

A LINE ON LIFE

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Suspicious about Sex Research *

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Some of you may be wondering what type of person writes a weekly column like this, especially one that so often deals with sex. Even more so, you may have had some suspicions about the character of the sex researchers who provide the data that I use. Why do these suspicions exist?

In studying sexuality, the same methods are used as when studying other types of behavior. However, when we study sexual behavior, we are studying *tabooed* behavior – behavior that you are not supposed to do. Even if you engage in sexual behavior, you tend not to talk about it. For example, your response to the question, "*When was the last time you ate?*" would be much more open than your response to "*When was the last time you had sex?*" Norms leading to the reluctance to respond effect the way you view those who study sexuality. These norms also influence the way sexuality is studied.

Those in our society see students and researchers who study sexuality as somehow "*different*" from those who study subject like accounting or animal physiology. Ulterior motives are often suspected. Many people are likely to think that person is inexperienced, strange, obsessed or unhealthy for studying sexuality.

Students taking a social psychology course, for example, do not have to explain their "*true*" motives for taking that course. On the other hand, those taking a course on sexuality are frequently asked by their friends for their "*real*" motives for taking the course. Initially, their friends – especially guys – tend to make jokes about what the student knows or doesn't know about sex. ("*You mean you have to take a class about it? Are there labs? Ha, ha.*") The humor of others often disguises their uneasiness about sexuality. Even so, the textbooks and readings about sexuality are usually the most passed-around books. Students find eager audiences to discover what they learned in the sexuality classes.

Like students, researchers face difficulties in studying sexuality. What makes sex research different from traditional psychological research is not its methodology — all social sciences rely on the same methodologies. It is the *content*. Because of the taboos surrounding sexuality, sex researchers face problems that other social scientists do not.

For example, imagine that – in our culture – *eating* was subject to the same taboos as sexuality. Researchers wanting to study eating would have the same obstacles observing people eat, as we are currently experiencing in trying to observe sexual behavior. Colleagues or friends might think the researcher was suffering from a food fetish or an obsession with eating. Watching people eat at MacDonald's would be considered the same as voyeurism. "*May I observe you masticating (chewing) your Big Mac?*" would be viewed like a shocking display of carnal lust.

Even though knowledge about sexuality is very important to both individuals and our society, sex research is not a high-status field. Because of our society's uneasiness with sexuality, research in this area is minimized. In 1977, John Gagnon, a leading sex researcher, noted:

"Sex research is still not very respectable, and sex researchers are viewed skeptically by their more conventional colleagues.... It is often difficult to get funds to do sex research, because granting agencies and foundations are afraid of being attacked for supporting sex research."

Only recently has sex research gained a degree of respectability. Between 1920 and 1945, many researchers were unwilling to do research on sexuality. To protect their professional image, researchers had to argue that "*although the subject was distasteful, it had to be studied as any other kind of pathology.*" Not only

was there little prestige in such work, it was politically risky. For example, in the early 1950s, Alfred Kinsey did his groundbreaking work on American sexual behavior. A Congressional committee investigated his funding, which he subsequently lost. In 1978, Vern Bullough, a prominent researcher, requested his FBI file under the Freedom of Information Act.

"I was shocked to find that the FBI classified me as a security risk.... At each annual or biennial check of my activities made by the FBI from 1956 to 1972...my research in prostitution led the list of subversive activities. Listed were some of my talks and scholarly papers on sex, homosexuality, pornography, abortion, etc."

Bullough was placed in a security risk category by the FBI that provided for his imprisonment in the event of a national emergency. Bullough indicated that his case was not unusual. It merely illustrated that *"those who engage in sex research remained somewhat suspect to many, including some in powerful positions."*

Since I do write about some of this research, I assume that some of you are skeptical about me. However, I will continue to write this weekly column about psychological topics – sexual or otherwise – as long as you gain information that will help your lives and this publication has the courage to put it into print.

* Adapted from Strong and DeVault's *Understanding Our Sexuality*, West, 1988, page 9.