

Comparing social attitudes

Then and now

Explore some longitudinal survey work comparing everyday attitudes in the 1940s and 2020s

The research

Many sociologists like to compare behaviour and attitudes over time to try to gain an insight into how our habits and views have changed. This sort of *longitudinal* survey work is not always easy to do, because sampling will often differ, and people's approach to completing surveys may change. Think now about some of the problems of producing reliable and comparable survey data, if they are drawn from periods that are decades apart.

Researchers in the Policy Institute at King's College London recently took on the task, using data from Gallup surveys included in *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls, Great Britain, 1937–1975* with a sample size of c.1,000 British adults. They compared these data on matters of education, work and the sexes with similar surveys conducted today on attitudes and behaviour on a range of subjects. The more recent data collection took place between 11 and 12 December 2024, with a total of 1,033 respondents drawn from a nationally representative group of those aged 18+. Data were weighted by age, gender, region, ethnicity and education status. So, what did they find out?

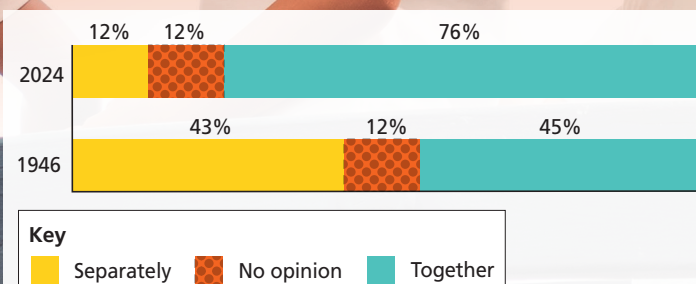


Figure 1 Should boys and girls over 11 years of age be taught separately or should they be taught together? (1946 and 2024)

Attitudes to mixed gender schools

Well, views seem to have changed quite a lot, at least in terms of matters of sex and education. In 1946, people in the UK were quite evenly split about whether boys and girls should be educated together or separately. By 2024, a large majority think that educating the sexes together is the best way forward (see Figure 1). Why do you think this public view about education and the sexes has changed so much over time?

REFERENCES

Policy Studies Institute (2025) 'Everyday life, education and work in the UK'. Available at: www.tinyurl.com/5c477883

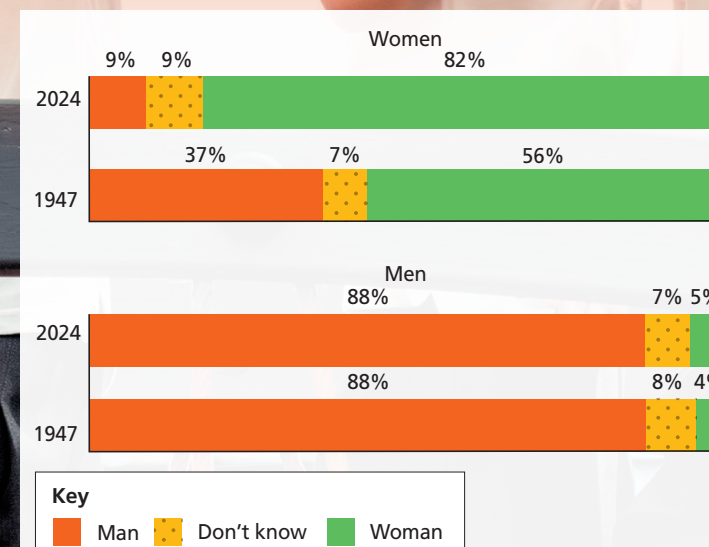


Figure 2 If you had a choice, which would you rather be, a man or a woman? (1947 and 2024)

Attitudes to being a woman

More general views in the immediate post-war period and today about the sexes are also very significant. In surveys conducted in 1947, nearly four in 10 women said that they would rather be a man – but today only just one in 11 feel this way. Men's preference remains largely unchanged over time, with only around one in 20 today and back in the 1940s saying that they would rather be a woman (see Figure 2). Remember, the survey in the 1940s was conducted just after the war. What other things do you think may have changed to produce these continuities and differences, especially perhaps in how women see the sexes and the world in the past and today?

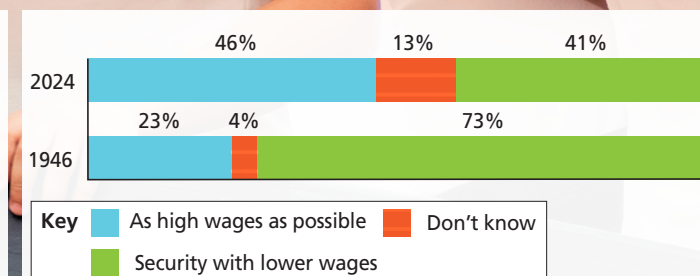


Figure 3 Which do you think is more important in a job? (1946 and 2024)

Attitudes to ambition for work

Finally, another area that allowed for general survey comparisons between the 1940s and the 2020s is in relation to what happened in life *after* education was over. What were the major differences, for example in terms of ambitions for working lives in the two periods under study? Interestingly, in the 2020s there is a much stronger focus on employment that provides high wages. Back in the 1940s, wages were much less of a focal concern, at least compared to job security (see Figure 3). Again, why do you think views differ so strongly about work in these two periods? How have our lives changed today?

Making survey data comparisons between two periods that are almost eight decades apart is fraught with methodological problems for sociologists, but such comparisons can also help us reflect on how the social world has changed. Doing longitudinal studies using data such as these are vital for deeper sociological analysis and for reflections on attitudes and social life, both in the past and the present.

John Williams is a managing editor of *Sociology Review*.

SociologyReviewExtras

Go online for a printable pdf of this centrespread
www.hachettelearning.com/sociologyreviewextras