

Searching by the Light: In Defense of Social Science

by David Murray

In its June/July 1995 issue, *Public Perspective* addressed a subject we titled, "Measuring American Society—The Numbers Are Often Wrong." Among the commentary in this section, we included an excerpt from a review that Richard Lewontin, a population geneticist at Harvard, had written for the *New York Review of Books*. Lewontin criticized the social science in a book by Edward Laumann, John Gagnon, Robert Michael, and Stuart Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*. Here, David Murray of the Statistical Assessment Service takes issue with Lewontin's criticisms.

An old joke had it that the drunk searched for his lost keys not where they were dropped, but rather in the yellow circle of a nearby lamppost. Upon being questioned about the logic, he offered the compelling response—he searched where the light was better.

This joke captures the dilemma of sexuality research, and Richard Lewontin's *New York Review of Books* essay (excerpted in *Public Perspective*, Vol. 6 No. 4) is right to question a social science that, unable to investigate actual behavior through the keyhole *flagrante*, relies on self-reports, where the light, though less urgently *delicto*, is clearly better. Before dismissing this strategy, however, we should determine just how far away the lost keys are likely to be.

Moving Beyond the Kinsey Study of Sexuality

Most sex studies have moved forward considerably since Alfred Kinsey's 1948 survey of sexuality. Kinsey's study, which produced, among other figures, estimates of 10% or more homosexuals in society, has been subjected to extensive methodological criticism. In many respects, Kinsey's work was an attempt to develop an ideal-type structure of distributions of sexual actors, because he believed that one couldn't "just ask Mrs. Jones," (or even Mrs. Robinson). Accordingly, he went to various quadrants of the social/sexual world, such as the Indiana State Penitentiary, for his samples. Kinsey's error, however, was to treat the answers as summative. That is, he added them together, on the assumption that the extreme quadrants would cancel each other, leaving a legitimate portrait.

The University of Chicago and the National Opinion Research Center, well aware of Kinsey's problems and the subsequent fate of sexuality research, took a more rigorous course. They constructed a comprehensive and systematic sampling technique for their study entitled *The Social Organization of Sexuality*. The NORC team eventually turned to private foundation support for their study after President

Bush's Health and Human Services Department found them too hot a political potato. But ire can come from many political quarters, as Richard Lewontin, an eminent geneticist and no supporter of Republicans, shows in his review.

What is Lewontin's complaint? He feels that NORC, by asking people what they do, consistently low-balls the number of sexual practices, particularly those which might be regarded as deviant. When "the NORC, the organization that epitomizes modern objective statistical social science...does not crack the problem of knowledge from self-report, then not just 'sexology' but all of scientific sociology is in deep trouble."

For Lewontin, the NORC study was "made objectionable by the air of methodological snootiness...(they) expend immense intellectual energy on the problem of taking a representative sample...but are rather cavalier about the question of whether people tell them the truth when asked." Specifically, Lewontin fears that repression seals the public's lips and hence distorts the scientific survey. People will just not talk about their sexuality, he asserts.

Lewontin, however, seems unfamiliar with recent daytime television programs. Rather than feeling reluctance about their sex lives, the shows seem packed with Americans quite free about their various erogenous zones. Is Lewontin merely an insulated academic straying outside of his expertise?

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Everett Ladd has defended the right of an evolutionary biologist to poach upon subject matter not his own, since "geneticists are hardly unfamiliar with statistical measures." More troubling than mathematical competence, however, is the question as to whether Lewontin really knows the sociological tools. Regarding sex research, his central claim is that, "There remains one realm of self-report that seems utterly resistant to external verification." But he has overstated his case, I believe, in large part because of unfamiliarity with the full armory of social investigation.

The "Sex Survey" in Perspective

Lewontin's general posture towards social science is most clearly revealed when he makes a comparison between sexuality research and domestic abuse: "One cannot know, for instance, how many women suffer domestic assaults by asking their husbands." To be sure, but, one can get a sense of how far away the interested estimate is from evidential likelihood.

For instance, domestic violence is no doubt under-reported, yet the rate of domestic homicide, which leaves the indisputably countable corpse, is reported by criminologist Gary Kleck to be going down. Self-serving reports from interested parties, therefore, can be calibrated against other evidence—the body, or, in the case of sex, such things as pregnancies and rates of venereal infection. Overall, when it comes to rates, we are not as much in the dark as the image of the bedroom would suggest.

Lewontin is right to establish a central difficulty for sexual study, which is the secretiveness of (most) acts. Happily, the problem of privacy, while real, is much diminished once one grants that sexuality, which appears solitary, is in fact an importantly *social* process susceptible to indirect accounting. For instance, most expressions of the drive involve at least two individuals, and sex has a countable product, seen in rates of reproduction.

Moreover, the act leaves traces, such as rates of disease, as well as further evidence in the sale of commercial products. Sex, that is, only appears to be private. It is most commonly a social dyad, and it depends upon a wider context for the choreography of meeting and mating, all of which make it an intensely social activity. My argument is that where sex is social, it is also accessible to measurement.

Let me acknowledge that self-report does not offer an immaculate window on intention or on actual behavior. But neither is it without relationship to

the behavior. The connection is subtle but recoverable. We should examine a parallel problem, which would be to ask someone the speed at which they drove. There is a norm, and the proper sort are inclined to give the normative answer. Young males may over-exaggerate, the elderly may just admit confusion. Actual observations of driving, of course, reveal that the norm is not strictly adhered to, and actual speed on the highway is commonly faster than the formal limit. But the norm is nevertheless present in interesting, and measurable, ways.

If the limit is 55 mph, then many will drive 65. That buffer of difference is itself a rough constant. In the presence of an enforcing agent, the norm and the behavior more closely coincide. In an emergency, they may vary widely, or show the presence of a superseding norm. But most importantly, the actual behavior is highly regular, even though it may not exactly equal the stated norm.

People just do not drive some at 25, others at 114, the rest between 39 and 84—they drive around the stated norm in regularized ways, and their behavior leaves several measurable "traces" of physical evidence. Gas consumption, tire wear, accident skid marks, and citations given provide, for the thoughtful detective, marks against which to test the validity of various self-reports. The wildly spurious will exceed those marks, and reveal the deliberate deception.

Comparable regularities in report discrepancy are commonly found in areas such as voting participation, and we may reasonably expect the same for sexual behavior. The burden may actually fall on Lewontin to account for how it is that polls are ever able to be right or even close in areas of emotional potency, such as abortion. Economic responses to personal preferences, in the aggregate, allow a restaurant to order bananas for the upcoming week in a number that proves reasonably accurate. Actuarial tables, bank loans, product development, and presidential elections are only measurable at all because

there is a relationship between self-reports and performance. Reports and behavior both follow forces of a social nature and are not just the product of individual idiosyncrasy.

Other Consistent Findings

Moreover, three massive surveys in France, Britain, and now the NORC data from the US show a remarkable fact—comparable numbers for every category of sexuality. The French telephone-surveyed 20,000, the British did face-to-face interviews with 18,000, and the NORC survey acquired another 3,000 respondents out of roughly 9,000 inquiries. In general, the more times one can sample, and the more heterogenous the settings into which the sample dips, the higher the confidence level in the validity of the findings.

This comparability is not conclusive, but it remains very steady. Further, such equivalence of numbers for the preference, type, and frequency of sexual acts and identities should allay Lewontin's concerns that Americans are somehow unusually susceptible to repression. Whatever we may think of Gallic veracity, we hardly suspect them of inordinate erotic modesty.

An added difficulty is that Lewontin is not entirely accurate in his dismissal of NORC's variables. For instance, he declares that prostitutes have been ignored by NORC's methodology. But Appendix B, specifically records data for females who were asked, "Since your 18th birthday, have you ever had sex with a person you paid or who paid you for sex?"

Next, Lewontin is surprised that no one sought out college dormitories, where we should find "relentless sexuality," thereby yielding higher numbers. Has Lewontin missed the point that questions about "lifetime sexual experiences" will cover those college years of potentially increased activity? He is further concerned about the exclusion of the institutionalized, because the survey examined only those with attainable ad-

Polling America

dresses. Since “there is nothing like having been raped in prison to organize people’s understanding of the social world around them,” he specifically demands the addition of a question, “Have you ever spent time in prison?”

Lewontin’s point is dramatic, but he apparently missed the specific questionnaire item asking whether the respondent had spent time in jail. About 13% have, and they are slightly, but not significantly, more likely to have had increased sex partners.

Finally, Lewontin challenges the NORC survey for its choice of social forces. He dismisses, for instance, the proxies that NORC uses for social class, such as education or parent’s wages. One suspects this dismissal is because of an implicit bit of social thinking on the part of Lewontin which seems wedded *a priori* to the notion that social class must not only matter in sexual affairs, it must predominate. Poverty, criminality, or race/ethnicity are the variables that Lewontin expects. But according to NORC, social class seems to matter little, affecting sexual behavior only slightly.

Considering the Motive

I began by asking whether Lewontin’s analysis was primarily methodological, or whether another motive was paramount. Since it was he who directed an inquiry at the ideological motives of the NORC sexual researchers, should we not ask for Lewontin’s? The first issue is that low counts, of either gays or orgasms, seem to dismay him. Why should higher numbers be more satisfying? That is, if he is genuinely a methodological critic, arguing that we cannot know in principle, why not assume the equal likelihood that everybody is really exaggerating, rather than dampening, their number of sexual encounters?

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 seems to think

that subjects are in the grips of “false consciousness.” Of the original effort by the NORC team to title their survey something innocuous and thereby acquire funding, he says, “The attempt to mislead the prudes in the Bush administration did not work.” Yet his reaction, it seems, comes close to producing the exact reciprocal. It is true that politics plays a part, and that government officials of the Bush and the Thatcher administrations were concerned lest their respective sex surveys revealed, and thereby validated, the promiscuity that they feared.

But Lewontin appears their counterpart on the progressive ledger. Once the findings were in, they brought smiles to the nervous faces of the prudes. People

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were conventional; more than that, they were traditional, monogamous, dull, and in the main, bourgeois, just as were the worried officials. Lewontin appears troubled because sexuality studies demonstrate, more than any other summing adjective, that when it comes to their genitals as well as their pocketbooks the bulk of Americans act like Republicans!

Lewontin is distressed not that there exist what NORC termed “master variables” for sexual behavior, but that they are not the ones upon which his theory insists. That is, NORC found regularities in sexual behavior, just as there are for any other social activity, and further found that they are not the ones required by progressivist social thinking—that is, social class and state repression.

So when empirical investigation produces a profile that fails to conform

with his social theory, Lewontin invites us to shoot the messenger—the validity of social science methodology. He, one is finally led to believe, is really defending against the collapse of only one kind of social science—the Marxist/Freudian legacy that all normative postures are ideological masks and produced by false consciousness, at both the social and at the psychological level. Since a social study of sex combines both levels, it must be doubly assaulted.

Granted, what one gets in a survey is an “answer,” a subjective report of an activity for an interlocutor. This is a sociolinguistic event, admittedly, and not a pure reflection of the subject’s inner workings. One cannot recover the activity itself, and even if one could videotape, the observer effect and so forth make it all very problematic. All social science, we must admit, is compromised, in that it is inherently interactional, intersubjective, and involves phenomena on the same order of nature as the investigator himself.

There are no controlled comparisons, the *sine qua non* of Western science, except in the most tightly structured of small-group social psychology. As it stands today social science in the broad frame is a mess, in principle. Nevertheless, what are our choices? Should we throw it out? Into the vacuum which results from expunging careful social science rushes worse. What we have may not be perfect, but it is the best that we can do in the face of alternative mysticism, folklore, and the trumping *raisons d’etat* which await the emptied field. In conclusion, all that truly has to be defended is the following—social science isn’t really any good. It is just better than the political and commercial nonsense that will fill the vacuum in its absence.



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