

Word for Word / Who's Asking?

Everything Researchers Ever Wanted to Know About Sex

POETS, lyricists and lovers are not alone in their fascination with sex. Researchers have long sought to shed light on its mysteries, bringing scientific techniques to bear on the varieties of human sexual behavior. The century's most famous sex-survey researcher, the biologist Alfred C. Kinsey, published his best-selling books on male and female sexual behavior in 1948 and 1953, summarizing data from more than 200,000 punchcards of coded interviews (please, no pregnant chad jokes). Although Kinsey's statistical sampling techniques left much to be desired, he was quite successful in getting both individual respondents and the nation at large to talk about formerly taboo sexual topics.

But Kinsey was only one of many researchers who have asked people directly about their sexual behavior. The latest sex study, an analysis of data from the National Health and Social Life Survey, was published in December under the title "Sex, Love and Health in America: Private Choices and Public Policies" (University of Chicago Press).

Many critics still think such surveys are hopelessly flawed, given the difficulty of knowing whether respondents are telling the truth, and sex researchers struggle to answer charges that merely asking questions gives sexual practices legitimacy (and respondents ideas), whether the topic is masturbation or bestiality.

And there are other limitations. Every wave of research is a product of its time and of the imagination of its creators. A sampling from a century of sex surveys may reveal more about the attitudes of the researchers than respondents' answers do about what they were up to in bed. **JEFF STRYKER**

Helia Duel Mosher, a Johns Hopkins-educated doctor, was probably the first to survey Americans about their sex lives. Between 1892 and 1920, Dr. Mosher interviewed 45 upper-middle-class white married women in their 30's. Among her questions:

- What knowledge had you of sexual physiology before marriage? How did you obtain it?
- Did conception occur by choice or by accident?
- Was intercourse held during pregnancy? If so, how often? Had you any desire for it during this period?

• At other times have you any desire for intercourse? (a) How often? (b) At what time in relation to your menses?

• Is intercourse agreeable to you or not?

• Do you always have a venereal orgasm?

• (1) When you do, (a) effect immediately afterwards? (b) effect next day?

• (2) When you do not, (a) effect immediately afterwards? (b) effect next day?

• What do you believe to be the true purpose of intercourse?

• (a) Necessity to man? To woman? (b) Pleasure? (c) Reproduction? (d) What other reasons beside reproduction are sufficient to warrant intercourse?

• What, to you, would be an ideal habit? [i.e., how often?]

• Surveys from the early part of the century reflect a new emphasis on sexual pleasure as key to marital happiness. In 1929, a doctor, Gilbert Hamilton, interviewed 200 married, middle-class residents of New York City. Among his 13 questions were:

• How long after you were married did you

begin to be seriously dissatisfied with any serious lack or shortcoming of your spouse?

• If, by some miracle, you could press a button and find that you had never been married to your husband (or wife), would you press that button?

• What changes would you make in any of the following mental qualities of your husband (or wife): Temper? Talkativeness? Thriftiness? Carefulness of dress? Selfishness? Tendency to scold? Intelligence? Social standing? Religious life? Truthfulness? Tendency to flirt? Capacity for showing affection? Strength of sex desire? Vanity? Serious-mindedness?

From 1900 to 1950, approximately 50 sex surveys were conducted in the United States; by the 1970's, the number grew to more than 100 per

decade. In 1972, Shere Hite mailed 100,000 surveys to women across the country, describing them as a "giant rap session on paper." Her analysis of the 3,000 replies was published as "The Hite Report on Female Sexuality" (MacMillan, 1976). Some reviewers, like the writer Erica Jong, were thrilled to hear women's voices unfiltered by male researchers; a male sociology professor dubbed it the "functional equivalent of malpractice for surveys." Among Ms. Hite's 57 questions:

• Please give a graphic description or drawing of how your body could best be stimulated to orgasm.

• Is having sex important to you? What part does it play in your life?

• What do you think is the importance of masturbating? Did you ever see anyone else masturbating? Can you imagine women you admire masturbating?

• Do you usually have sex with the people you want to have sex with? Who usually initiates sex or a sexual advance — you or the other person?

• Do you think your vagina and genital area are ugly or beautiful? Do you feel that they smell good?

• What do you think of the "sexual revolution"?

• Do you feel that having sex is any way political?

• Have you read Masters and Johnson's recent scientific studies of sexuality? Kinsey's? Others? What do you think of them?

• How did you like the questionnaire?

In the wake of the women's movement came more attention to rape, date rape and sexual coercion in general. These questions are from a survey of 2,000 college women created by the researcher Mary Koss and published in 1982.

Have you ever:

Had sexual intercourse with a man even though you didn't really want to because he threatened to end your relationship otherwise?

Had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn't really want to because you felt pressured by his continual arguments?

Found out that a man had obtained sexual intercourse with you by saying things that he didn't really mean?



From "Peek: Photographs From the Kinsey Institute" (Arena Editions, 2000)

A 1944 picture from Alfred Kinsey's collection of erotica.

In the 1970's, women's magazines began to use sex surveys that had a veneer of science but were mostly meant to entertain. A 1989 Redbook article discussed how 1,000 readers answered 22 questions adapted from "Love and Sex: The Book of Questions," by Gregory Stock (Workman, 1989), including:

- Suppose you couldn't avoid an accident that would result in nerve injury. Would you rather suffer an injury that numbed your entire genital region, or one that made you completely deaf?

- If you could have \$500 a day for every day that you had no physical contact at all with your partner, how long do you think you could last?

- If you and your spouse had a passionate, intoxicating love life that you knew would last only until your first child was born, would you still have a child?

With the appearance of AIDS, the details of sexual practices suddenly became critical pieces of information. Through the late 80's and early 90's, AIDS researchers, stymied in their efforts to secure federal funds to reprise the Kinsey study with a national sample of sexual behavior, conducted instead a mosaic of small studies focused on subgroups. A 1991 survey of Hispanic women about condom use is typical. Administered by researchers at the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies of the University of California at San Francisco, it ran to more than 130 questions, including:

- Do you think it's difficult to find places to buy condoms/rubbers?

- Would you ask a partner to use a condom/rubber even if you had been drinking alcoholic beverages or using drugs?

- Imagine that you carried condoms/rubbers in your pocket or purse. Do you think that your women friends would think badly of you?

- If you had condoms/rubbers with you, would men think you're willing to have sex with someone you just met?

- How comfortable would you feel being naked in front of a sex partner?

- How comfortable would you feel having sex with the lights on?