., 2001). The question here is: Who are those who are more likely to support sex education in public schools?

Using data from the 2002 General Social Survey, a nationally representative sample of adult Americans, I found that those who hold favorable view about sex education in public schools outnumber those who oppose it. I then examined individual characteristics and social factors that would explain individual differences in attitude toward sex education. Because of its major role in the socialization and personal development process, education was considered as our key predictor of attitude toward sex education. More specifically, I hypothesized that those with higher levels of education would be more likely to support sex education in public schools than their counterpart with less education. This hypothesis was confirmed. Respondents with high school degrees and those with college education were respectively three and four times

more likely to report a favorable view on sex education than those without high school degree, net of the effects of other explanatory variables.

Other important predictors were age, political orientation, and region of residence. The negative association between age and favorable attitude toward sex education suggests that the debate over sex education is taking a more positive turn with younger generations. This is probably because younger generations are growing up in the period of HIV/AIDS during which unsafe sexual activity can be deadly. Moreover, today's young adults can access various sources of information, especially Internet, and learn about sex education and its role in their lives.

I also found that political orientation does affect the way people view sex education. Our data revealed a positive association between liberal political orientation and support for sex education in public schools. The attitude toward sex education also depends on the region of residence, but only two regions of the nine regions were very distinctive. Hence, compared to those who were living in Northeastern, those in East South Central and West South Central were the only ones who were significantly less likely to support sex education in public schools. Although statistically marginal ($p=0.10$), the effects of religion and social class were in expected direction. Christians were significant less like to support sex education in public schools than non-Christians. The influence of social class was significant only for those who were in the working class category. Members of the working class were significantly more likely to be in favor of sex education than their counterparts in the lower class. Yet, no significant difference was found among middle and upper class respondents when compared to those in the lower class.

In general, this study shows that educational attainment is a key ingredient that should be taken seriously in the current debate over sex education. There are still ideological and cultural oppositions out there, but the fact that this issue transcends racial, marital, and childbearing differences suggests that the era of more support for sex education is near as levels of education are rising. However, I am aware that education and even comprehensive sex education alone will not be sufficient; the issues of socioeconomic disadvantages must also be substantially resolved for better sexual health.

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Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample, General Social Survey (GSS) 2002

Characteristic	Number of cases	Percentage
Educational attainment		
No high school degree	400	14.5
High school degree	1485	53.8
College+	875	31.7
Age		
18-29	530	19.3
30-39	590	21.4
40-49	545	19.8
50-59	434	15.8
60-69	298	10.8
70-89	354	12.9
Race		
White	2175	78.7
Black	402	14.5
Other	188	6.8
Sex		
Male	1228	44.4
Female	1537	55.6
Marital status		
Married	1269	45.9
Formerly married	788	28.5
Never married	708	25.6
Number of children		
0	799	28.9
1+	1966	71.1
Political orientation		
Democrat	1190	44.4
Independent	528	19.7
Republican	963	35.9
Social class		
Lower class	167	6.1
Working class	1231	44.8
Middle class	1253	45.6
Upper class	94	3.4
Religion		
Protestant	1460	52.8
Catholic	673	24.3
Other	632	22.9

Table 1. Continued.

Characteristic	Number of cases	Percentage
Region of residence		
New England	158	5.7
Middle Atlantic	435	15.7
East North Central	461	16.7
West North Central	223	8.1
South Atlantic	486	17.6
East South Central	199	7.2
West South Central	272	9.8
Mountain	165	6.0
Pacific	366	13.2
Total	2765	100.0

Notes: Total may not add up to 2765 due to missing values. Likewise percentage may not add up to 100, due to rounding.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Respondents by View on Sex Education, Excluding Missing Values (N=890)

Characteristic	For	Against	Chi-Square
All respondents	88.4	11.6	
Educational attainment			
No high school degree	73.8	26.2	31.6***
High school degree	90.8	9.2	
College+	91.2	8.8	
Age			
18-29	94.7	5.3	21.3***
30-39	92.5	7.5	
40-49	87.4	12.6	
50-59	86.4	13.6	
60-69	86.4	13.6	
70-89	79.2	20.8	
Race			
White	88.2	11.8	0.3
Black	89.8	10.2	
Other	87.7	12.3	
Sex			
Male	88.2	11.8	0.0
Female	88.6	11.4	
Marital status			
Married	87.2	12.8	9.2**
Formerly married	85.1	14.9	
Never married	93.2	6.8	
Number of children			
0	90.3	9.7	1.4
1+	87.6	12.4	
Political orientation			
Democrat	92.2	7.8	10.3**
Independent	88.3	11.7	
Republican	84.5	15.5	
Social class			
Lower class	79.7	20.3	5.4
Working class	89.3	10.7	
Middle class	88.4	11.6	
Upper class	93.3	6.7	

Table 2. Continued.

Characteristic	For	Against	Chi-Square
Religion			
Protestant	85.0	15.0	13.4***
Catholic	89.9	10.1	
Other	94.6	5.4	
Region of residence			
New England	96.0	4.0	26.7***
Middle Atlantic	92.9	7.1	
East North Central	90.7	9.3	
West North Central	87.2	12.8	
South Atlantic	90.0	10.0	
East South Central	74.6	25.4	
West South Central	78.4	21.6	
Mountain	88.9	11.1	
Pacific	90.0	10.0	
Total	890		

Notes: *** $P \leq 0.001$ ** $P \leq 0.01$ * $P \leq 0.05$ + $P \leq 0.10$

Table 3. Percentage Distribution of Respondents by View on Sex Education, Including Missing Values (N=2765)

Characteristic	For	Against	Non response	Chi-Square
All respondents	28.5	3.7	67.8	
Educational attainment				
No high school degree	24.0	8.5	67.5	35.6***
High school degree	30.5	3.1	66.4	
College+	27.1	2.6	70.3	
Age				
18-29	33.4	1.9	64.7	31.1***
30-39	27.3	2.2	70.5	
40-49	27.9	4.0	68.1	
50-59	29.3	4.6	66.1	
60-69	23.5	3.7	72.8	
70-89	26.8	7.1	66.1	
Race				
White	28.2	3.8	68.0	1.3
Black	30.6	3.5	65.9	
Other	26.6	3.7	69.7	
Sex				
Male	28.1	3.7	68.2	0.1
Female	28.8	3.7	67.5	
Marital status				
Married	26.3	3.9	69.8	22.7***
Formerly married	26.0	4.6	69.4	
Never married	35.0	2.5	62.4	
Number of children				
0	31.4	3.4	65.2	4.9 ⁺
1+	27.3	3.9	68.9	
Political orientation				
Democrat	29.8	2.5	67.6	10.3*
Independent	28.6	3.8	67.6	
Republican	27.1	5.0	67.9	
Social class				
Lower class	28.1	7.2	64.7	8.1
Working class	29.8	3.6	66.6	
Middle class	27.5	3.6	69.0	
Upper class	29.8	2.1	68.1	

Table 3. Continued.

Characteristic	For	Against	Non response	Chi-Square
Religion				
Protestant	26.7	4.7	68.6	14.7**
Catholic	30.3	3.4	66.3	
Other	30.5	1.7	67.7	
Region of residence				
New England	30.4	1.3	68.4	27.8*
Middle Atlantic	29.9	2.3	67.8	
East North Central	29.7	3.0	67.2	
West North Central	30.5	4.5	65.0	
South Atlantic	27.8	3.1	69.1	
East South Central	22.1	7.5	70.4	
West South Central	25.4	7.0	67.6	
Mountain	29.1	3.6	67.3	
Pacific	29.5	3.3	67.2	
Total	2765		100.0	

Notes: *** $P \leq 0.001$ ** $P \leq 0.01$ * $P \leq 0.05$ + $P \leq 0.10$

Table 4. Logistic Regression Results Predicting the Likelihood of Being in Favor of Sex Education in Public Schools, GSS 2002

Characteristic	Model I	Model II	Model III
Education attainment			
No high school degree	-- (1.000)	-- (1.000)	-- (1.000)
High school degree	1.249*** (3.488)	1.292*** (3.638)	1.199*** (3.317)
College+	1.295*** (3.649)	1.494*** (4.456)	1.452*** (4.273)
Age			
18-29		-- (1.000)	-- (1.000)
30-39		-0.363 (0.696)	-0.525 (0.592)
40-49		-0.955* (0.385)	-1.112* (0.329)
50-59		-1.071* (0.343)	-1.317** (0.268)
60-69		-0.791 (0.454)	-0.967+ (0.380)
70-89		-1.126* (0.324)	-1.424+ (0.241)
Race			
White		-- (1.000)	-- (1.000)
Black		0.280 (1.323)	0.008 (1.008)
Other		-0.404 (0.668)	-0.683 (0.505)
Sex			
Male		-- (1.000)	-- (1.000)
Female		0.073 (1.076)	0.038 (1.038)
Marital Status			
Married		-- (1.000)	-- (1.000)
Formerly married		0.090 (1.094)	0.263 (1.301)
Never married		0.612 (1.844)	0.468 (1.625)
Number of Children			
0		-- (1.000)	-- (1.000)
1		0.324 (1.382)	0.340 (1.404)
Political orientation			
Democrat			0.753* (2.124)
Independent			-- (1.000)
Republican			-0.237 (0.789)
Social Class			
Lower class			-- (1.000)
Working class			0.703+ (2.020)
Middle class			0.608 (1.836)
Upper class			1.203 (3.329)
Religion			
Protestant			-- (1.000)
Catholic			0.346 (1.414)

Other	0.655+	(1.925)
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Table 4. Continued.

Region of residence				
New England			--	(1.000)
Middle Atlantic			-0.688	(0.503)
East North Central			-0.790	(0.454)
West North Central			-1.222	(0.295)
South Atlantic			-0.819	(0.441)
East South Central			-1.916*	(0.147)
West South Central			-1.691*	(0.184)
Mountain			-1.109	(0.330)
Pacific			-0.791	(0.453)
Constant	1.886*** (6.592)	1.865*** (6.457)	1.967***	(7.150)
-2 Log-Likelihood	611.820	578.454	513.959	
Number of Cases	889	882	857	

Notes: *** $p \leq 0.001$ ** $p \leq 0.01$ * $p \leq 0.05$ + $p \leq 0.10$ Odds ratios in parentheses