

# **Attitudes of exchange students towards premarital sexual relationships**

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by

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## **Abstract**

Among other things, exchange students often experience different perceptions of sexual relationships before marriage in different countries. The aim of the study was to identify can the attitude of exchange students change towards premarital sexual relationships under the influence of new life style, people and environment during approximately one year abroad and also how did it change. My hypothesis was that attitude towards premarital sexual relationships can change after experiencing a life in a new society. To find it out I used qualitative research method. By snowball sampling I took in-depth interviews from exchange students. Results showed that the attitude changed from negative to positively perceive premarital sexual relationships, but respondents are still not practicing sexual relationships before marriage back in their home country Kyrgyzstan because of such reasons as a social structure, family, up-bringing, and religion. According to respondents the big influence to change the attitude was from the social perception of premarital sexual relationships abroad, from observing American friends and classmates, from free conversations with host families about sexual topics. Raewyn Connell in “The Major Structure: Labor, Power, and Cathexis” from his work “Gender and Power. Society, the Person and Sexual Politics” described that social structure can influence on forming the certain boundaries of freedom. It gives limitations to the human by social institutions, where it becomes difficult to follow own desires and feelings. According to such structures people choose whom to love, how to love and how to behave towards their lovers so the society will accept his or her choice.

## Introduction

In 2007 I was lucky to become an exchange student of FLEX. In Kyrgyzstan there are different exchange programs that give an opportunity to high school students to go abroad and to study there for one academic year. The famous programs are Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX)<sup>1</sup> and Rotary Club (Rotary, 2013)<sup>2</sup>. Starting from the first day of my exchange year I recognized so many differences between my home country and the USA. I met people from different cultural subgroups who were sharing common interests, outfits, goals, and lifestyles. It was a multiplicity, which I could never meet in my home country Kyrgyzstan. For the first time in my life I met people with different sexual orientations and I was feeling uncomfortable because I did not know how to react and behave in their company. In the American high school I had classmates who were practicing sexual relationships before marriage and had children, while in Kyrgyzstan premarital sexual relationships more preferred as a shame and taboo. By living in Kyrgyzstan and before my exchange year I was strictly following family traditions, Islamic laws and did not discuss sexual topics with family and even friends. Premarital sexual relationships in Kyrgyzstan is not restricted, people are practicing it but hiding it, because of Kyrgyz traditional taboos and Islamic inspired concerns to keep the public debate free from such topics. While after an exchange year I started considering sexual relationships before marriage as a part of human development and there is nothing bad about it. This pushed me to find out what experiences had other exchange students, did they change their attitudes towards premarital sexual relationships as I did, and what influenced to change their attitudes. To find out the answers I have four research questions:

- 1) Did the student change his/her attitude towards sexual relationships before marriage after an exchange year?
- 2) If yes, how did it change (from positive to negative or from negative to positive)?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://flex.americancouncils.org/?q=content/o-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BCe>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rotary.org/en/history>

- 3) What cause the change in their attitude towards sexual relationships before marriage?
- 4) How was the process of change?

This research will show that the attitude can change during the exchange year towards sexual relationships before marriage and under different influences as host families, classmates, friends, new lifestyle and society. Unfortunately in Kyrgyzstan there is not much sociological researches have been conducted about such changes. This research will help better to understand the society in Kyrgyzstan and learn more about the formations of attitudes. For this research I used qualitative research method and by snowball sampling I interviewing students who got participation in two programs of FLEX and Rotary. The structure of my work is as follow: in the literature review I will focus on how different cultures, religions, societies perceive sexual relationships before marriage and introduce the theory related to it, which would be Connell's theory of social structure; further I will focus on the methodology; then next part will be about the findings which I will analyze through the theoretical framework, and the last part of the paper will be conclusion of the whole research.

### **Literature review**

The structure of the literature review consists of several sections. The first section will include different data and statistics on sexual habits in Kyrgyzstan, and the United States of America. The second section will describe how society shapes sexual habits and influences on sexual relationships before marriage in different cultures, with different socio-economic status, religion, and family. The third part of the literature review will describe from the psychological point of view how attitude and behavior towards the sexual relationships before marriage can be shaped. The next section will be about theoretical framework of the research. And the last part will be looking at methodology and previous researches that were made about the same topic of this research to learn about appropriate, tested or untested methods to study my object of interest.

In 1994, there was a research in United States of America among 3,432 American women and men between ages of 18 and 59. The goal of the research was to find out how age, gender and marital status can influence to the sexual behavior; how sexual lives of men and women are similar and different one from another; and how social factors as an education, ethnicity and religion can influence on sexual behavior (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, Michaels & Kolata, 1995). According to the findings, about 17% of American men and 3% of American women had sex from age of 15 with more than 21 partners. In 1990 the government of the United States of America conducted the research by Centers for Disease Control (CDC) among high school students and their sexual relationships. Students in grades 9 through 12 had had sex and it was about 54% of the nation's high school students (Kolbe, 1992). This survey was conducted among 11,631 students, where in 9<sup>th</sup> grade 40% of students had had sex, in 10<sup>th</sup> grade 48%, in 11<sup>th</sup> grade 57%, and in 12<sup>th</sup> grade the number of students who had had sex was about 72%. 45% of respondents used condoms, 33% used another method of contraception as birth control pills, withdrawal, and 22% respondent did not use any protection (Kolbe, 1992).

In Kyrgyzstan during the last decade there were a lot of surveys among young people to find out their sexual activity. In 2001 55% among 3,520 of young people whose ages were between 15 and 24 were sexually active (IPPF, 2001). In august of 2002 Babett Pfandr by UNISEF made a research in Kyrgyzstan on sexual relationships before marriage. 2411 young people whose ages were between 14 and 17 were involved in the survey. According to the findings 19% of the young people had a sexual relationship (UNISEF, 2002). In 2008 22% of 3,500 young people were not against of premarital sexual relationships (UNISEF, 2008). Some regional medical experts stated that boys are more likely to exaggerate about their intimate experiences, while girls are more likely to hide such information about them, in order not to be judged by society (Ismanov, 2004). For my study of students' attitudes towards premarital sexual relationships these figures provide information on that in Kyrgyzstan youth people also practice

premarital sexual relationships. But such kind of relationships and information about them are more hidden in the Kyrgyz society.

According to the answers of respondents that I interviewed for the research they identified having sexual relationship as normalized in United States of America, while in Kyrgyzstan it was abnormal. By abnormality respondents were referring to the fact that taboos over sexuality were preventing social exchange on relevant questions. While the exchange year and experience in the new country within a new society with a new lifestyle made exchange students to observe premarital sexual relationship as a normal part of a life style. In United States of America people are feeling themselves more comfortable to talk about sexuality and practice premarital sexual relationships. It became a habit for exchange students. Habit is a particular practice and an acquired behavior pattern that followed until it become involuntary.<sup>3</sup> Studies showed that people have automated behaviors every time, because they do life in the same environment and if they will change the environment it is likely to influence to change the behavior (Duhigg, 2012). Habit starts from psychological pattern “habit loop” which has two types of processes: cue or trigger, that makes a brain to go into automatic mode and let a behavior unfold (Duhigg, 2012). Also it can be explained according to Pierre Bourdieu as a habitus in the society. Habitus is a socialized norm that guides our thinking and behavior.<sup>4</sup> Exchange students got used to meet with people who had sexual relationship before marriage and to talk about sexual topics openly without feeling themselves uncomfortable or shy, while before their exchange year it was a topic of shame and abnormal to have premarital sexual relationships. Through the habitus some practices, values, lifestyle, the dispositions and expectation of certain social groups that are obtained through the experiences from our everyday life can be explained (Scott, John & Marshall, Gordon, 1998). According to Navarro, habitus is not fixed or permanent; it can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical

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<sup>3</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/habit>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/bourdieu-and-habitus/>



period (Navarro, 2006). So it is flexible and easy to change through practices. Ira Reiss wrote in his article “A sociological journey into sexuality”, that sexuality is not “natural”, it is learned (Reiss, 1986). Sexuality can be learned and changed under certain conditions, throughout the time. It is influenced by the family, friends, culture, and religion to learn and change the attitude toward sexuality, because exact these factors are influential in shaping peoples’ world perception. Teenagers in America and Kyrgyzstan are different in their behavior and worldview. And one of the reasons is the difference in cultural background. Sexual behavior and beliefs are different because every society has its own cultural differentiation (Richters, 1998). Cross-cultural researches stated that every society is trying to regulate sexual behavior and those regulations are vary in every culture (Hyde & DeLamater, 1997). Richters also claims that the topic of sexuality is socially constructed through social interactions (Richters, 1998). In 1977 Albert Bandura proposed the social learning theory: “Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are preformed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (Bandura, 1977). According to Bandura people can learn new behavior and new information by observing other people. People who are observed are called models (Bandura, 1977). And during that year, spending in a new society and new environment, sexuality of such student can be changed and shaped through observation of other’s behavior toward sexuality. Of course the impact of society to learn different things, even sexuality, is very influential. Sexuality can be influenced by interaction of different factors: biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual (Ilkharacan, 2007). In my research I will pay attention more on religion, up-bringing process of respondents, family and friends influence, society structure.

Sexuality is a term that implies the set of beliefs, values, and behaviors that defines each of us as a sexual being (Olson & DeFrain, 2000). Back from history people’s sexual behavior and attitude toward it was shaped by religion and culture (Olson & DeFrain, 2000). The majority people in the United States of America are Christians and in Kyrgyzstan majority of population

are Muslims. For example in Islam and Christianity according to holy books the sexual relationships outside of the marriage is considered as a sin and prohibited action. A lot of researches were made to understand how religions influence on sexual behavior (Meier, 2003). According to the finding researchers concluded that those people who are religiously active and in whose life a religion plays an important role are more likely to be against of premarital sexual relationships (Gilbert, 2008). In Muslim societies people are strict about informal interaction between different sexes (Muslim Women's League, 1999). The reason is that boy and girl will have informal interaction they are more likely to experience sexual attractiveness, while Muslims value importance of virginity until marriage, that's why society try to discourage such interactions (Finke & Adamczyk, 2008). According to Kelman, citizens of the country where majority of population are Muslims, they are also attempt to follow restrictions and requirements to fit and to live in that country (Kelman, 2006). If to compare Christianity and Islam, Christians are more liberal about sexual relationships before marriage in comparison with Muslims, but of course there are exceptions in every cases, for example if you will go to the southern states of the US there are some strict conservative Christian groups that are also strict towards premarital sexual relationships (Addai, 2000 & Agha, 2009). People can openly talk today about sex, while religion is still trying to control behaviors and attitudes toward sex on moral grounds, that's why there are limitations on sexual discussions not to increase the desire towards sexual practice (Olson & DeFrain, 2000). In 1989 the Gallup organization was commissioned by the Christian Broadcasting Network to make a survey among college students to find out their attitude and behavior toward sexual relationships. 539 interviews were conducted at 100 two-year and four-year campuses. 80% of the students answered that religion holds an important part in their lives, while in their sexual behavior and attitude it had the little impact. About 69% of the students said that they did not believe sexual relationships before marriage was something wrong (Gallup, Inc., 1989). There is a connection with the hypothesis of research that attitude of exchange student

towards sexual relationships can change after an exchange year because of cultural exchange, new lifestyle and society.

Modern Kyrgyzstan is also dealing with sexuality topics. During the last decade the society in Kyrgyzstan is having a lot of reforms and changes, whereby one of such reforms is concerning the sexual freedom of citizens. The number of people who have premarital sexual relationships is increasing everywhere in the country, in urban areas and rural areas (Ismanov, 2004). Young people allow sexual relationship before marriage by accepting it as a natural development of every person, while the older generation is against of it because they are more conservative and follow traditions by being against of intimacy before marriage. This can be explained by how certain traditions were valued in back times, while now the new young generation is stick to a different set of values, which can be influenced by globalization (Ismanov, 2004). According to Aibek Karamykov, who is the head of regional public organization by involving youth people into sexual relationships they are forgetting about their historical background and they are having a bad impact into society and its health (Karamykov, 2004). But having sexual relationships before marriage cannot influence on historical background and there is nothing bad about it and its impact into society. The only thing which can influence on health of the society can be the lack of knowledge about sexual relationships that can cause different diseases and consequences as unexpected pregnancies.

Nowadays sources of getting new knowledge and new information are so broad. According to Altman, globalization has an influence on different aspects of human life (Altman, 2004). And it provides an access to people to learn sexuality through the new media, cinema, television, Internet, magazines. These sources are teaching young people to recognize sexual identities, gender arrangements and also shaping the attitude and behavior toward sexuality (Altman, 2004). It teaches not only to have sexual relationship, but also it teaches people that the premarital sexual relationships can have different results, for example pregnancy. Reiss wrote that sexuality

is important because of its social bonding power, which encourages by societies in relationships such as marriage that societies wish to support (Reiss, 1986). Dennis Dailey designed a model of the circles of sexuality. It represents five interconnected broad areas of sexuality – sensuality, intimacy, sexual identity, sexual health and reproduction, and sexualization. This model is used by Advocates of Youth, a national organization that helps young people to be informed and to be responsible about their sexual life. Sensuality is about being aware, accept and enjoy with own and other's bodies. Intimacy is about the need for closeness with another person and expression of degree. Sexual identity is about how people perceive themselves as a sexual being. It consists of biological gender, gender identity, gender role and sexual orientation. Sexual health and reproduction is about people's own attitude and behavior toward health and consequences of sexual activity. The last component of the model is sexualization. It is about how people use their sexuality and may involve manipulation and control of others, through media images and messages, flirting, sexual harassment and rape (Dailey, adopted by Advocates for Youth, 2007). This model can be used as theoretical as practical source of the sexual life for people who are practicing sexual relationships.

Of course all these factors that were listed can influence on attitude and behavior towards sexual relationship before marriage, but another main point that has to mention is the age. As so time is flying and all young people are becoming adults, they are growing up. As we know by ages people can become more experienced more open and critical, but not always. They do think about different things differently. Throughout time by ages also the behavior and attitude are changing under different lifestyle, friends and family, and even environment.

The word attitude in psychology has three components of explanation: affective, behavioral and cognitive (Breckler, 1984). The affective component of attitudes consists of feelings that a particular topic arouses, while the behavioral component of attitudes consists of the action in a particular way with a respect to a particular topic, and the last cognitive

component consists of a set of beliefs that can be expressed in words about a topic. Attitude is easy to form and then to change it under certain conditions by influence of people and environment. Attitude can be one while the behavior can be totally different. Actually society is playing a huge role in how the behavior of the person should be in a certain situation. The most powerful influence in our behavior and attitudes is how other people are behaving. Sometimes, it is easy to observe during how a person acts in a certain way because other people are acting the same. Or people are not performing in a particular behavior so then a person will not perform that behavior (Carlson, 1990). The meaning of attitude can be defined through two schools: the tricomponent approach and the single component approach. The tricomponent approach defines an attitude that is made up from our beliefs about an object, our feelings about the object, and our behavior towards the object. The single component approach defines attitude as a positive or negative evaluation of people, things, events and issues (Carlson, 1990). Actually people's beliefs shape his or her attitudes (Carlson, 1990). Attitude can be learned through the instrumental conditioning, observational learning, and through the effect of television and textbooks. The tricomponent approach definition reflects what is studying in my research and where the attitude is learned by the observation of others.

Connell's "The Major Structure: Labor, Power, and Cathexis" from his work "Gender and Power. Society, the Person and Sexual Politics" is used in this research to describe the social structure. According to Connell social structures are representing a sophisticated device of social world (Connell, 1987). It represents the boundaries of freedom, which you can reach only collectively in the society but not individually, because if a person wants to live and fit in a certain society he has to follow collective decisions and practice collective lifestyle. Social structures appeared from common shared frameworks, because people were practicing and following such framework from generation to generation continuously, after which it was bind to the society. Social structures are reproduced in the present on present conditions. It gives limitations to the human by social institutions, where it becomes difficult to follow own desires

and feelings. Limitations of social practice are given through the mix of different powers and social institutions. Family is teaching to follow social norms and structures. Structure identifies and limits a practice. According to such structures people choose whom to love, how to love and how to behave towards their lovers so the society will accept his or her choice. Respondents are willing to have sexual relationships before they will get marry, but from their childhood a family was raising them in a certain boundaries by teaching what is accepted and what is prohibited, where premarital sexual relationship is prohibition. People cannot choose freedom to practice a sexual life and only one decision that can satisfy a society is to not have a sexual practice at all in order to live in a peace in that chosen society. The power of society is influencing on all aspects of human's life in sexuality starting from marriage and ending up with raising children. The author identifies three social structures of labor, power and cathexis. Through the structure of cathexis he wants to show the sexual and social relationship of people in the society. Cathexis is referring to the premarital intimate relationships in this research. Through the cathexis author describes the psychoanalytical term meaning psychobiological energy associated with the implementation of ideas, feelings and desires (Connell, 1987). In our cultures there are two organizational principles. The object of desire is identifying through the dichotomy and oppositions of femininity and masculinity, and sexual practice is organized usually in boundaries of couple's relationship (Connell, 1987). The topic of sexuality is a social phenomenon (Connell, 1987). It is accepted in the society if a boy is not virgin and if he practices the sexual relationship, while a girl should be a virgin and follow the strict boundaries of not having premarital sexual relationship. Robert Connell introduces the concept of "gender composition", which the set of everyday practices and structural conditions, organizing difference between sexes and the relationship between them. R. Connell considers such social institutions as school, family, teenage society, and localized interaction in the framework of the urban space. Connell also distinguishes public and private spheres. The public sphere includes economy, politics, ideology, and culture to analyze, while the private sphere is about family and marriage relationships,

friendship and sexual relationships. So the private sphere is shaping the attitude of people towards sexual relationships before marriage.

The significance of research is first of all it will be useful for exchange students and their parents in the future. It will help them to be prepared for new changes and for new expectations after the spending a year separately one from another. And of course I want this research to be valued for other studies and future researches in topic of sexuality in the field of sociology and to increase the understanding of the issue at hand. As I mentioned before there were a lot of researches made to find out do young people practice premarital sexual relationship that are made based on quantitative research method. That researches pay attention on how religion can influence on behavior towards sexual relationship, but they did not pay attention on cultural factors and influence of society and family. For example Amy Adamczyk and Brittany E. Hayes in an American Sociological Review reported that sexual behavior is shaped by the religious institutions and they do not regret that there are can be a lot of factors and reasons to influence on person's behavior and attitude towards premarital sexual relationships. Amy and Hayes looked into the major world regions of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism to find the differences and similarities on how different religions do accept or regret sexual relationships before marriage. In my research I will observe how the change of cultures, religion, and society can influence on attitude of students towards premarital sexual relationships.

There are numerous researches made about peoples' sexual relationship before marriage, but they are were made among youth at all but I am paying attention exactly on attitude of exchange students towards sexual relationships before marriage, using qualitative research method. This research is not global and big, but hopefully it will have at least small impact into sociology.

## **Methodology**

The research is based on the qualitative research method that involves in-depth interviews with open ended questions. In-depth interviews give an opportunity to do it and to observe the

behavior of the respondent, because not everyone feels himself or herself comfortable when it concerns the topic of sexuality. Respondents are students who had the experience of living abroad for approximately one year. They had lived in host families and studied in high schools of host countries. They are students of different ages, with different experiences and life stories. Personal meetings with them and taking interviews by observing respondents promises reliability of information they give. It is chosen because of big amount of information that can be found through the conversations based on personal experiences with respondents. For example respondents told that if such kind of interview would be conducted before their exchange year, they would probably be shy and maybe even would not give this kind of interview, because they considered topic of sexuality something hidden. Before the exchange year they could only joke about it and go away from conversations about sexual topics. This research method was flexible to me in asking questions, for example it let me to turn to the right direction a respondent's answer, so I could take more needed information with help of sub questions. It gives an opportunity to take information from respondents based not only on "yes" or "no" answers, but fully and deeply understand and explain certain given information for analyses. For example when respondents told that in America there are a lot of pregnant teenagers at school, which is normal in their society while in Kyrgyzstan it is shamed to be pregnant at school and it is consider as abnormal in Kyrgyz society. That's why I had to ask sub question, as "What do you mean by being normal or abnormal in society?" Their answer will influence to make final analysis, because being "normal" or "abnormal" can have different meanings for different people. Everyone defines normality and abnormality personally. It also allows taking filed notes during the interview, which are very important for the final analyses. This research method involves collecting information about personal experience, observations, and some significant and meaningful moments of peoples' lives. In this particular study it is about student's life experience that may change him and his character and attitude. Another main point is that I want to find out the reason in changing attitude towards sexual relationships before marriage after



spending a year abroad and that reason cannot be described and analyzed with only one word or sentence. It was a process which has to be discussed without any limitations. Through the in-depth interview the respondent can freely express not only his or her opinion and thoughts but also some emotions and feelings, which are noted in the field notes and recorded through the voice in voice recorder.

In this research there are 3 steps in analysis procedure: transcribing of data, coding of data and analyzing findings according to theoretical framework given by Connel R.W. "Basic structures: Labor, Power, Cathexis". First step which is transcribing of data during which I had a problem with one of the interviews, because respondent's speech was very fast that's why I had to replay a record several times to transcribe it right. Interviews were conducted in Russian language because respondents are not native speakers of English, that's why to be more open and to gain more information without any limitations or boundaries I translated the origin questionnaires from English language into Russian. Therefore after transcribing the origin interviews in Russian language I had to translate them into English language. In the second step which is coding the data is about to read attentively and to divide that information into different needed spheres. As so interviews were starting with general information as introduction of him/her, introduction of their families, and only few questions later I was asking about the main information concerning the sexual relationship before marriage for coding a data. So there are three parts in coding a data: general information, where warm-up questions were asked, and main information concerning exactly the sexual relationship before marriage and concluding part of the interviews. Interview questions were constructed and information was codified independently from the theoretical framework as so it is independent object, which should not be codified in advantage for the theory. If the information will be codified for the advantage to the theoretical framework it will not bring any results and analyses will not be reliable and useful. The last step of analyzing procedure is to analyze the data through the theoretical framework. So far the theoretical framework of Connel's theory of labor, power and cathexis is connected to the

data of research. Cathexis is referring to the premarital intimate relationships in this case. Through the cathexis author describes the psychoanalytical term meaning psycho-biological energy associated with the implementation of ideas, feelings and desires (Connel, 1987). As so social structures limit a human with certain boundaries through the social institutions it becomes difficult to follow own desires and feelings. The topic of sexuality is a social phenomenon and according to the Connel, society decides for a person whom to love, how to love, and how to behave towards lover (Connel, 1987). By analyzing the information given by respondents it is obvious that they would like to practice sexual relationships before marriage, but because of social structures they are not able to practice. It becomes as an alienation of the body, because through the not having the premarital intimate relationships respondents are representing the face of their families, which has to be clean and virgin. It is respondents' responsibility. Respondents are not owners of their bodies. They have to fit to the social common framework where to have sexual relationship is permitted only after the marriage. And if they will have intimate relationship before marriage it will be shame of the whole family. That's why respondents are more careful about having premarital sexual relationships in order to fit to the social structure.

Snowball sampling was chosen to find respondents for the research. It is a non-probability sampling technique where respondents are usually choosing from acquaintances, because of limited target of population. The first interview was conducted with a person whom I know, and after he gave me contacts of other his friends who had also experienced a life abroad as an exchange student. I chose students who had a chance to be a part of any exchange program and to live abroad for one year and experience different lifestyle. 5 respondents were alumni of Future Leaders Exchange program, and 1 respondent was an alumnus of Rotary Club. To make a better comparison and analyze the data I also interviewed one not exchange student. Total number of interviews is 7, where 2 interviews were conducted with boys and 5 interviews were conducted with girls. All respondents' ages were between 19 and 22 years. They are all students of American University of Central Asia. Respondents were representatives of different nations

and were practicing different religions, so it will let to analyze the data from different perspectives and points of view. The topic of sexuality can be discussed differently in every religion which can influence on peoples' attitude toward it, that's why it has to be taken on consideration. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. It was recorded to the voice recorder with the permission of the respondent. Locations for 4 interviews very quite places, with no disturb: empty class rooms in AUCA. It helped to concentrate only on conversation and to let respondent feel more confident and comfortable. 3 of other interviews were conducted through the skype, because it was difficult to manage the time. Even interviews were through the skype they were recorded to the voice recorder and I had a chance for observation and field notes.

Interviews were conducted to find answers for the research questions:

- 1) Did the student change his/her attitude towards sexual relationships before marriage after an exchange year?
- 2) If yes, how did it change (from positive to negative or from negative to positive)?
- 3) What cause the change in their attitude towards sexual relationships before marriage?
- 4) How was the process of change?

A hypothesis of the research is that exchange students change their attitude towards sexual relationship before marriage after an exchange year by living in a new society. Independent variable is exchange student and dependent variable is attitude towards sexual relationship before marriage. Before students went abroad the premarital sexual relationship was a taboo, while after exchange year they accept it as a natural thing in people's relationships.

### **Research findings and analyses**

The data of the research was divided into different parts to make analyses. Every aspect is expected to influence on the attitude towards sexual relationships before marriage, which are:

religion, family, friends, up-bringing process, social structure and also it is important to take into consideration the age of respondents.

### **Religion:**

Religion was created in order to have moral obligations in the society (Durkheim, 1897). In Kyrgyzstan there are different people with different beliefs of religion, but the majority of the population in Kyrgyzstan is Muslim. I wanted to find out about how non-Muslim students grew up in Muslim society and how it influenced on them. During the exchange year the religion did not play a role but it was influencing basically from the beginning. Religion shaped the attitudes of my respondents from the childhood. Two interviews were conducted with non-Muslim respondents and one of the respondents said:

“I am thankful that I grew up in this country, a Muslim country even though I am not a Muslim, but anyways it influenced me. So I don’t let myself to behave in inappropriate way and when I went to America I was shocked... when in the US one of my friends told me that on February 14<sup>th</sup> she presented to her boyfriend some candies and condom, how comes at the age of 14 to present to each other condoms... another situation when one of my classmates had a miscarriage... it was too much for me” (Respondent #1)

According to respondent #1 Muslim society always played an important part in her social life, life style and upbringing. By “to behave in inappropriate way” I consider not practicing sexual relationships before marriage, behaving dissolved because if she would do it she could probably feel that the society will judge her. And the respondent’s shock about presenting condoms and having a miscarriage in the United States of America can be explained that in home country Kyrgyzstan the society was uneasy with such issues among young unmarried people. Such kinds of behaviors of American classmates were influencing on formatting attitudes not immediately but gradually. Even though the respondent is non-Muslim, she is still living in a Muslim society, which that is shaping her attitude and behavior somehow. According to the reaction of the respondent to events in the US it can be considered as how society in Kyrgyzstan is not

discussing basic issues about sexual topics. But of course it is not always the same for all non-Muslim people, for example the answer of the second respondent was:

“I will start with that I grew up differently... more liberal, because I didn't have to recognize the sin, what is good and bad, while my friends, classmates... were living by Islamic laws... the religion had a huge influence on some of them, and they were taught that it is (premarital sexual relationship) a bad thing - it is a catastrophe” (Respondent #2)

According to respondent #2 he didn't feel any pressure by living in a Muslim society, he was keeping his liberty towards own religion and culture. He observed how other Muslim friends and classmates were following Islamic laws, and they did not make him to accept those laws but only to respect. As so he grew up by respecting his non-Muslim friends, it made him behave according to Islamic laws towards non-Muslim girl friends:

“For the Asian girl it is not right (to have sexual relationships), because it harms her... it is haram (sin)... My attitude is if she is Asian I will care about her... If she is Asian I am afraid to have with her such kind of (sexual) relationships... it is a huge responsibility... I know that she can be regretted from her family...” (Respondent #2)

I feel a small fear in the voice and in the answers of respondent #2 towards having sexual relationships with Asian Muslim girl. At the same time this fear is reflecting a care and respect, because he has a lot of Muslim friends and he is familiar about consequences of premarital sexual relationships. That kind of attitude, respect and fear is not only among non-Muslim respondents, but also among Muslim respondents:

“Religion is a weapon which is threatening people if they do something wrong, there is no sex before marriage, and during the marriage no cheating... religion was made to make people afraid”(Respondent #4)

Religion shapes a framework in which society has to live and even in case of not following such framework by having premarital sexual relationships then people can be punished not physically but morally in front of the religion. According to answers of respondents I can learn that religion can influence on their attitudes and behaviors by putting boundaries between premarital sexual

relationships, desire, fear and respect because there are always some priorities of religion in the human's life:

“Priorities of the religion” (Respondent #4)

Religion can shape the original attitude towards premarital sexual relationships. According to my respondents it is important to take into consideration priorities of Islamic religion of Kyrgyz society before observing attitudes towards sexual relationships before marriage. According to Gilbert those people who are religiously active and in whose life a religion plays an important role are more likely to be against of premarital sexual relationships (Gilbert, 2008). Also according to the answers of my respondents Kelman's statement was proved that citizens of the country where majority of population are Muslims, they are also attempt to follow restrictions and requirements to fit and to live in that country (Kelman, 2006).

### **Family:**

A family can be a fundamental institution where a person can get an idea about life, how he has to live, what he has to follow. It is also considered as a group of kin which is responsible for the upbringing of children by following traditions and customs (Giddens, 2006). In this section I want to find out how family influences and shapes the attitude of respondents towards sexual relationships before marriage. The major insight, I found in my respondents' answers was that his family is very strict about virginity and they do expect from their children to bring home a clean girl, in order not to bring shame to the family.

“We didn't have lecture hours in our family like you shouldn't do that, you shouldn't do this, everything was obvious in the example. They didn't tell me about how a girl should behave my mother was just showing it in her own example... because we do not talk about such topics at home. Even if we are watching a movie or a serial and there are some scenes we have to turn on to another channel. Yes it is a closed topic on which we do not talk” (Respondent #3)

“We are not a so traditional family... we do not follow certain traditions... There are always some requirements as that I have to marry earlier, to wear a scarf on my head, to read namaz (laughing)... My mother is always telling me that I have to get married as a girl (virgin) it shows that I am clean and decent” (Respondent #5)

According to respondent #5 even if her family is not following certain traditions and customs according to Islam but if it concerns the topic of sexuality and virginity the family requires to do not have premarital sexual relationships from their children. There is a strong hierarchy in the families of Kyrgyzstan, they consider a mother as person to whom they should show a respect and she doesn't allow talking about some personal aspects and the topic of sexuality is taboo conversation. The reason of such attitude can be how the family is structured.

“When I talk with my mom about such topics I feel very uncomfortable, when I talk with my friends I do feel like I am in my own plate... because she is my mother and I am her daughter, and age matters” (Respondent #3)

“I feel uncomfortable because it is my family and I cannot discuss it with my family” (Respondent #2)

According to respondents #3 and #2 there is a certain boundaries in topics on which they can discuss with the family members and on which they just do not talk about. A child is up-bringing by showing a respect towards family members and the topic of sexuality is a hidden thing which is never discussed between parents and children, especially if it concerns premarital sexual relationships. In some families a child and parents are more open to such topics about sexuality:

“We do have trustful relationships and I don't do stupid things to lose the trust of my parents... to bring shame, to get drunk... reputation for example... Not with the father, but we talked with my mother... my mother thinks that a person should be educated about it” (Respondent #1)

After an exchange year even if they did change their attitude towards sexual relationships but they do not practice it because it is not allowed by the family. There is also about the structure of the relations between the generations, between children and parents. In Kyrgyz families there are

wide networks of relatives, where members of one generation stick closer in contrast to more modernized families, where such ties are loosened and only core family members grow closer. They are feeling comfortable talking about sexual relationships not with family, but with friends and they are okay if their friends are practicing sexual relationships, but they are against it if it concerns them. I think it is because respondents care about their family relationships and if their friends are practicing premarital sexual relationships they consider it as responsibility of their friends:

“I agree with the theory, but in practice I am against it and the reason is in my family and in all traditions that were saved by the Kyrgyz people, not only Kyrgyz people, but all Muslims” (Respondent #3)

“As so when I was abroad I started to be more tolerate about a lot of things, also I am tolerant towards intimate life before marriage. It is a choice of every human, but in my personal case I am strict, because my up-bringing doesn't let me. I feel the responsibility. In the case of society I don't have a right to judge someone; I think it is the free choice of everyone... In my case I feel that it is prohibited before marriage... huge influence was in my up-bringing” (Respondent #6)

But even if they do practice sexual relationships before marriage their parents and family do not know about it.

“My family doesn't know that I have sexual relationships... they up-brought me that the sex is a taboo” (respondent #4)

Families are very concerned about saving traditions and not to let down the reputation of their families in front of the society and community where they live.

“If I had an intimate life in practice I would feel shame in front of my brothers and mother... because they have different thinking and they are categorically against it... In Kyrgyzstan we have to care about the family and not let others think that I am a bad girl, in the US you live for yourself, and if you want you can go and date a someone and have an intimate relationships..” (Respondent #3)



“My family is very conservative... they up-brought me in the more traditional foundations... for example they didn't let me have a boyfriend for a long time... they were telling me how to behave what to do and what not to do so I won't bring shame to the family” (Respondent #6)

“Conservative family from the south... The big attention is given to traditions and customs... My family prepared me. They were telling in their manner not to bring shame to the family... in the family we have conservative views we have a class taboo towards this topic. We do not talk about this topic at home it is still a closed topic...” (Respondent #4)

In American host family one of the respondents discussed such topics even if he didn't practice sexual relationships:

“In Kyrgyzstan at home we didn't talk about such topics, but in the US for the second day probably after I arrived my host dad started to talk about this around the table... They were feeling very comfortable with topics about the sex, they were smiling and discussing... after several discussions about it and they were often... about my experience about their experience... A host mother was telling about her experience before she met a host dad and also he was telling and this made me liberate to discuss such topics”(Respondent #4)

According to respondent #4 there is a process of changing an attitude through the conversations and discussions of sexual topics with his host family in the USA. He saw that his host family is feeling free about such issues and it influenced on the respondent to feel himself also comfortable. The influence of the family towards shaping a certain attitude about premarital sexual relationships is very strong. Family makes a child to be responsible not to bring a shame and not to act according their requirements. Almost every respondent mentioned in his interview about the family and about following its rules and requirements. Interesting point is that after the exchange year where respondents spend almost one year in a new host family and society it changed the attitude but not behavior. According to Pierre Bourdieu it is a habitus, when a person reacts automatically towards different situations and things even after changing a life style and environment. One exchange year was not enough to change the habitus of respondents.

## **Up-bringing**

Up-bringing is a process of raising a child by teaching him how to behave, what kind of attitude to have in different situations. Some respondents referred to the Soviet Union to mark the difference in ways of up-bringing. For them the “older” generation was still living in moral expectations that were about restrictions towards sexual relationships, for example:

“Let’s go back to history, everyone has a family... they grew up during the Soviet Union, in the Soviet Union there “wasn’t any sex” advertisement, movies, rare kisses which were wild so much, no any hints towards sex... no God... it was prohibited... strong structure and society”(Respondent #4)

“Another up-bringing of the soviet union” (Respondent #3)

“The reason is probably that we still have Soviet Union foundations. As they were telling “No sex in the Soviet Union” (people didn’t discuss it), it was a taboo and another reason is that we are the Asian country, our up-bringing is more eastern, more strict, while there in the USA they are more emancipated, more free, freedom of choice probably that’s why...” (Respondent #6)

According to respondents’ answer I observed how even if time is changing peoples’ attitudes and world perceptions can stay the same. As so during the Soviet Union there was a prohibition on sexual topics, people were not discussing it, were not observing it, but they were practicing it. The up-bringing process of my respondents in Kyrgyzstan was influenced by the Soviet Union, while in United States it is more liberal process. Even by living and rising in a new host families and society for one year it is very less filled and influenced on the up-bringing process of my respondents, because after spending a year they had to come back to their own family, responsibilities and lifestyle.

## **Friends:**

According to respondents they spend a lot of time with their friends. They share a lot of common behaviors and attitudes, because they learn it from each other. They share thoughts,

opinions and ideas. And the topic of sexuality is the most common topic that they can discuss only with their friends, for example:

“Friends have a huge influence, there are things which I will not do it by myself, but I can do it under the influence of my friends” (Respondent #3)

“There are no any problem with my friends and I feel myself very comfortable in conversations about such topic and America influenced me, now I feel myself more liberated I don’t consider it as something scary, what is natural is not ugly”(Respondent #4)

“Close friends... openly and trustful...” (Respondent #6)

“Close good friends” (Respondent #2)

“It is easier with friends” (Respondent #5)

Respondents feel themselves comfortable to talk about sexual topics with their friends, because they are more on the same level of understanding and perceiving information according such topic. Respondents can ask their friends about more details concerning sexual topics, while with family they feel uncomfortable. The attitude towards sexual topics can be changed under the influence of communication with friends and such influence was made from American friends:

“My American friends...” (Respondent #1)

### **Social structures:**

According to Luckmann social structure is about expectations, through the organization and communication between people (Luckmann, 1966). All previous factors as a religion, family, up-brining and fiends go into the social structure, but I have more to say about the social structure that can shape the attitude of respondents towards premarital sexual relationships. The claim of the respondents is that in Kyrgyzstan people think collectively and they follow each other, each other’s thoughts and share the common life style, so people expect from each other common attitudes and beliefs. While in the USA according to the respondents’ answers and

experiences people there are more individualistic and they think about themselves and they do not care about public opinion, the only thing which they care about is to make their own life better:

“In Kyrgyzstan the society is homogenous... they follow one certain opinion, while in the USA every person is an individual. He does what he wants and other people just respect it, but here you cannot do it. In the USA you cannot make a wrong choice, because any choice will be respected... here people have the same thinking and they follow it”  
(Respondent # 3)

In Kyrgyzstan the majority of people do not talk about sexuality and they are against sexual relationships before marriage, that makes other people also follow such opinions in order to fit in this framework of social structure to justify expectations. As Connell’s “The Major Structure: Labor, Power, and Cathexis” stated that social structures are representing a sophisticated device of the social world (Connell, 1987). By which the author means the boundaries of freedom that can be reached only collectively in the society but not individually (Connell, 1987).

“There is a brotherhood... in the US it more formal... more individualistic... here we have brotherhood, which is collectively thinking and friendship and everything together, while there more about individualism...” (Respondent #2)

“We do have more collective consciousness. We think more as us not me, but there it is vice a versa they care about themselves, how to make it better for them” (Respondent #5)

According to the answers of respondent #2 and #5, it is clear how people depend on each other. It is like a chain reaction of depending one from another that is almost impossible to destroy, because it does not depend only on one person it is the whole system which people always follow. Brotherhood is a special form of collectivism where people share almost every belief, perception of certain things as premarital sexual relationships before marriage and no one dictates what a brotherhood is about.

“Brotherhood is the collectivism, it is impossible to change it alone, even if to talk about it globally we have to change the whole structure... structure in the society; we have to

educate the child in different way... yes in Kyrgyzstan people have to accept it and to follow it. Unwritten law” (Respondent #2)

Respondents before their exchange year used to live and follow the brotherhood structure which had the influence on attitude of exchange students towards sexual relationships before marriage. By living in the brotherhood society respondents did not discuss topics about sexuality openly. That is the lack of communication on such topics and discussions:

“In America in the relationship between the girl and boy it is normal to have the intimate life if you are boyfriend and girlfriend, but in Kyrgyzstan no! For example at school two or three volunteers came, two boys and the girl and they told about AIDS and about how to use a condom and I was feeling that not only me but also others were feeling them uncomfortable and even the boys”(Respondent #3)

“There were some girls (in the US) who were telling, bragging and just discussing, but here (in Kyrgyzstan) we just make jokes about it and no any serious discussions”(Respondent #6)

“I think we were talking about such things childishly, we didn’t know the true information that everything was theory, more about bragging, more about first experiences, but in America even with my fellows of the same age it was more seriously level, so they knew all the consequences of intimate relationships all the dangers and advantages of sex, they had a serious attitude” (Respondent #4)

Students were introduced during school in Kyrgyzstan about the intimate life and to give information about it, but the reaction of the students was being shy and feeling uncomfortable. The reason is that students at school could only joke on sexual topics, but not any serious conversations. For example according to respondents if people will have educated on sexual life there will be fewer abortions, less diseases that are spread among people by sexual relationships.

“They had intimate relationships and it was normal, while in Osh they could only make a joke about it and laugh about it” (Respondent #2)

“In the US they teach to accept it (sexual relationships) more simply... it is a natural process” (Respondent #3)

“It is a natural process and I do not consider it as something strange” (Respondent #5)

“There it is accepted and it is normal to have intimate relationships ... It was normal for them. Please they can do whatever they want, but I will do my own things” (Respondent #6)

“Here in Kyrgyzstan girls don’t have enough skills about it... Not with the father, but we talked with my mother... my mother thinks that a person should be educated about it” (Respondent #1)

“A human has to have knowledge about intimate life, people have to discuss it... forewarned is forearmed” (Respondent #6)

According to respondents’ answers I can say that they consider sexual relationships as a normal part of human development and it is normal to have sexual relationships, because every person has a natural desire and attraction towards another person. If students would discuss about sexual topics they would have some knowledge about its advantages and consequences as a pregnancy, different diseases. While in United States of America according to respondents the majority of students of the same age were already practicing sexual relationships, but in every case there is exception:

“Not for every student in America that is a normal, yes for some it is abnormal to have the intimate life before marriage. Some are following; some are telling that it is abnormal but others normal. For example in Kyrgyzstan at school even with a girl friend it was uncomfortable to talk about such topics, but in the USA I even had a friend with whom we were talking about such topics and he was even telling me about his relationships with his girlfriend... for me it was wild when a boy was telling me about his first night... I was shocked when I found out that he has a daughter (a senior student)” (Respondent #3)

In order not to bring shame to the family in front of the society, students were aware not to behave improperly not only in their home countries but also in host countries, even if no one was looking after them. Students were aware about saving a trust of their parents.

“The society in Kyrgyzstan has a huge influence. If my family would let me to live how I want and that they do not care about what society will think about our family I would

have another lifestyle... to visit clubs, to promenade, to have a more intimate life I would live how I want, but because the society has an influence and my family does not want to hear that Aijamal is like that and that, and the reputation of my family will fall down”  
(Respondent #3)

“They were very judgmental about those who did have relationships before marriage”  
(Respondent #5)

“Head should be on shoulders” (Respondent #5)

The respondent #5 mean that no matter how far he will be from his family he should always think about his actions and to control them. To live in a new society and to practice a new lifestyle influences to change an attitude and behavior towards sexual relationships before marriage. Before an exchange year student was considering sexual relationships before marriage as taboo and a closed topic, while after an exchange year they started to accept it as a natural process of human’s development by observing more liberal attitude.

“Before the states I was against it 100%. When I heard that in Bishkek girls are like that, I was thinking how they can have an intimate life before marriage, and after the US it is normal”(Respondent #3)

“At the beginning I was at school and I knew for sure that there is no way to have sexual relationships before marriage it is prohibited, but after the US people are so comfortable and happy with it... I think it is more practical when you live with a person before marriage to get know each other... less divorces will be then”(Respondent #5)

“America helped to change my worldview about sex” (Respondent #4)

After an exchange students came back home he already did change their attitude towards sexual relationships before marriage. But they are not allowed to behave in their home society openly towards sexual relationships before marriage, that’s why they put back their new experiences and return to the routine which they used to follow before their exchange year in order not to be criticized by the home society:

“There is no entrance with own charters to another monastery“(Respondent #4)

By which respondent wants to say that every society has different life style, beliefs and interests that's why it is impossible to come to a new society and change its structure. Certain frameworks about prohibition of sexual relationships before marriage in the society are not openly discussed they are so into the society that no one talks about it but everyone follows it:

“Virginity... society... no one was telling it openly but it was in the air” (Respondent #4)

“Hush Hush you cannot talk about it... In Kyrgyzstan we do not talk about it”  
(Respondent #1)

“If you start to discuss the sex openly people will think that you do have sexual relationships (laughing)... at school in Bishkek we were touching this topic rare, but in the US it was normal for them... It is the right of every person, if he thinks so... he can practice it and there is nothing judgmental about it” (Respondent #5)

As Luckmann said that social structure is about expectations, I can observe how respondents know about what their family and society expect from them. According to respondents they do not discuss it openly and they do not have knowledge about sexual topics. Before their exchange year respondents thought that sexual relationships before marriage is something very strict and taboo, while after living in a new society and observing how people there freely can discuss sexual topics and practice premarital sexual relationships, exchange students changed their attitude towards it. Exchange students started to accept premarital sexual relationships as a natural part of human development, but they are still not practicing it in order not to be judged by the society. After they came back home in order not to have conflicts with families and society respondents are just flexibly returning to the old lifestyle.

#### **Age:**

Another main point is that I have to take into consideration the age of these exchange students, because year by year people grow up and they grow up not only physically but also mentally, by which they do accept a lot of new things, they do behave differently towards



different things. I have to consider not only the influence of the family, cultural exchange, religion but also the time, their age that can influence on attitudes of respondents.

“The age influenced on me, because we are growing up and we do understand that it is natural I do consider it as an age” (Respondent #3)

“Not only had the America influenced on it, but also the age ... the consciousness...” (Respondent #1)

According to respondents #3 and #1 they changed their attitude towards having sexual relationships before marriage by growing up and considering it as a natural process to have sexual relationships.

All these factors that influenced on the attitudes of exchange students towards sexual relationships before marriage are connected to each other and interdependent. To form the attitude towards premarital sexual relationships from the beginning influenced the religion, upbringing process, family and to change the attitude influenced the social structure, friends during the exchange year abroad. And also the ages of my respondents somehow influenced on them, that according to respondents they grew up and started to understand a lot of things. The first formation of attitudes became as a habitus that allow perceiving sexual relationships before marriage after the exchange year but still do not allow practicing it. To make analyses clearly and strong I asked few questions to the student who did not go abroad and grew up in Kyrgyzstan and here what he said:

“My attitude towards sexual relationships before marriage is absolutely negative, because I think our mentality does not give permission to practice it. If you practice sexual closeness before marriage it will show disrespect towards your family, religion, culture, society and yourself... At school with my friends we could only joke about such topic and even today I feel uncomfortable when people openly discuss such issues... No no no to premarital sexual relationships...” (Respondent #7)

According to the respondent a student who did not go abroad by any exchange programs have absolutely negative attitude towards sexual relationships before marriage and such student even

feel himself or herself uncomfortable to talk about sexual topics. Of course it does not concern every non-exchange students because in every case there is an exception. It should not be generalized. According to every factor as a religion, family, up-bringing process, friends, social structure and ages of respondents I can say that attitudes of exchange students were formatted from before the exchange year. During the exchange year new society, new friends, host families influenced to change the attitude towards premarital sexual relationships by living for one year abroad by talking about sexuality and observing how other people of the same ages are practicing sexual relationships before marriage. Respondents are more comfortable talking about such issues after their exchange years and they are more liberal if someone of the same age is having sexual relationships, but if it will concern them about practicing, they are still holding their desires in order not to bring shame to the family and not be judged by the society, where majority of people in Kyrgyzstan are strict about premarital sexual relationships.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of my research was to find out can the attitudes of exchange students change towards premarital sexual relationships and how they can change it. Results showed that their attitudes changed after the year abroad from being negative about premarital sexual relationships they become positive about it. The big influence to change the attitude was from the social perception of premarital sexual relationships abroad, from observing American friends and classmates, from free conversations with host families about sexual topics. The process of the change was not immediate but slow, because respondents experienced some shocking conversations and observations. Before the exchange year premarital sexual relationships were considered a taboo and shameful action for my respondents because of the social structure in Kyrgyzstan. That includes the influence of Islamic religion, family, and the up-bringing process. According to Connell social structure defines boundaries of freedom, which can be reached only collectively in the society but not individually. That's why respondents are conserved about the

collectivism and about the brotherhood (one the forms of the collectivism), where everyone depends on each other and have certain responsibilities and obligations, as not having premarital sexual relationships in order not to be judged by the society and bring shame to the family. But after living for one year abroad and observing how people there can have sexual relationships before marriage without feeling a shame and discomfort about it, it influenced to perceive premarital sexual relationships not as a taboo but as a natural part of human development. It is natural to have some attractions towards other people and to feel a desire. While according to my respondents they changed their attitudes towards premarital sexual relationship, but they still are not practicing it, because in Kyrgyzstan liberal attitudes towards premarital sexual relationships are less preferred than to consider it as a taboo.

My further recommendations for this research will be to interview exchange students before they will go abroad and after they will come back in order to have more correct data to compare and to find out exact changes in students' attitudes towards premarital sexual relationships. And it will be more interesting to find out how these changes affect or do not affect the society in Kyrgyzstan. Of course it needs more time to make a better research in this field to observe several generations of exchange students.

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