

Premarital sex in state-socialist Poland: a generational perspective

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Abstract: In this article we examine personal narratives on premarital sex by two generations of Polish men and women—one born in the 1950s and 1960s, and their parents’ generation, born in the 1920s and 1930s and coming of age during or after World War II—and place these in dialogue with discourses surrounding young sexuality in state-socialist Poland. Using sociological surveys, popular sexological literature and Catholic marriage preparation material, we contextualize accounts of premarital heterosexual experiences, provided through oral history interviews and contest memoirs, ego documents submitted for autobiographic writing competitions in the 1960s and 1970s. We show there was no clear division between public secular and Catholic approaches to premarital (hetero)sexuality, with both opposing sexual experimentation before and beyond marriage throughout the state-socialist period (1945–1989).

However, across the same period, young people's acceptance of premarital sexual experimentation increased and the importance of a woman remaining a virgin until marriage declined. Our analysis of discourses and experiences reveals the connections and intersections of secular and Catholic realms. While secular experts did not conceptualize premarital sex as a sin, they often mirrored Catholic views by framing their discourse in love, sex, responsibility, and potential risk. Young people negotiated various elements of these teachings in their premarital sexual practices, which, during the final decades of state socialism, were largely normalized, especially when couples were planning to marry.

Introduction

In 1971, sociologist Maria Trawińska published a study on the sexuality of young people in Poland.¹ The study explored what she termed the “sexplosion” taking place among those coming of age in the late 1960s and demonstrated that this generation were far more sexually active than their parents and grandparents. However, Trawińska argued that the Polish “sexplosion” was fundamentally different from what was taking place in the West. While young Poles were having sex, in contrast to their Western counterparts, love and family continued to play a central role for their sexual activity. Dagmar Herzog has described the similar changes in sexual mores taking place across Eastern Europe as “a less noisy sexual revolution—one that might be better understood as sexual evolution—and while the governments maintained a puritanical tone (restricting both serious research and media reportage), at the grassroots dramatic changes quietly occurred.”²

In this article we examine one aspect of this “less noisy sexual revolution:” early sexual experiences between heterosexual men and women in a communist country in which the Catholic Church maintained considerable influence. We focus on two Polish generations: those born in the 1950s and 1960s who, according to Trawińska, lived through the “sexplosion,” and

their parents' generation, born in the 1920s and 1930s and coming of age during or after World War II. We argue that an important change in practices relating to premarital heterosexual experiences took place during the state-socialist period (1945–1989). Sexual experimentation between young heterosexual adults became increasingly accepted, despite strong condemnation and discouragement in the contemporary public discourses shaped by popular sexual experts and Catholic ethics. Although in many aspects these two strands of expertise framed sexuality differently, both discouraged young people from engaging in sex before marriage throughout the state-socialist period.

The personal narratives we analyze here, however, reveal generational change towards a more permissive approach to premarital sexuality among heterosexual men and women and, although deeply gendered, a shift in the value attached to virginity. While people often shaped the narratives of their experiences and perceptions within a complex relationship to Catholic teachings and identities, interview and memoir material showcase a diversity of “lived experiences” of Catholicism in the realm of sexuality, in which religious mandates were conscientiously negotiated on the individual and couple level.

The term “premarital sex” is not unproblematic as it indirectly assumes that marriage is a point of reference for sexual activity. Our use of this term is conscious and reflects the terminology used by experts at the time as well as broader social perceptions. We argue that, despite a pronounced shift of values attached to the idea of premarital sexual experimentation, marriage—contracted or prospective—remained a significant background reference for Polish people coming of age during the final two decades of state socialism.

Our main analysis categories are gender and generation. By applying the former, and in line with the classical gender history program,³ we place the values and ideas attached to female and male premarital sexuality and the hierarchies between in dialogue with people's narratives of their early heterosexual experiences. Our source base does not include accounts of same-sex

sexual experiences, which does not mean such experiences did not take place, either in the lives of the individuals whose narratives are presented here, or more broadly amongst the generations under study. Anthropologist Agnieszka Kościńska has shown that debate about non-heteronormative sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, was ongoing in the sexologist-run agony columns of Polish youth and student magazines, and that Polish sexologists' framing of homosexuality shifted from pathologization in the 1960s to a more nuanced position of recognition and tolerance in later decades.⁴ However, as both the contest memoirs and oral history interviews—the methodological aspects of which we discuss in more detail below—focused primarily on “normative” sexuality, these non-heterosexual experiences are absent from our material.

We apply the category of generation to people born before World War II and commencing their sex life between the 1940s and 1950s (Generation 1), versus people born in the 1950s and 1960s becoming heterosexually active in the 1970s and 1980s (Generation 2). We use generation as an “ordering of history”⁵ against the conventional grain that links “generation” to elites, political activism, counterculture, or specific forms of consumerism. Rather, we employ this category to illuminate changes in the intimate realm that we argue have been equally significant within social and historical change in Poland.⁶

Our analysis draws from and dialogues with the recent renewed historiographic interest in the history of sexual science and experiences in state-socialist East Central Europe. For the United States and Western Europe, the “sexual revolution” can be somewhat simplistically summarized as the greater presence of sex in the public sphere, and more acceptance of sexual experimentation, increasingly outside the frame of marriage for heterosexual men and women, and gradually for individuals engaging in same-sex sexual activity. According to Herzog, there are two main interpretative approaches to the “sexual revolution” in Western Europe during the second half of the 1960s and the 1970s. The first perceives increasing consumerism, the

emergence and dissemination of oral contraceptives, and new visual cultures of sex as the driving forces of the sexual revolution. The second focuses on the rise of sexual liberation activism, including access to abortion and the rights of sexual minorities. East Central Europe does not fit neatly into these interpretative frames, as most, and in some countries, all of these features were absent.⁷

An important line of enquiry within recent scholarship has been the specificities of the Eastern European “sexual revolution”, viewed as a lengthy, non-linear process with specific regional and local chronologies. Josie McLellan has argued that the German Democratic Republic (GDR) framed a long-term loving relationship as the appropriate arena for sex in its early decades, but later, in order to both boost natality and appear modern, legitimized and even encouraged premarital sexuality.⁸ Herzog has theorized the gradual shift in East German sexual mores as the outcome of a balance between conservative and liberal perspectives. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the East German state and experts supported premarital heterosexual sex and single motherhood, but a new strand of expertise towards the end of the 1960s branded premarital sex inappropriate.⁹ Kateřina Lišková has analyzed analogous processes in Czechoslovakia through the lens of “sexual liberation,” a term she believes encompasses the ebbs and flows in sexual mores produced by interactions between the State, experts and ordinary people in the second half of the twentieth century. This socialist style of sexual liberation resulted from the mapping of shifting gender regimes onto sexuality. Both Herzog and Lišková describe a non-commodification of sexuality and the degree of State intervention as important features in sexual change within Eastern Europe.¹⁰

In Poland, such change has thus far been examined from the perspective of institutions, expertise and representation.¹¹ Kościańska, whose scholarship has been foundational for the history of Polish sexual expertise, has outlined the predominance of ideas about appropriate sex as essentially occurring between men and women playing out the traditional “masculine”

(dominant, strong, active) and “feminine” (subordinate, weak, passive) roles. This is similar to cases presented by Lišková. A comparative analysis of school-based sex education curricula in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland has revealed the diverse paths these programs took within local contexts, with the latter two states becoming more progressive in the teaching of sexuality during late socialism.¹²

In this article, we draw on this literature, as well as the international body of scholarship on sexual experiences and narratives in postwar Europe discussed above, to illuminate the history of premarital sexuality in state-socialist Poland through personal narratives. In earlier publications, we analyzed these narratives, accessed through memoirs and oral history interviews, to address the reception of expert knowledge on sexuality and reproductive decision-making in postwar Poland. In this article, we focus on premarital heterosexual experiences of teenagers and people in their twenties. First, we analyze the predominant discourses on premarital sexual activity formulated in postwar Poland. Second, we discuss and analyze narratives of sexual initiation by Generation 1, then Generation 2. We conclude by summarizing the gendered and generational similarities and differences.

We collected our source narratives from contest memoirs and oral history interviews. Author 1 generated the latter within her doctoral and postdoctoral research projects between 2012 and 2019. She employed mixed recruitment methods and open-ended, semi-structured interviewing strategies to encourage life stories focusing on themes such as sex education, knowledge about the reproductive body, sexuality and contraception, sexual and reproductive decision making, and the impact of religiosity on this decision making. Together with a research team, she conducted three interviews with couples, in accordance with their preferences, and 45 one-to-one interviews in person (43) or over the telephone (2). Interviewee birthdates range between 1931 and 1972. Over half had married between 1970 and 1989, and the most numerous group (18) was women with secondary and university education born in the 1940s or the first

half of the 1950s, residing or having resided in large cities. The research team attempted to minimize this bias by targeting participants born before 1940 (6); those residing in rural areas (5); those having received elementary education or vocational training (8); and male participants with various backgrounds (5). The contest memoirs are part of Warsaw's Central Archive of Modern Records' rich unpublished collection of responses to calls for accounts of marriage and family life issued in the popular press during the 1960s and early 1970s. These ego documents form part of a broader trend of popular memoir writing in twentieth-century Poland, and public debates on marriage and family held in the post-Stalinist period.¹³ We also include published material from a memoir contest organized by *Tygodnik Powszechny* (*Catholic Weekly*)—a progressive Catholic magazine—in 1962; the original memoirs sent to the magazine have not been preserved. Authors of the selected memoirs were born between 1922 and 1944, the majority in the 1930s. Apart from one contest addressing family planning, press calls did not explicitly request that authors share sexual experiences. However, numerous memoir authors mentioned sexuality, including their first experiences of intercourse, (unwed) pregnancy, sexual knowledge, and contraception.

These two types of narrative, both purposefully generated and focusing on the past but recorded in the past and the present, enable a detailed analysis of sexual experiences between the 1930s and 1990s. While these narrative sources cannot be treated as representative, they nevertheless illuminate cultural norms and popular understandings that are not easily detected in other types of sources. To conduct our contextual analysis, we also consulted expert discourses that relate to the premarital sexual experiences of Generations 1 and 2, such as surveys and studies of “normative” sexual behavior produced in state-socialist Poland, and popular sexological and marital advice literature produced by sexologists, doctors, and Catholic priests and advisors.

Premarital sex in Catholic and secular sexual expertise

In this section, we examine how premarital sexuality was represented in public discourse in postwar Poland. Focusing on a selection of advice books published in multiple editions and directed at diverse audiences, as well as Catholic marriage preparation guidelines for premarital counseling, we present an overview of discourses about premarital sex throughout the state-socialist period. The aim of this analysis, supported by scholarship on sexual advice in Poland, particularly by Kościńska, is not to be exhaustive, but rather to provide insight into the general lines of argumentation used in expert discussions about sexual initiation.

These discussions were shaped by both experts aligned with Catholicism and the Catholic hierarchy, and those working within the state-sponsored family planning framework. This framework was institutionalized with the creation of the Society of Conscious Motherhood (SCM) in 1957. Focused on family planning, SCM also developed the concept of a “culture of sexuality” embedded in progressive ideas and argued against the double standard of greater acceptance of male premarital sexual activity.¹⁴ The Catholic Church fiercely opposed the SCM campaign and infused this opposition into its discourse on sexual ethics, promoted through marriage preparation courses, religion classes, catechesis, and Church publications. Although at times these two discourses used similar arguments, they clashed in their approach to the legality of abortion, the use of “artificial” contraception, masturbation, and premarital sex.¹⁵ This added another dimension to the state-Church conflict over secularization and the place of religion. However, as we will discuss, while there were significant differences in the framing of sexuality, both secular and Catholic experts presented sex among young people in terms of risk and assumed a gender division.

Throughout the state-socialist period, the Catholic hierarchy welded sex with marriage and forbade premarital sexual activity. Both popular books aimed at the public and available in libraries, and unpublished scripts for the clergy and lay Catholics delivering “preparation for

marriage” training at various levels, consistently represented premarital sexuality as sinful and unhealthy. The anticipated negative consequences of premarital sex were steadfastly gendered: girls and women would suffer most. A boom in the production and dissemination of Catholic advice material began during the 1970s, boosted by the publication of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 and increasing tolerance from authorities, whose family-oriented policies intended to stimulate population growth had become more aligned with those of the Episcopate.¹⁶

However, the foundation for these principles had been laid in preceding decades. In the early postwar period, Catholic advice literature on marriage and sexuality largely repeated pre-war discourses and presented marriage as the only space for sexual activity. According to some authors, sexual abstinence should ideally extend to the three nights after a wedding.¹⁷ Others addressed the new legal situation that directly affected Catholic sexual values: divorce was legalized, and civil marriage had become the only legal union in 1945. A 1946 book by the priest Zygmunt Baranowski explained that the Church did not recognize civil union as marriage and condemned divorce.¹⁸ A comprehensive editorial silence on sexuality existed throughout the Stalinist period (1948–1955), and most of the Catholic press was shut down. However, the institutional Church continued to disseminate its ideology on sexuality and marriage through other channels, such as catechesis and marriage preparation classes. As a 1952 clergy handbook by the Warsaw diocese explained, premarital abstinence could be achieved through prayer and the avoidance of “opportunities” for sexual activity. Engaged couples should express their love through “a kiss, a sign of pure spiritual love.”¹⁹

In the late 1950s, Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, a Catholic gynecologist and one of the main popularizers of the rhythm method in Poland, claimed that sexual abstinence was not harmful and encouraged the development of love; he recommended premarital abstinence for both men and women.²⁰ The exaltation of premarital abstinence received a powerful boost with the

publication of Karol Wojtyła's *Love and Responsibility* in 1960, a treatise of marital and sexual morality that became a key reference for the Catholic Church in Poland and beyond.²¹ Wojtyła, then Archbishop of Cracow and future Pope John Paul II, insisted that marriage justified sexual activity before society and God; such activity outside marriage was not only unjustified but also objectively and universally harmful, especially for women, "even if she allows it, even if she encourages it, even if she desires it."²² Wojtyła also dismissed the argument that it was beneficial for a couple to test their sexual compatibility before marriage, as "marital cohabitation is fundamentally different from premarital."²³

From the late 1960s onwards, the Polish Episcopate used the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* as the foundation for developing an intense Catholic marriage preparation program. Catholic sexual ethics, guided by the Encyclical, were disseminated through religious classes and courses for the young and the betrothed; publications suggesting content for such classes and courses proliferated. Many of these publications maintained and developed the discourse on the advantages of "purity" and the perceived risks of premarital sex, again, particularly for women. A 1970 compilation of sample lectures edited by the Gorzów Wielkopolski Dioceses insisted that girls and women were not only responsible for controlling male sexual urges and advances, but also sexual violence: "Girls must not provoke boys with their clothes, with their behavior, with their exaggerated emotionality—as this could impede their [the boy's] self-control."²⁴ Engaging in premarital sexual activity had long-term negative consequences: "It is well known that a woman never forgets her first intercourse, the loss of virginity; if it was linked with tension, fear, remorse, a lifetime of stigmatization remains," thereby destroying a woman's ability to ever enjoy sex. Another collection of scripts for Catholic marriage preparation, created in Warsaw in 1975, even maintained that premarital sex left girls "psychologically handicapped."²⁵ Premarital sex for boys, although framed in less dramatic terms, was incompatible with love: "a boy who truly loves a girl will never take her body."²⁶ For both

sexes, premarital intercourse—“premarital sin”—undermined marital fidelity, weakening this pillar of marriage before it had even been contracted. If a husband went on to be unfaithful, the wife perhaps had only herself to blame, as “she had been the one who had taught her husband to act against the divine law.... Therefore girls should be wise, should raise faithful husbands, they cannot become ‘easy’.”²⁷

Progressive Catholic voices constructed a less unapologetic, but still vocal criticism of premarital sexuality. In *Marriage Upon Us*, the most important popular Catholic marriage preparation manual, published in 1972 and re-edited in 1974 and 1988,²⁸ Catholic intellectual Andrzej Wielowieyski was ambiguous about affianced couples engaging in sexual activity. While such activity did not fundamentally contradict the essence of their love, it was a flaw in their relationship and “collided with their personal dignity, depriving them of participation in the beautiful act of marriage.”²⁹ Wielowieyski also shared the view that premarital sexuality had a negative impact on future marital sexuality: even petting would hinder the development of a normal sex life. Similar ideas appeared in the third edition of *Catholics and Family Planning* (1975), which contained a new section on sexual initiation. According to the authors, who copiously cited non-Catholic experts linked to state-sponsored sexual education, particularly Mikołaj Kozakiewicz, premarital sex was premature and a direct path to conflict and chaos.³⁰

Secular advice literature and sexological writings published between the late 1950s and the end of Polish communism in 1989 presented ambiguous and non-homogeneous discourses, with premarital sexual activity accepted by some experts, but rejected by others. The “culture of sexuality” promoted by experts tended to apply to marital relationships: explicit advice on sex was largely directed at married couples or in the framework of “preparation for marriage”. While secular experts did not label premarital sex immoral, throughout the 1960s, 1970s and

1980s, many still provided a range of medical and social arguments against the practice, at times based on (and constructive of) gender hierarchies.

During the 1960s, experts offered rather vague and even contradictory advice. Kazimierz Imieliński, the father of postwar Polish sexology, addressed sexual intercourse in a chapter on marriage in his popular book *Sex Life: Psycho-hygiene*, published four times between 1965 and 1973. While Imieliński criticized men who expected to marry virgins, this was a rejection of double standards, not a green light to premarital sex.³¹ In an advice book for men published in 1965, Jadwiga Beaupré, a medical doctor and SCM leader, argued “the truth [about premarital sex] lies in between.” She believed abstinence was impossible for men to maintain, but, given the threat of unwanted pregnancy, more achievable for women. Beaupré framed sexual abstinence like the aforementioned Catholic gynecologist Fijałkowski, as a way of exercising “strong will and reason” and finding “real happiness in love.” Nevertheless, Beaupré accepted premarital sex in couples intending to marry.³² Mikołaj Kozakiewicz, the eminent SCM expert and highly popular author, presented arguments for and against premarital sex, but upheld the widespread assumption that early sexual experiences had far more impact on women.³³

Experts also used sociological arguments to discourage young readers from premarital sex well into the late 1970s. Sociologist Barbara Łobodzińska, who researched and published widely on marriage, cautioned that “sexual freedom” among young people was spreading venereal disease, abortion and “forced” marriage.³⁴ Sexologist Zygmunt Janczewski claimed the alleged promiscuity of young people stemmed from a lack of “real” feelings, and counseled that intensive sexual activity before marriage led to infidelity;³⁵ a similar argument appeared in conservative Catholic marriage preparation scripts from the mid-1970s. Leading sexologist Lew-Starowicz shared this opinion and condemned the devaluation of virginity among Polish girls in the early 1970s.³⁶

As Agnieszka Kościańska has demonstrated, the dominant line of Polish sexual advice literature during state-socialism was a lack of explicit condemnation of sexual activity outside marriage, coupled with a warning not to start “too early.”³⁷ By the 1970s, many popular advice books for young people provided little or no information about sexual intercourse and experts were still in agreement that the initial experience of intercourse determined future sexual experiences. Lew-Starowicz, as Kościańska has shown, argued that as initial intercourse left a life-long imprint, it required emotional maturity and a readiness to accept the procreative component of sex; an idea that aligned with the aforementioned framing of premarital sex in Catholic marriage preparation literature. Both Catholic literature and secular expertise considered the impact of initial intercourse and premarital sexual activity to be different for girls and boys.

Michalina Wisłocka, whose *Art of Love* was the most popular sex advice book throughout the postwar period, also emphasized a need for maturity in sexual experimentation, which she believed was attained between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five. As Kościańska has highlighted, although *Art of Love* was aimed at adults, Wisłocka explicitly acknowledged that teenagers might read it to gain rare and valuable practical knowledge about sex; the *Art of Love* was amongst the first publications to provide this by including detailed and visually supported advice on sexual techniques. Wisłocka viewed a young thirst for knowledge as positive, yet, like earlier authors, she insisted on differences between male and female sexuality, contrasting men’s sexual desire with the centrality of emotions in a woman’s sex life. While, as Kościańska has pointed out, Wisłocka believed premature sexual experimentation for girls could lead to promiscuity and an inability to sustain lasting relationships, she discouraged young adult couples from waiting “too long” and not attaining sufficient intimacy before marriage. To this end, the book included instructions on the best sexual positions and contraceptives for first penetrative intercourse.

According to Kościańska, a shift in expert gendering of young sexuality occurred in the 1980s. A textbook for the official school sex education program, coauthored by the young sexologist, Wiesław Sokoluk, rejected the gendered stereotypes of male sexual desire/female emotion of earlier decades. At the same time, and somewhat echoing, but also nuancing the genealogy of Polish sexology during state socialism, Sokoluk continued to posit a loving relationship as the prime site for sexual experimentation. With regards to “virginity”, Sokoluk proposed it should neither be treated as essential, nor completely disregarded, and provided concrete advice for couples, particularly young couples, on how to begin their sexual relationship. Sokoluk stressed that their decision to do this should be thoroughly thought through, and emphasized the importance of individual autonomy, communication, consent, and sexual pleasure for both partners. As Kościańska has emphasized, it is perhaps this new framing of young sexuality that prompted the book to be labelled a “manual of defloration and masturbation” and criticized by secular and Catholic experts alike, leading to its removal from school syllabi and the destruction of all unsold copies.³⁸

Catholicism, virginity and stigmatization: experiences of premarital sex for Generation 1

In this section we show that, while young couples representing Generation 1 did not necessarily avoid premarital sex, their opinions and experiences reflected tensions that mirror some elements of Catholic sexual morality described in the previous section. Moreover, this generation attached great importance to a woman’s virginity from both a religious and non-religious perspective.

Opinion polls and sociological research in the late 1950s and early 1960s, reveal both the prevalence of negative attitudes to premarital sex, particularly from a Catholic viewpoint, and

gendered “double standards” in sexual norms. According to a poll conducted by the public research body OBOP in 1959, 60 percent of parents believed girls should not engage in premarital sexual relationships, while only 33.8 percent considered the same for boys. A rejection of premarital sex was strongly related to a high level of religious engagement. Believers who declared themselves as “practicing” (*praktykujący*)—attending Sunday Mass and religious celebrations—deemed premarital sex unacceptable in even greater numbers: 70 percent for girls, 44.4 percent for boys.³⁹ Other studies, however, indicated greater acceptance. Imieliński conducted a survey among betrothed couples in Warsaw in 1961; 71 percent of the men interviewed reported having sexual relations with their fiancés.⁴⁰ Sociologist Hanna Malewska, who analyzed interviews with (mostly) married women around thirty years of age who attended various gynecological clinics in Poland, found that only 26 percent condemned premarital sexual experiences, 43 percent accepted it where partners were in love or had marriage plans, and 25 percent believed premarital sex was beneficial.⁴¹ Malewska suggested that these more liberal views among the patients she interviewed were related to a statistically younger age and higher level of education than the OBOP survey. Her study corresponded with that research in a correlation between intercourse before marriage—experienced by 65 percent of the patients—and low levels of religiosity. However, 36.7 percent of those considering themselves “ardent believers” did not condemn premarital sex.⁴² It appears premarital sex was more widespread than its stated acceptance would indicate.

Personal narratives from the generation born between the 1920s and 1940s reveal tensions relating to premarital sex. About half the authors admitted having sexual relations before marriage, but only a few narratives fully normalized this behavior.⁴³ Most commonly, authors and/or their partners had hesitated, unsuccessfully attempted abstinence, or were regretful about the negative consequences of premarital sex; those who did not have sexual intercourse before marriage were often glad and rather self-righteous about the fact. Memoir references to initial

sexual intercourse and premarital sex were often couched in euphemisms, such as “crossing the Rubicon” or “breaking the dam”.

A memoir by a male author with a university education, born in 1935 and married around 1961, exemplifies the typical tension between moral constraints, sexual desires, and experience of unwanted and unwed pregnancy. The author, who considered himself shaped by “Catholic pedagogical writings” and his “average religious family,” met his girlfriend at university:

We soon engaged in intercourse (*doszło między nami do zbliżenia*). After a long period of abstinence, resistance, and fear of consequences and the new and unknown, the dam was broken (*tama została przerwana*). But the intercourse did not satisfy us. It rather caused disgust and remorse. ... On the other hand, I was afraid of marriage (but only marriage was acceptable, this ambiguous situation was a burden for us).⁴⁴

Breaking religion-based sexual norms could provoke intense anxieties and guilt. The aforementioned study by Malewska found that a strong identification with Catholicism could instigate sexual dissatisfaction due to moral conflict.⁴⁵ Tensions about sex often related to anxiety about marriage; the memoir author quoted above framed marriage as an undesirable event, perceived as the only way out of an embarrassing situation. A taboo on sex, revealed in the author’s euphemistic language and his lack of knowledge about sexuality, can be related to a Catholic upbringing. Yet, this memoir showcases a complex relationship between Catholic identity or tradition and choices made in the realm of sex and reproduction. The couple struggled to avoid premarital sex, but when the woman got pregnant, they sought an abortion—soundly prohibited by the Church—before changing their minds at the last moment and getting married. Although most memoir authors demonstrated at least a theoretical acceptance of Catholic teachings on premarital sex, they felt able to ignore other norms of Catholic sexual

ethics, such as censure of contraception and abortion. Polish Catholics became more aware of the mandates of Catholic sexual ethics during the 1960s, but—as shown in the memoirs—consciously rejected them in many situations.

Other authors of memoirs published in the *Catholic Weekly* volume *Us Two*, extensively described their struggles to uphold “chastity.” Given the magazine had close ties with Wojtyła, its readers were most likely educated and engaged Catholics who acknowledged the Church’s teachings but allowed for negotiation. “We wanted to live through the engagement period honestly, as we were both religious. Constant sexual desire deepened the conflict,” declared one female author born in 1929, who met her partner at university and married in 1950.⁴⁶ A male university student born in 1937, who had learned “some moral norms”, experienced “a constant spiritual conflict.”⁴⁷ “Why does ‘pure love’ not give me what I wanted: a full understanding of the other person?” These accounts reveal an understanding of sex in moral terms, the internalization of Catholic sexual ethics, and negative experiences caused by internal conflicts. Yet the memoir authors also draw attention to either the impossibility of living up to Catholic morality, or its shortcomings.

Premarital sex and unwed pregnancy—as a visible sign of the former—were stigmatized. One memoir author, an electrician born in 1934 in a worker’s family in Eastern Poland, married when his fiancé was five months pregnant, having unsuccessfully sought an abortion. The whole family “treated [the wife] as a loose woman.”⁴⁸ In this case, both spouses had working-class backgrounds, but couples with higher social status experienced similar stigmatization. It was perhaps against this background of anticipated stigmatization that a female textile worker born in Łódź in 1933, interviewed in 2014, insisted she married as a virgin in 1955 and was unhappy her 1980s-born granddaughter was raising a child in an informal partnership; an inappropriate and scandalous situation for her generation.⁴⁹ Despite having undergone a civil marriage in 1951, when a female memoir author born in 1931 became pregnant, her “very

Catholic family ... demanded we got rid of the ‘unwed’ child and ‘family’s shame.’” The relatives of both spouses belonged to the “old intelligentsia.”⁵⁰

The impact of religious motivation on premarital sexual decisions was not straightforward, and despite a strong interrelation between Catholicism and tradition, the narratives reveal that rationales were multi-dimensional. A memoir by a rural school headteacher born in 1932 and married to another teacher in 1959, exhibits norms relating to sexuality and marriage of both religious and non-religious character. Despite contracting a civil marriage, this couple only had sex after their religious union was celebrated:

I was also afraid of a sex life, because I had no experience. ... [The civil marriage they contracted] was not a full marriage. My wife did not accept it until we married in the church. Therefore, I did not use the husband’s privilege. ... On the other hand, I felt an enormous and growing respect for my partner for keeping her virginity. I was grateful to her. It obliged me to make certain concessions. I was aware of the fact that many young wives could not take pride in keeping their chastity. I remembered complaints by some of my colleagues who hadn’t had that luck.⁵¹

The memoir author’s wife had religious motivations for avoiding premarital sex, following the Church’s stand that civil union was not a proper marriage and therefore sinful cohabitation. Her virginity—framed in religious language as “chastity” in the memoir—proved to her husband that she was respectable. However, the author explained his reluctance to have sex not in terms of Catholic motives, but rather in relation to his lack of sexual experience.⁵² The memoir by a skilled male worker born in 1934 who had undertaken “only caress/necking and kisses” before marriage also reveals a man venerating female premarital chastity while feeling unease about his own lack of experience. Although this memoir author was convinced his partner would have

agreed to sex, he preferred “to wait until the wedding night” due to his own virginity.⁵³ These examples point to gendered dimensions of premarital sexual activity: men preferred women to be virgins,⁵⁴ but their own virginity could instigate shame and discomfort.

These and other narratives about virginity and sexual experience clearly show the existence of the “double standards” so often condemned in early post-1956 sex advice literature. A male typographer, born in 1932 and married in 1957, disapproved of his wife’s previous sexual intimacy and “reproached her for her lack of virginity.”⁵⁵ A female medical doctor, born in 1933 and married in 1953, pretended she had not had any sexual experience. When her husband discovered the truth, he was disappointed:

Edek was very old-fashioned and wanted to have a woman only for himself. ... He always reproached me about not being a virgin.⁵⁶

While these two husbands used a lack of virginity to castigate and humiliate their wives, other memoirs reveal that those who put a premium on virginity also perceived themselves as old-fashioned. An unmarried twenty-eight-year-old woman with a university education born in 1934, blamed the weakening importance of traditional morality for the failure of a relationship: men expected “the proof of love,” as this kind of pressure was referred to in advice literature:

It hurts. Why neither he nor other thoughtful and cultural young people have ever realized that if a girlfriend or even a fiancé, does not allow a sexual relation (*zblizenie fizyczne*), and never elicits it, it does not mean that she does not love. She does not permit it, because she loves authentically. It is not about a pleasant moment, it’s about responsible love that should never end, and that expresses itself in a spiritual union of two people. If there is no such unity, it’s not possible to allow for sex.⁵⁷

This author not only related virginity to respectability, but also to love and the strength of the marital union: “an objective value that an enduring and stable family life can be built on.” She identified these ideas as “typically female, romantic and old-fashioned,” suggesting that contemporary men felt differently. Yet her understanding of love and female sexuality was similar to that promoted by advice books of the period, which underlined love, responsibility and female emotionality. The conviction that premarital abstinence was no longer popular was also expressed by another author, a man born in 1944 and married in 1967: “We were not urged to marry by the now typical circumstances, that is an unwed pregnancy.” He declared they had not had sex before marriage for “religious reasons and fear of pregnancy.”⁵⁸

Mention of premarital sex without moral constraints is rare in the narratives of this generation. One refers to a “loose” young woman sleeping with many men and attempting to “catch” one through pregnancy. This took place in the setting of a Youth Labor Brigade in the early 1950s, and brings to mind the moral panic that surrounded discussions about young women’s sexuality during the de-Stalinization, as described by historian Małgorzata Fidelis.⁵⁹ This male author, a steelworker born in 1938, claimed he was “seduced” at the age of seventeen by a woman working in the Brigade’s kitchen. As he phrased it, she used to “give herself to everyone” and then “forced” him into an unhappy marriage, which ended in divorce when she was unfaithful.⁶⁰ This narrative interpreted female sexuality as promiscuous and linked to danger and domination.

Among authors of this generation, there were only two examples of normalized and non-stigmatized premarital sex. A female author with a university degree, born in 1934 and married in 1959, claimed she and her husband had both had previous “erotic experiences.”⁶¹ She associated the affirmation of premarital sexual experiences with a modernizing model of marriage. In the second, a white-collar worker born in 1933 claimed his marriage happened “by

accident”; a satisfying sexual relationship led to pregnancy.⁶² This was also another example of inconsistency in the application of Catholic sexual ethics; the woman was “religious” but accepted both premarital sex and contraception in marriage.

Discovering premarital sex: narratives of Generation 2

One of our interview partners, a female postal clerk born in 1945 in Łódź, started having sex in the mid-1960s when she had “a stable boyfriend and knew it was going to work out.” In her narrative the attachment of sex to an engagement or serious relationship was a substitute for marriage, a legitimizing factor typical of the generation born in the 1950s and 1960.⁶³ However, as we will demonstrate, this legitimization was not always necessary and positive interpretations of sexual experimentation did emerge, especially among urban students.

Sociological studies of sexual practices in Poland reveal an increasing acceptance and normalization of pre-marital sexual activity between the early 1970s and early 1980s, as well as a gradual lowering of age at sexual initiation. Trawińska found her young respondents willing to discuss sexuality: only 8 percent of over 400 sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds from both rural and urban backgrounds considered it taboo and refused to relate their experiences. Over 77.2 percent of boys and 43.4 percent of girls had experienced intercourse, most after the age of seventeen.⁶⁴ This gendered difference also appeared in studies referred to by Kozakiewicz, with 59 percent of men and 37 percent of women having had sexual experience (meaning intercourse) before their eighteenth birthday.⁶⁵ This percentage was lower than neighboring countries, such as the GDR, where there was also less gender difference in sexual activity. In the mid-1970s, 23.5 percent of young Polish people and 44.3 percent of women disapproved of premarital sex. Nevertheless, Kozakiewicz concluded that young Poles were not significantly

different from their European counterparts: they shared the desire to get married and the impact of religion on their opinions and practices in the realm of sexuality was diminishing.⁶⁶ Sociologist Krzysztof Czekaj reached similar conclusions in the early 1980s. Among surveyed students and blue-collar workers, between 60 and 75 percent accepted premarital sexual activity. Among practicing Catholics this acceptance was lower, but still considerable, especially when there was the prospect of marriage.⁶⁷ Czekaj also explored class differences: students were more likely to state they took a secular approach to sexuality than young blue-collar workers. These differences were further complicated by gender, with female workers being more attached to Catholic morality than their male colleagues. However, a rejection of premarital sex did not exceed 34 percent in any group categorized by gender, class or religiosity. While intersectional differences in approaches to sexuality should not be underestimated, both surveys and narratives point to the predominance of generation over other categories. As historian of girlhood Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz has shown, sexual matters were part of the generational conflict in the 1960s and 1970s between conservative parents and their “modern” daughters.⁶⁸

Narratives of the generation coming to age in the late 1960s and 1970s confirm the normalization of sexual cohabitation before marriage, but this was inscribed into an exclusive relationship, with marriage explicitly or implicitly on the horizon. Our material confirms a continuing desire for marriage, which legitimized sexual experiences for interview partners with various backgrounds, educational levels, places of residence and religious devotion. In one narrative, typical of this framing, the interview partner explained that she and her boyfriend started having sex once a date had been set for their civil wedding. Born in Łódź in 1953, vocationally trained as a waitress but subsequently employed in commerce and cleaning/caregiving services, she had known her partner for many years before they became

sexually intimate.⁶⁹ Their civil marriage in 1972 was the critical juncture, not the religious wedding they underwent a year later.

Practicality was an additional factor: young people did not start having regular sex until not only symbolic but also physical space enabled them to do so. Most of Trawińska's under eighteen-year-old study subjects said their sex life was at best irregular, if not sporadic.⁷⁰ Born in 1951 and married when she became pregnant in 1978, an accountant who worked in a cooperative in Łódź and later completed a university degree while working, emphasized the lack of places to be intimate and evade social control:

You didn't have your own flat, your friends didn't have flats either. You came back home for the night [to your parents' house], there was discipline. And these kind of things [sex] rarely happen during daytime. But if you go to the party, it's evening, a bit of alcohol, you're not at home, so this would happen. I think the majority of couples tried to wait until the wedding, or if not, they just had [sex] sporadically.⁷¹

Spatial limitations also affected religious interview partners. A female high school teacher born in 1954 in Warsaw defined herself as a practicing Catholic, but only postponed a regular sex life until after marriage because of lack of space:

We started a bit earlier, before marriage, but more in terms of caressing, being close, but no regular (sex) life, because there were not conditions, opportunities. No, regular sex was after the wedding.⁷²

In this narrative, the lack of an appropriate space for sex was the main reason for abstinence, rather than the Church's mandates on premarital sexuality. In her aforementioned

study, Trawińska found that young Catholics were unaware premarital sex contravened Church doctrine.⁷³ Our interview partners from the postwar generation were, however, well aware of these mandates and engaged with them in various ways. A female kindergarten teacher born in Warsaw in 1959 married her deeply religious boyfriend after becoming pregnant. When they attended a Catholic marriage preparation course she realized many other participants were in the same situation:

We didn't wait until marriage. Was it a dilemma for me? Rather not. I had a bit of remorse, Catholic remorse. But the desires of youth are strong (*krew nie woda*).⁷⁴

Other practicing Catholic interview partners who had sex before marriage rationalized their transgression in various ways. A male agricultural engineer with a PhD, born in Warsaw in 1961 and married c.1980, considered premarital sex sinful but prioritized “biological instincts” over Catholic instruction, which he deemed detached from real life.⁷⁵ A female dentist born in 1965 in Kielce was pregnant with her first child when she and her partner underwent a civil marriage in 1990. They had a Church wedding later. Following encouragement from her deeply Catholic mother, this interview partner had waited until she found “the one” and linked sex to love, not marriage. Reflecting the diminishing importance attached to female virginity and the value at times placed on female sexual experience, her less religious husband joked she was “sexually retarded.”⁷⁶

If an interviewee's religious engagement intensified, cohabiting when marriage was in the near future could be acceptable at the time but re-interpreted as problematic later in life. There are no specific statistics for premarital cohabitation in Poland, but according to a population census, there were 180,000 unmarried couples cohabiting in 1970, slightly more than half the number of annual marriages.⁷⁷ A female dentist from a small town near Cracow, born in 1969

and married in 1994, lived with her husband a few months before their wedding, something she attributed to a “lighter attitude towards religion” and justified as the cheaper option.⁷⁸

Managing fertility in premarital sex was not straightforward. An academic teacher, born in Łódź in 1953 and married in 1978, used the contraceptive pill with her future husband. While less than 7 percent of married women using contraception employed this method in the mid-1970s, there is no comprehensive data on pill usage by unmarried women.⁷⁹ We can speculate, however, that poor or no fertility management was probably more common in premarital than marital sex, often leading to unexpected and unwanted pregnancies. Unexpected pregnancies often hastened marriages, planned or unplanned.⁸⁰ Unwanted ones could end with abortion, legal and accessible between the late 1950s and the early 1990s, as in the narrative of a female interview partner from Łódź, now an entrepreneur. Born in 1959, she had a relatively regular sex life with her high school boyfriend and, in the absence of a “pregnancy prevention project,” underwent an abortion in her teens. She and her boyfriend later married, had two children and another abortion in between births.⁸¹

Many couples practiced premarital birth control through methods condemned by the Church. A businessman with a high school technical education born in 1963 described himself as an “active Catholic,” yet this resident of a small town in North-East Poland started having intercourse with his future wife long before they had planned their 1986 marriage. They combined cycle observation, which he believed to be part of the female domain, and withdrawal, for which he took responsibility. The strategy was successful, with the couple having their first child two years into marriage.⁸²

Narratives by students destabilize the concept of a marriage-focused approach to sexuality. Several female interview partners who moved from a small town or rural area to study in a big city perceived sexual freedom—experienced or observed—as a fundamental and wonderful part of their newly acquired unsupervised life, one which, through dorms, also provided space

for sex. According to research conducted among university students in the early 1980s, female students were liberal in their approach to sexuality, in some respects even more so than their male colleagues, and substantially more than young female blue-collar workers.⁸³ A rapid expansion in women's education in postwar Poland, together with migrations for study and work, contributed to emancipating young women, despite continuing attempts at institutional and parental control.⁸⁴ The combined impact of acquiring higher education and more independence, especially when temporarily or permanently living outside the parental home, opened new symbolic and physical spaces for experimentation. A female academic lecturer based in Warsaw, born in 1947 and married to a fellow student in 1970, discovered that field trips were a great occasion for sexual experimentation, but not the only opportunities: "Sex life blossomed in dorms. Boys made arrangement to book the rooms."⁸⁵ Born in 1954 and married in 1976, another interview partner was transformed by the sexual freedom she observed during her relationship with a fellow student at the Technical University in Łódź:

It was a process, but a short one, so short I was surprised myself. Perhaps because I hung out with students. Everybody was away from home, living in residences. This world was free. I was shocked at first, but later, to be honest, I started to like it, and realized this was what I wanted. I was very curious. And this new, unknown world came within my reach when I met my husband.⁸⁶

The appeal of sexual liberation was interpreted here as stemming from within a relationship, enabling this young girl from a small town near Łódź to feel included in what she perceived as "a free world." A narrative by another female interview partner was exceptional in its depiction of sexual experimentation at an even earlier stage. Born in 1956 in Łódź, she attended a well-regarded high school in the early 1970s where sexual relations were so

normalized that virginity was practically perceived as deadwood, to be jettisoned as soon as possible. In her narrative, all the girls in her class had penetrative sex before their second year and the boys were reluctant to use condoms.⁸⁷ These accounts showcase the increase in sexual experimentation among young elites.

Motivations for postponing sex until marriage in the generation born in the 1950s and 1960s could be religious or personal. A male conservation officer, born in 1963 and residing in Warsaw, started having sex around the age of twenty, but the woman he married in the late 1980s had refrained from penetration until marriage for religious reasons.⁸⁸ Similarly, a female high school teacher, born in 1966 and residing in Giżycko, prided herself on postponing sex until marriage, a decision which, while in line with her and her partner's religious beliefs, nevertheless required a "strong character."⁸⁹ In contrast, a female teacher from the small town of Radom born in 1948, perceived sex as "out of place" in her student relationships, in which physical manifestations of affection and interest were limited to hugging; she explained this rejection of premarital sex through her general lack of interest in sex.⁹⁰ Postponing sex until marriage, however, did not always produce positive results as it could raise expectations that were hard to meet. A female teacher, born in a small town in North-East Poland in 1969, agreed with her also deeply religious boyfriend to postpone sex, a decision she later regretted:

I had a huge problem to address, during a whole year we could not have complete intercourse... It's a nice sphere, but from what others said, in my mind it was elevated to a level of extreme sensations. It's pleasant, but perhaps not that important... And I regretted not having started before marriage.⁹¹

This narrative showcases the value placed on sexual experimentation and sexual pleasure in general. During the final years of state socialism, the expectation that sex would be a

pleasurable, bond-enhancing activity appears to have been widespread among Polish men and women, religious or not.

Conclusions

Our analysis of personal narratives from two generations of Polish men and women, backed with sociological surveys and in dialogue with contemporary expertise on young sexuality, reveals that an important shift in the conceptualization of premarital sexual activity occurred during state socialism in Poland: an example of the quiet yet dramatic changes at grassroots level that Dagmar Herzog has placed at the core of the “sexual evolution” in East Central Europe.

The Polish “sexual evolution” normalized premarital sex, loosened the bond with Catholic morality, and diminished the—highly gendered—importance of virginity. Overall, however, premarital sex gained acceptance within a stable relationship based on love and leading to marriage. This evolution was not triggered by the predominant public discourses on sexuality, Catholic and secular, which generally discouraged premarital sex and presented uncontrolled young sexuality as dangerous, the latter particularly up to the late 1970s. Narratives by Generation 1 reflect some of these fears, as well as tensions relating to Catholic identities and the persistence of gender difference in the framing of sexuality, while narratives by Generation 2 reveal a greater freedom. Nevertheless, our two-fold analysis of discourses and experiences reveals common connections and an intersecting of secular and Catholic realms. The line of division between Catholic-based and secular approaches to premarital sexuality in both discourses and experiences is somewhat indistinct. While secular experts were unlikely to

conceptualize premarital sex as a sin and recommend its unconditional rejection, they often aligned with their Catholic counterparts in framing discourses in love, sex, responsibility, and, especially in the earlier decades of state socialism, the likelihood of negative individual and social consequences, such as sexual trauma or unplanned pregnancy. Young people negotiated with various elements of these teachings. The behavior and attitudes of Generation 2 may have been shaped by some ideas developed in mainstream sexual advice in the post-1956 period, such as linking sex with love and a stable relationship, and rejecting premarital virginity as an outdated concept, but did not share earlier anxieties relating to the alleged negative consequences of premarital sex. The overcoming of these anxieties took place without the presence of sexual liberation discourse, an essential element of the contemporary “sexual revolution” in the United States and Western Europe.

While Catholicism remained the dominant religious affiliation and identity for many Polish people, these narratives show how people negotiated Catholic sexual ethics into their particular subjectivities and relationships. In Generation 1 these negotiations were timid and embedded in moral conflict. Although a detachment of intimacy issues from religious mandates is evident in Generation 2, a diminished group of Catholics continued to follow these directives.

Despite the impact of other factors on attitudes to premarital sex in postwar Poland, we have argued that gender and generation were paramount. As gender historians of state-socialist Poland have shown, postwar urbanization, education, new patterns of consumption and leisure, popular culture, women’s employment, and an “emotional revolution” in love and marriage, have all contributed to the reshaping of sexual norms.⁹² Our research shows that the generation born after the war shaped and experienced a significant emancipation for women and sexuality.

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42. Ibid., 61–62.
43. There may also be a discrepancy between declarations and real experiences due to the strong stigmatization of female premarital sexual activity.
44. *Nas dwoje*, 35–38.
45. Malewska, *Kulturowe i psychospołeczne determinanty życia seksualnego*.
46. *Nas dwoje*, 80–81.
47. *Nas dwoje*, 186.
48. Young Marriage, 10607, Towarzystwo Pamiętnikarstwa Polskiego (TPP), AAN.
49. DPA1K, interview by author 2 in Łódź, 8 May 2014.
50. *Nas dwoje*, 210–211.
51. *Nas dwoje*, 59.

52. The youngest memoir author to refer to husbandly respect in relation to virginity was a blue-collar worker from Łódź, born in 1952 and married in 1974. *My Marriage* 9939, TPP, AAN.

53. *Young Marriage*, 10607, TPP, AAN.

54. Another example is a memoir by a man born in 1934: “We married, because she was pretty and was not yet touched (*ruszona*), so just like I wanted”. *Young Marriage* 10613, TPP, AAN.

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67. Krzysztof Czekał, *Młodzież studencka i robotnicza a modele życia seksualnego. Uwarunkowania społeczno-kulturowe* (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 1988), 180–185.

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