History of Surveys of Sexual Behavior

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History of Surveys of Sexual Behavior

My own belief is that there is hardly anyone whose sexual life, if it were broadcast, would not fill the world at large with surprise and horror.

Somerset Maugham

Survey research (see Survey Questionnaire Design) is largely a product of the twentieth century, although there are some notable exceptions. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, for example, Charles Booth, a successful businessman and dedicated conservative, sought accurate data on the poor of London after becoming disturbed by a socialist claim that a third of the people in the city were living in poverty. But it is only in the past 70 to 80 years that survey research has become firmly established, particularly as market research, opinion polling, and election research. Among the factors that brought surveys into favour was the change from speculation to empiricism in social psychology and sociology – the demand that 'hunches' must be backed by numerical evidence, that is data.

Sample surveys provide a flexible and powerful approach to gathering information, but careful consideration needs to be given to various aspects of the survey if the information collected is to be accurate, particularly when dealing with a sensitive topic such as sexual behavior. If such surveys are to be taken seriously as a source of believable material a number of issues must be addressed, including:

- Having a sample that is truly representative of the population of interest. Can the sample be regarded as providing the basis for inferences about the target population? A biased selection process may produce deceptive results.
- Having a large enough sample to produce reasonably precise estimates of the prevalence of possibly relatively rare behaviors,
- Minimizing nonresponse. Nonresponse can be a thorny problem for survey researchers. After carefully designing a study, deciding on an appropriate sampling scheme, and devising an acceptable questionnaire, researchers often quickly discover that human beings can be cranky creatures; many of the potential respondents will not be at home (even after making an appointment for a specified time), or will not answer the telephone, or have moved away, or refuse to reply to mail shots, and so generally make the researcher’s life difficult. In many large-scale surveys, it may take considerable effort and resources to achieve a response rate even as high as 50%. And nonresponse often leads to biased estimates.
- The questions asked. Do the questions illicit accurate responses? Asking questions that appear judgmental can affect the way people answer. The wording of questions by the interviewer or on the questionnaire is critical. Everyday English, as used in colloquial speech, is often ambiguous. For surveys, definitions of terms need to be precise to measure phenomena accurately. At the same time, the terms should be easily understood – technical terms should be avoided. This is not always easy because there are few terms that are universally understood. This is particularly true in surveys of sexual behavior. The meaning of terms such as 'vaginal sex', 'oral sex', ‘penetrative sex’ and ‘heterosexual’, for example, is taken for granted in much health education literature, but there is evidence that much misunderstanding of such terms exists in the general public.
- Are people likely to be truthful in their answers? Systematic distortion of the respondent’s true status clearly jeopardizes the validity of survey measurements. This problem has been shown even in surveys of relatively innocuous subject matter, owing in part to a respondent’s perceptions and needs that emerge during the data collection process. Consequently the potential for distortion to cause problems in surveys of sensitive information is likely to be considerable due to heightened respondent concern over anonymity. Of course, a person’s sex life is very likely to be a particularly sensitive issue. The respondents need to be assured about confidentiality and in face-to-face interviews the behavior of the interviewer might be critical.

In the end the varying tendencies among respondents to cooperate in surveys (particularly sex surveys), or to under-report/overreport if they respond, can easily lead to wildly inaccurate estimates of the extent of sensitive phenomena. There are techniques to collect sensitive information that largely remove the problem of under or over reporting by introducing an element of chance into the responses. These
techniques disguise the true response yet allow the researcher sufficient data for analysis. The most common of these techniques is the randomized response approach but there is little evidence of its use in the vast majority of investigations into human sexual behavior.

Surveys of Sexual Behavior

The possibility that women might enjoy sex was not considered by the majority of our Victorian ancestors. The general Victorian view was that women should show no interest in sex and preferably be ignorant of its existence unless married; then they must submit to their husbands without giving any sign of pleasure. A lady was not even supposed to be interested in sex, much less have a sexual response. (A Victorian physician, Dr. Acton, even went so far as to claim ‘It is a vile aspersion to say that women were ever capable of sexual feelings.’) Women were urged to be shy, blushing, and genteel. As Mary Shelley wrote in the early 1800s, ‘Coarseness is completely out of fashion.’ (Such attitudes might, partially at least, help explain both the increased interest in pornography amongst Victorian men and the parallel growth in the scale of prostitution.)

But in a remarkable document written in the 1890s by Clelia Mosher, such generalizations about the attitudes of Victorian women to matters sexual are thrown into some doubt, at least for a minority of women. The document, Study of the Physiology and Hygiene of Marriage, opens with the following introduction;

In 1892, while a student in biology at the University of Wisconsin, I was asked to discuss the marital relation in a Mother’s Club composed largely of college women. The discussion was based on replies given by members to a questionnaire.

Mosher probed the sex lives of 45 Victorian women by asking them whether they liked intercourse, how often they had intercourse, and how often they wanted to have intercourse. She compiled approximately 650 pages of spidery handwritten questionnaires but did not have the courage to publish, instead depositing the material in Stanford University Archives. Publication had to await the heroic efforts of James MaHood and his colleagues who collated and edited the questionnaires, leading in 1980 to their book, The Mosher Survey [9].

Clelia Mosher’s study, whilst not satisfactory from a sampling point-of-view because the results can in no way be generalized (the 45 women interviewed were, after all, mature, married, experienced, largely college-educated American women) remains a primary historical document of premodern sex and marriage in America. The reasons are clearly identified in [9];

... it contains statements of great rarity directly from Victorian women, whose lips previously had been sealed on the intimate questions of their private lives and cravings. Although one day it may come to light, we know of no other sex survey of Victorian women, in fact no earlier American sex survey of any kind, and certainly no earlier survey conducted by a woman sex researcher.

Two of the most dramatic findings of the Mosher survey are

- The Victorian women interviewed by Mosher appeared to relish sex, and claimed higher rates of orgasm than those reported in far more recent surveys.
- They practised effective birth-control techniques beyond merely abstinence or withdrawal.

For these experienced, college-educated women at least, the material collected by Mosher produced little evidence of Victorian prudery.

Nearly 40 years on from Mosher’s survey, Katharine Davis studied the sex lives of 2200 upper-middle class married and single women. The results of Davis’s survey are described in her book, Factors in The Sex Life of Twenty Two Hundred Women, published in 1929 [2]. Her stated aim was to gather data as to ‘normal experiences of sex on which to base educational programs’. Davis considered such normal sexual experiences to be, to a great extent, scientifically unexplored country. Unfortunately, the manner in which the eponymous women were selected for her study probably meant that these experiences were to remain so for some time to come.

Initially a letter asking for cooperation was sent to 10000 married women in all parts of the United States. Half of the addresses were furnished by a ‘large national organization’ (not identified by Davis). Recipients were asked to submit names of normal married women – ‘that is, women of good standing in the community, with no known physical, mental, or moral handicap, of sufficient
intelligence and education to understand and answer in writing a rather exhaustive set of questions as to sex experience’. (The questionnaire was eight pages long.)

Another 5000 names were selected from published membership lists of clubs belonging to the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, or from the alumnae registers of women’s colleges and coeducational universities.

In each letter was a return card and envelope. The women were asked to indicate on the card whether they would cooperate by filling out the questionnaire, which was sent only to women requesting it. This led to returned questionnaires from 1000 married women.

The unmarried women in the study were those five years out of a college education; again 10000 such women were sent a letter asking whether or not they would be willing to fill out, in their case, a 12-page questionnaire. This resulted in the remaining 1200 women in the study.

Every aspect of the selection of the 2200 women in Dr Davis’s study is open to statistical criticism. The respondents were an unrepresentative sample, of volunteers who were educationally far above average and only about 10% of those contacted ever returned a questionnaire. The results are certainly not generalizable to any recognisable population of more universal interest. But despite its flaws a number of the charts and tables in the report retain a degree of fascination. Part of the questionnaire, for example, dealt with the use of methods of contraception. At the time, contraceptive information was categorized as obscene literature under federal law. Despite this, 730 of the 1000 married women who filled out questionnaires had used some form of contraceptive measure. Where did they receive their advice about these measures? Davis’s report gives the sources shown in Table 1.

Davis along with most organizers of sex surveys also compiled figures on frequency of sex; these are shown in Table 2.

Davis’s rationale for compiling the figures in Table 2 was to investigate the frequency of intercourse as a possible factor in sterility and for this purpose she breaks down the results in a number of ways. She found no evidence to suggest a relationship between marked frequency of intercourse and sterility – indeed she suggests that her results indicate the reverse.

Table 1 Sources of information about contraceptive measures (from [2])

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physicians</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married women friends</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend of husband</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth-control circulars</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Common knowledge’</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical studies</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Various’</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Drug-store man’</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bible</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A servant</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A psychoanalyst</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Frequency of intercourse of married women (from [2])

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than once a day</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a day</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over twice, less than seven times a week</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or twice a week</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One to three times a month</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Often’ or ‘frequently’</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Seldom’ or ‘infrequently’</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total answers to frequency questions</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None in early years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unanswered (No answer)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total group</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From a methodological point-of-view, one of the most interesting aspects of the Davis report is her attempt to compare the answers of women who responded by both interview and questionnaire. Only a relatively small number of women (50) participated in this comparison but in general there was a considerably higher incidence of ‘sex practices’ reported on the questionnaire. Davis makes the following argument as to why she considers the questionnaire results to be more likely to be closer to the truth;

In the evolutionary process civilization, for its own protection, has had to build up certain restraints on sexual instincts which, for the most part, have been in sense of shame, especially for sex outside of the legal sanction of marriage. Since sex practices prior to marriage have not the general approval of society, and since the desire for social approval is one of the
fundamental motives in human behavior, admitting such a practice constitutes a detrimental confession on the part of the individual and is more likely to be true than a denial of it. In other words, the group admitting the larger number of sex practices is assumed to contain the greater number of honest replies [2].

The argument is not wholly convincing, and would certainly not be one that could be made about the respondents in contemporary surveys of sexual behavior.

Perhaps the most famous sex survey ever conducted was the one by Kinsey and his colleagues in the 1940s. Alfred Charles Kinsey was undoubtedly the most famous American student of human sexual behavior in the first half of the twentieth century. He was born in 1894 and had a strict Methodist upbringing. Originally a biologist who studied Cynipidae (gall wasps), Kinsey was a professor of zoology, who never thought to study human sexuality until 1938, when he was asked to teach the sexuality section of a course on marriage. In preparing his lectures, he discovered that there was almost no information on the subject. Initially, and without assistance, he gathered sex histories on weekend field trips to nearby cities. Gradually this work involved a number of research assistants and was supported by grants from Indiana University and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Until Kinsey’s work (and despite the earlier investigations of people like Mosher and Davis) most of what was known about human sexual behavior was based on what biologists knew about animal sex, what anthropologists knew about sex among natives in Non-Western, nonindustrialized societies, or what Freud and others learnt about sexuality from emotionally disturbed patients. Kinsey and his colleagues were the first psychological researchers to interview volunteers in depth about their sexual behavior. The research was often hampered by political investigations and threats of legal action. But in spite of such harassment, the first Kinsey report, Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, appeared in 1948 [7], and the second, Sexual Behavior in the Human Female, in 1953 [8]. It is no exaggeration to say that both caused a sensation and had massive impact. Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, quickly became a bestseller, despite its apparent drawbacks of stacks of tables, graphs, bibliography, and a ‘scholarly’ text that it is kind to label as merely monotonous. The report certainly does not make for lively reading. Nevertheless, six months after its publication it still held second place on the list of nonfiction bestsellers in the USA. The first report proved of interest not only to the general public, but to psychiatrists, clergymen, lawyers, anthropologists, and even home economists. Reaction to it ranged all the way from extremely favourable to extremely unfavourable – here are some examples of both:

- The Kinsey Report has done for sex what Columbus did for geography,
- …a revolutionary scientific classic, ranking with such pioneer books as Darwin’s Origin of the Species, Freud’s and Copernicus’ original works,
- …it is an assault on the family as the basic unit of society, a negation of moral law, and a celebration of licentiousness,
- there should be a law against doing research dealing exclusively with sex.

What made the first Kinsey report the talk of every town in the USA lies largely in the following summary of its main findings:

Of American males,
- 86% have premarital intercourse by the age of 30,
- 37%, at some time in their lives, engaged in homosexual activity climaxed by orgasm,
- 70% have, at some time, intercourse with prostitutes,
- 97% engage in forms of sexual activity, at some time in their lives, that are punishable as crimes under the law,
- of American married males, 40% have been involved in extramarital relations,
- of American farm boys, 16% have sexual contacts with animals.

These figures shocked because they suggested that there was much more sex, and much more variety of sexual behavior amongst American men than was suspected.

But we need to take only a brief look at some of the details of Kinsey’s study to see that the figures above and the many others given in the report hardly stand up to statistical scrutiny.

Although well aware of the scientific principles of sampling, Kinsey based all his tables, charts, and so on, on a total of 5300 interviews with volunteers. He knew that the ideal situation would have
been to select people at random, but he did not think it possible to coax a randomly selected group of American males to answer truthfully when asked deeply personal questions about their sex lives. Kinsey sought volunteers from a diversity of sources so that all types would be sampled. The work was, for example, carried on in every state of the Union, and individuals from various educational groups were interviewed. But the ‘diversification’ was rather haphazard and the proportion of respondents in each cell did not reflect the United States population data. So the study begins with the disadvantage of volunteers and without a representative sample in any sense. The potential for introducing bias seems to lead to the overreporting of an activity. The use of leading questions is generally thought to place the onus of denial on the respondent before starting the interview as the following quotation from the report indicates:

> ‘When did you last….’ or ‘When was the first time you….’, thereby placing the onus of denial on the respondent. The use of leading questions is generally thought to lead to the over-reporting of an activity. Kinsey’s aim was to provide the ideal setting for each individual interview whilst retaining an equivalence in the interviews administered to all respondents. So the objective conditions of the interview were not uniform and variation in sexual behavior between individuals might be confounded with differences in question wording and order.

The interview data in the Kinsey survey were recorded in the respondent’s presence by a system of coding that was consigned to memory by all six interviewers during the year-long training that proceeded data collection. Coding in the field has several advantages such as speed and the possibility of clarifying ambiguous answers; memory was used in preference to a written version of the code to preserve the confidence of the interviewee. But the usual code ranged from six to twenty categories for each of the maximum of 521 items that could be covered in the interview, so prodigious feats of memory were called for. One can only marvel at the feat. Unfortunately, although field coding was continually checked, no specific data on the reliability of coding are presented and there has to be some suspicion that occasionally, at least, the interviewer made coding mistakes.

Memory certainly also played a role in the accuracy of respondent’s answers to questions about events which might have happened long ago. It’s difficult to believe, for example, that many people can remember details of frequency of orgasm per week, per five-year period, but this is how these frequencies are presented. Many of the interviews in the first Kinsey report were obtained through the cooperation of key individuals in a community who recommended friends and acquaintances, and through the process of developing a real friendship with the prospective respondent before starting the interview as the following quotation from the report indicates:

> We go with them to dinner, to concerts, to nightclubs, to the theatre, we become acquainted with them at community dances and in poolrooms and taverns, and in other places which they frequent. They in turn invite us to meet friends in their homes, at teas, at dinners, at other social events [7, p. 40].

This all sounds very pleasant both for the respondents and the interviewers but is it good survey research practice? Probably not, since experience suggests that the ‘sociological stranger’ gets the more accurate information in a sensitive survey, because the respondent is wary about revealing his most private behavior to a friend or acquaintance. And assuming that all the interviewers were white males the question arises as to how this affected interviews with say, African-American respondents (and in the second report, with women)?
Finally there are some more direct statistical criticisms that can be levelled at the first Kinsey report. There is, for example, often a peculiar variation in the number of cases in a given cell, from table to table. A particular group will be reported on one type of sexual behavior, and this same group may be of slightly different size in another table. The most likely explanation is that the differences are due to loss of information through ‘Don’t know’ responses or omissions of various items, but the discrepancies are left unexplained in the report. And Kinsey seems shaky on the definition of terms such as median although this statistic is often used to summarize findings. Likewise he uses the sample range as a measure of how much particular measurements varied amongst his respondents rather than the preferable standard deviation statistic.

Kinsey addressed the possibility of bias in his study of male sexual behavior and somewhat surprisingly suggested that any lack of validity in the reports he obtained would be in the direction of concealment or understatement. Kinsey gives little credence to the possibility of overstatement:

Cover-up is more easily accomplished than exaggeration in giving a history [7, p. 54].

Kinsey thought that the interview approach provided considerable protection against exaggeration but not so much against understatement. But given all the points made earlier this claim is not convincing, and it is not borne out by later, better-designed studies, which generally report lower levels of sexual activity than Kinsey. For example, the ‘Sex in America’ survey [10] was based on a representative sample of Americans and it showed that individuals were more monogamous and more sexually conservative than had been reported previously.

Kinsey concludes his first report with the following:

We have performed our function when we have published the record of what we have found the human male doing sexually, as far as we have been able to ascertain the facts.

Unfortunately, the ‘facts’ arrived at by Kinsey and his colleagues may have been distorted in a variety of ways because of the many flaws in the study. But despite the many methodological errors, Kinsey’s studies remain gallant attempts to survey the approximate range and norms of sexual behavior. The Kinsey report did have the very positive effect of encouraging others to take up the challenge of investigating human sexual behavior in a scientific and objective manner. In the United Kingdom, for example, an organization known as Mass-Observation carried out a sex survey in 1949 that was directly inspired by Kinsey’s first study. In fact it became generally known as ‘Little Kinsey’ [3]. Composed of three related surveys, ‘Little Kinsey’ was actually very different methodologically from its American predecessor. The three components of the study were as follows:

1. A ‘street sample’ survey of over 2000 people selected by random sampling methods carried out in a wide cross section of cities, towns and villages in Britain.
2. A postal survey of about 1000 each of three groups of ‘opinion leaders’: clergymen, teachers, and doctors.
3. A set of interrelated questions sent to members of Mass-Observation’s National Panel, which produced responses from around 450 members.

The report’s author, Tom Harrison, was eager to get to the human content lying behind the line-up of percentages and numbers central to the Kinsey report proper, and he suggested that the Mass-Observation study was both ‘something less and something more than Kinsey’. It tapped into ‘more of the actuality, the real life, the personal stuff of the problem’. He tried to achieve these aims by including in each chapter some very basic tables of responses, along with large numbers of comments from respondents to particular questions. Unfortunately this idiosyncratic approach meant that the study largely failed to have any lasting impact, although later authors, for example, Liz Stanley in Sex Surveyed 1949-1994 [11], claim it was of pioneering importance and was remarkable for pinpointing areas of behavioral and attitudinal change. It does appear to be one of the earliest surveys of sex that used random sampling. Here are some of the figures and comments from Chapter 7 of the report, Sex Outside Marriage.

The percentages who disapproved of extramarital relations were

- 24% on the National Panel,
- 63% of the street sample,
- 65% of doctors,
- 75% of teachers,
90% of clergymen.

Amongst the street sample the following percentages were given for those opposed to extramarital relations:

- 73% of all weekly churchgoers,
- 54% of all non-churchgoers,
- 64% of people leaving school up to and including 15 years,
- 50% of all leaving school after 16,
- 68% of all living in rural areas,
- 50% of all Londoners,
- 67% of all women,
- 57% of all men,
- 64% of all married people over 30,
- 48% of all single people over 30.

The Kinsey report, ‘Little Kinsey2’, and the surveys of Clelia Mosher and Katherine Davis, represent, despite their flaws, genuine attempts at taking an objective, scientific approach to information about sexual behavior. But sex, being such a fascinating topic also attracts the more sensational commercial ‘pseudosurveys’ like those regularly conducted amongst the readership of magazines such as *Playboy* and *Cosmopolitan*. Here the questions asked are generally a distinctly ‘racier’ variety than in more serious surveys. Here is just one example:

- When making love, which of the following do you like? (check all that apply)
  1. Have your man undress you
  2. Pinch, bite, slap him
  3. Be pinched, bitten, slapped
  4. Have someone beat you
  5. Pretend to fight physically with the man or try to get away.

The aims of these surveys are to show that the readership of the magazine enjoys sexually exciting lives, to celebrate their reader’s ‘sexual liberation’ and to make the rest of us green eyed with envy (or red faced with shame). The results are generally presented in the form of tabloid type headlines, for example:

French have more sex than Englishmen.

Unfortunately, there have been several surveys of sexual behavior that demand to be taken seriously, but to which the same criticisms can be applied, and where, in addition, attempts to interpret the findings of the survey may have been colored by the likely *a priori* prejudices of the survey’s instigator. One such example is the basis of that 1976 bestseller, *The Hite Report on Female Sexuality* [6].

Shire Hite is a member of the *National Organization of Women* and an active feminist. When she undertook her study in the 1970s, the aim of which she stated as ‘to define or discover the physical nature of [women’s] sexuality’, she clearly had a feminist political axe to grind. – ‘Most sex surveys have been done by men’ she said and nobody had asked women the right questions. She wanted ‘women to be experts and to say what female sexuality was about’. However, Dr Hite often appeared to have a strong prior inkling of what her respondents would tell her and such clear expectations of results are a matter of concern. First, we consider the methodology underlying the Hite report.

Hite sent questionnaires to ‘consciousness-raising’, abortion rights, and other women’s groups and also advertised for respondents in newspapers and magazines, including *Ms.*, *Mademoiselle* and *Brides*. Of the 100 000 questionnaires distributed, Hite received somewhat more than 3000 responses, a response rate, she claimed, that was standard for surveys of this type. However, most serious survey researchers would regard 3% as very low. So the survey begins with an extremely biased sample and a very low response rate.

A further problem was that the questionnaire used in the study was hard to complete. Each question contained multiple subquestions, never a good idea in any survey. In addition, the survey began with numerous questions about orgasm rather than with more innocuous questions. Many questions called for ‘essay-like’ responses and others asked for seemingly impossible details from past events. Here are some examples:

- Do you have orgasms? If not, what do you think would contribute to your having them?
- Do you always have orgasms during the following (please indicate whether always, usually, sometimes, rarely, or never):
  1. Masturbation,
  2. Intercourse (vaginal penetration),
3. Manual clitoral stimulation by partner,
4. Oral stimulation by a partner,
5. Intercourse plus manual clitoral stimulation,
6. Never have orgasms.

- Also indicate above how many orgasms you usually have during each activity, and how long you usually take.
- Please give a graphic description of how your body could best be stimulated to orgasm.

Hite’s questionnaire began with items about orgasm and much of her book dwells on her interpretation of the results from these items. She concludes that women can reach orgasm easily through masturbation but far less easily, if at all, through intercourse with their male partners. Indeed, one of her main messages is that intercourse is less satisfying to women than masturbation. She goes on to blame what she sees as the sorry state of female sexual pleasure in patriarchal societies, such as the United States, that glorify intercourse. Critics pointed out that there may be something in all of this, but that Hite was being less than honest to suppose that her views were an inescapable conclusion from the results of her survey. As the historian Linda Gordon pointed out [5], the Hite report was orientated towards young, attractive, autonomous career women, who were focused on pleasure and unencumbered by children. These women could purchase vibrators, read the text, and undergo the self-improvement necessary for one-person sexual bliss.

The Hite report has severe methodological flaws and these are compounded by the suspicion that its writer is hardly objective about the issues under investigation. The numbers are neither likely to have accurately reflected the facts, nor to have been value-free.

(It is not, of course, feminist theory that is at fault in the Hite report, as the comprehensive study of sex survey research given in [4], demonstrates; these two authors combine feminist theory with a critical analysis of survey research to produce a well-balanced and informative account.)

If the Hite Report was largely a flash in the media pan (Sheer Hype perhaps?), the survey on sexual attitudes and lifestyles undertaken in the UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s by Kaye Wellings and her coworkers [12] acts as a model of excellence for survey research in such a sensitive area. The impetus for the survey was the emergence of the HIV pandemic, and the attendant effort to assess and control its spread. The emergence in the 1980s of a lethal epidemic of sexually transmitted infection focused attention on the profound ignorance that still remained about many aspects of sexual behavior, despite Kinsey and others. The collaboration of epidemiologists, statisticians, and survey researchers produced a plan and a survey about sex in which all the many problems with such surveys identified earlier were largely overcome.

A feasibility study assessed the acceptability of the survey, the extent to which it would produce valid and reliable results, and the sample size needed to produce statistically acceptable accuracy in estimates of minority behavior. The results of the feasibility study guided the design of the final questionnaire that was used in obtaining results from a carefully selected random sample of individuals representative of the general population. Of the 20,000 planned interviews 18,876 were completed. Nonresponse rates were generally low. The results provided by the survey give a convincing account of sexual lifestyle in Britain at the end of the twentieth century. For interest one of the tables from the survey is reproduced in Table 3. The impact of AIDS has also been responsible for an increasing number of surveys about sexual behavior in the developing world, particularly in parts of Africa. A comprehensive account of such surveys is given in [1].

Summary

Since 1892 when a biology student, Clelia Mosher, questioned 45 upper middle-class married Victorian women about their sex lives, survey researchers have asked thousands of people about their sexual behavior. According to Julia Erickson [4] in Kiss and Tell, ‘Sexual behavior is a volatile and sensitive topic, and surveys designed to reveal it have great power and great limits’. Their power has been to help change, radically change in particular aspects, attitudes about sex compared to 50 years ago. Their limits have often been their methodological flaws. And, of course, when it comes to finding out about their sexual behavior, people may not want to tell, and even if they agree to be interviewed they may not be entirely truthful. But despite these caveats the information from many of the surveys of human sexual behavior has probably helped remove the conspiracy of silence about sex that existed in society, which condemned
Table 3  Number and percent of respondents taking part in different sexual practices in the last year and ever, by social class (from [12])

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Vaginal intercourse</th>
<th>Oral sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Last year (%)</td>
<td>Ever (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I, II</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>97.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III NM</td>
<td>90.3</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III M</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>95.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV, V</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>91.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Vaginal intercourse</th>
<th>Oral sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Last year (%)</td>
<td>Ever (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I, II</td>
<td>91.8</td>
<td>98.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III NM</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>94.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III M</td>
<td>90.1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV, V</td>
<td>81.9</td>
<td>93.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>74.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NM = nonmanual workers; M = Manual workers.

many men and women to a miserable and unfulfilling sex life. The results have challenged views of the past 100 years that sex was not central to a happy marriage and that sex, as a pleasure for its own sake, debased the marital relationship. Sex as pleasure is no longer regarded by most people as a danger likely to overwhelm the supposedly more spiritual bond between a man and a woman thought by some to be achieved when sex occurs solely for the purposes of reproduction. Overall the information about human sexual behavior gathered from sex surveys has helped to promote, all be it in a modest way, a healthier attitude toward sexual matters and perhaps a more enjoyable sex life for many people.

References


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