Why Should Anyone Lie on A Questionnaire?

by Everett C. Ladd

David Murray was the first of several researchers to write *Public Perspective*, taking issue with Richard Lewontin's review of the survey by Edward Laumann and his colleagues at the National Opinion Research Center on "sexual practices in the United States." We invited Murray to publish his critical assessment here. Dr. Murray is convinced that Dr. Lewontin's harsh verdict on the NORC study is more ideological than methodological: "I suspect that Lewontin begins with an assumption—to wit, bourgeois morality is a fraud, and those whose data reinforce conventionality can only be hypocrites." Lewontin may or may not see middle-class values in this light. For our part, the editors of *Public Perspective* are entirely sympathetic to bourgeois norms.

Lewontin's primary argument is that there are topics on which it's exceedingly hard to get respondents to give reliable information. Acknowledging such areas doesn't diminish social science. Surely Lewontin is right as a rule that "there are some things in the world that we will never know and many that we will never know exactly. Each domain of phenomena has its characteristic grain of knowability" (June/July 1995 issue, p. 3).

The Types of Questions Asked

Q. 1: Thinking back over the past 12 months, how many people, including men and women have you had sexual activity with, even if only one time?; **Q2**: Since I will be asking some questions about (this/these) sexual partner(s), please tell me a first name or some other way to refer to (this person/each of these people)....;**Q13**: IF MORE THAN ONE PARTNER ON ROSTER:...Which of the people that you mentioned do you consider to have been your most important or primary sexual partner during the last 12 months?...Of the people that you mentioned, who did you have sex with most recently...?; **Q20**: (Is/Was) (PARTNER) married, living with someone else in a sexual relationship, separated, divorced, or in a steady relationship with someone else when you first became sexually involved?; **Q22**: During the last 12 months, (while you were sexually involved,) about how often did you have sex with (PARTNER)? Was it once a day or more, 3 to 6 times a week, once or twice a week, 2 to 3 times a month, once a month or less...?; **Q28**: How often (do/did) either you or (PARTNER) use any drugs to get high or intoxicated before or during sex...always, usually, sometimes, rarely, never?; **Q32**: Now I'm going to ask you some questions about anal intercourse. By anal intercourse, we mean when a man's penis is inside his partner's anus or rectum. When you had sex with (PARTNER), how often did you have anal intercourse with (PARTNER)? Was it always, usually, sometimes, rarely, or never?

We have learned that people will talk with reasonable candor about many subjects in carefully constructed interviews. But we have also learned that there are other areas where many are unwilling or unable to "tell the truth." Country-to-country differences in this regard are sometimes striking. In research for *Public Opinion in America and Japan* (AEI Press, 1996), Karlyn Bowman and I found that polls show only a tiny percentage (four percent or so) of adult Japanese stating that they had ever been divorced—compared to 25 to 30 percent of adult Americans. Official statistics, however, show that the actual incidence of divorce in Japan is not nearly that much lower than in the US. Most Americans seem to answer questions on this topic candidly; while many Japanese who have been divorced won't acknowledge it to an interviewer.

Here in the US, surveys asking people about their current annual family income encounter serious net under-reporting. The Census Bureau, the principal data source, acknowledges that the total aggregate money income reported in its Current Population Surveys (CPS) is far lower than what's shown by other reliable sources.[1] Census notes that the CPS has especially serious under-reporting problems for interest and dividend income, where the survey estimates are just 51 and 33 percent of the independent estimates (p. C-13). Census further acknowledges that "answers to questions about money income often depend on the memory or knowledge of one person in a household. Recall problems can cause underestimates of income...." (p. D-3). Still other respondents may be reluctant to give a government interviewer—even one promising full confidentiality—an accurate report on his or her family income if that would require reporting an amount in excess of what was filed with the IRS.

Problems encountered by the CPS on family income are likely small in comparison to those NORC researchers faced in asking a cross-section of adult Americans scores of intrusive questions about the most intimate details of their sex lives. The questionnaire is reprinted in an appendix to *The Social Organization of Sexuality*; questions included in the in-person interview alone cover 60 densely-packed pages.

I don't know what proportion of those who participated in the survey reliably answered questions such as the brief selection shown here, but I suspect many did not. More than "prudery" is involved. Why should people speak frankly to an interviewer previously unknown to them about a matter so intensely personal, and so deeply engaged with ideas of right and wrong, as their sexual practices and experience? Whether the NORC findings overall exaggerated or understated such things as the number of different sexual partners American men and women have had, it's likely that many people didn't describe their experience candidly.

It's also unlikely that the survey's participants resemble in most relevant regards those who declined to participate. Substantial numbers of those approached in exit polls are in effect telling the interviewers, "Don't bother me." These surveys are finding it hard to get reliable estimates of the voting decision—which is relatively non-sensitive. How much greater, then, is the likely impact of nonparticipation in a survey such as that done for *The Social Organization of Sexuality*?

Murray thinks the NORC study is vastly sounder than the earlier Kinsey efforts. It is, of course, but the comparison is unfair and even demeaning to the NORC investigators. No knowledgeable person considers Kinsey's work to be survey research. At issue here isn't whether Laumann and his team are competent survey professionals—they certainly are—but whether constraints inherent in the survey's subject matter are sufficiently acknowledged.

Endnote

[1] *Money Income of Households, Families, and Persons in the United States: 1992*, Current Population Reports, Series P60-184, p. C-12.