Asking America About Its Sex Life

An NIH-sponsored national survey on sexual behavior is on the horizon, but will people answer the door?

THE FIRST TRULY REPRESENTATIVE survey on the sexual life of America is slowly winding its way through the clearance process in the federal bureaucracy, where each question on the 60-minute interview is being given intense scrutiny. For good reason.

The government is about to ask a representative sample of citizens some of the most sensitive questions there are, questions that wives may never discuss with husbands, that a parent might never ask a son or a daughter. Though investigators in the social sciences speak their own language of "behavioral parameters" and "pair formation," this survey is going to ask people in plain English how many partners they've had and what they did.

There will be inquiries about homosexuality, contraception, fertility, religion, and sexual abuse. People will be asked to describe in detail their own sex lives, and to reflect on why they have sex and what they think about it. For not only are researchers interested in tallying contacts and preferences, they are trying to understand the social stage upon which sexual dramas are played out.

"We don't want to just list what people do, we want to begin to explain why they do what they do," says John Gagnon, professor of sociology at the State University of New York in Stony Brook, and one of three principal investigators designing the study under the direction of the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development. Gagnon's colleagues are Edward Laumann of the University of Chicago and Robert Michael of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), the nonprofit social research shop that was awarded a government contract to run the first pilot survey in which 2,300 people will be interviewed. In the final study to follow, some 20,000 subjects will be queried over a period of 2 years at a cost of at least $15 million.

The need for such a large and representative sampling is intense, particularly in light of the AIDS epidemic and the growing number of sexually transmitted diseases, say researchers. The last attempt to broadly sketch the sexual behavior of Americans was done by Alfred Kinsey in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Kinsey was a master at getting people to tell him about their escapades, but his work has great limits. An opportunist, Kinsey's subjects were the subjects of convenience: the faculty of the English department of a small midwestern college, for example. The problem is that Kinsey's subjects were not randomly chosen, and as such they could not be said to represent the millions of Americans not interviewed.

But it is upon the Kinsey data set that estimates of all kinds have been made, including the government's guess that between 945,000 and 1.4 million Americans are currently infected with the human immunodeficiency virus, figures based largely on Kinsey's contention that 4% of all adult American males are "exclusively homosexual" throughout life. (An article on the prevalence of homosexuality based on new data collected in 1970 but kept under wraps because of squabbling over methodology and authorship appears on page 338 of this week's *Science*. See also *Science*, 4 March 1988, page 1084).

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Bob, Carol, Ted, and Alice. *Estimates of the number of Americans infected with the AIDS virus are based largely on data from surveys conducted in the 1940s, before the sexual revolution.*

Unlike Kinsey and the anecdotal polling of Shere Hite and *Playboy* magazine, the present effort is an attempt to get a truly representative sample, in which every adult has an equal chance of being picked.

The pilot survey will be used to gather interim data on behavior and to run a series of experiments on the study's methodology in order to fine-tune the larger survey. There are many unknowns. Perhaps the greatest mystery lies in how one gets people to answer such sensitive questions. If a large number of people refuse to participate, the data will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to interpret.

During the pilot, the NORC interviewers will be field-testing all kinds of tricks of the trade. For example, is it necessary that people be interviewed by someone of the same gender, age, and race? Where should the interviews take place? Is the kitchen better than the living room? What words does one use to describe various sexual practices: the aseptic language of the clinic or the slang of the street? The NORC interviewers will get a long list of every possible term for every imaginable act, for what is intelligible to an 18-year-old black male in the inner city might not mean beans to the 62-year-old female in rural Nebraska.

During the process of thinking through the survey, the NORC researchers contemplated but rejected using lap top computers, self-administered questions that go in sealed envelopes, and tape recorders that only the subject listens to. One trick they will try during the pilot study is to hand subjects a card which lists by number all kinds of sexual practices. For example, the number 1 will represent kissing, 2 for hugging, 3 for touching, 4 for licking, and on and on. The subject would then be able to describe a sexual encounter without using the actual words. He or she could simply respond to a question about a recent event by saying: "We did 2, 5, 7, 13, 21, and then 5 again."

If the President's Office of Management and Budget clears the project, which appears likely, the pilot study should reach the field by March, which is about 2 years after the survey was strongly recommended by the National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine. Data would be expected by summer. Then, it is possible that the whole thing must go back to the bureaucracy for another round of clearance for the final study, which would be in the field for as long as 2 years, meaning that answers would not appear until the 1990s, almost a decade after the AIDS epidemic got its public debut. ■ WILLIAM BOOTH