

What are the difficulties and pitfalls in attempting to conduct a national survey on people's sexual activities?

Studies concerning peoples sexual behaviors are not often looked at or conducted, but however this is a subject where there is a great deal of talk and speculation, so there is not a great deal of evidence to help illustrate the points trying to be made. This means that questions concerning information such as about sexual behaviors, including the age and circumstances of first sex, attitudes to homosexuality and abortion, young people's experiences of sex education, the use of contraception and sexual health services, remaining largely unanswered, and anyone attempting to discover such information, did so under much controversy. It is important however that the public has access to information about sexual lifestyles to understand what effect their sexual behaviors are having on their health. With an ever increasing number of people becoming infected with sexually transmitted diseases, new diseases emerging, and people becoming more aware of AIDS and HIV, the only available data is not very reliable. Studies conducted on HIV have usually been based on homosexual men, injecting drug users, and prostitutes for example, Winkelstein, Lyman, Padian, 1987) This is not a cross section of the population, and so does not tell us a great deal about the spread of the HIV virus. It is a specific sub-group, which is expected to be of a particularly high risk because of their lifestyle, and so can not be used as a measure to assess the general population's behaviours and the findings generalized to the wider population (Cochran, Mostelier, and Tukey 1953).

When conducting a large scale survey on peoples sexual lifestyles several important things need to be considered. One of the main studies to be conducted was that by Wellings, Field, Johnson, and Wadsworth (1994) on sexual behaviours in Britain: the national study of sexual attitudes and lifestyles. The study came about as a result of an emerging HIV epidemic, which provided its justification and the funding opportunities to arise.

A research agenda or hypothesis is required when conducting a study with such sensitivity. It needs to justify or provide a rationale for the study that reflects its main aims. The momentum for the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles was to provide information on the spread of HIV, and in order to help the creation of preventive strategies, and the survey also provided an ideal opportunity to collect data on personal relationships, sex education, people's reproductive health and careers. Therefore the aim of this project was to take advantage of the data from the National Survey of specific relevance to help understand the patterns of family formation and household composition, so it was mainly concerned with firstly exploring the patterns of family formation and structure. Secondly, it wanted to investigate factors influencing why people form relationships particularly those relating to sexual attitudes and lifestyles. Thirdly the study wanted to describe the apparent effect on the course of someone's life by having been, or having lived with, a lone parent. Then the study wanted to document the possible reasons for and the result of teenage pregnancy. Finally it wanted to examine the extent of education, information and communication about sexuality and family life and to explore their relationship with family formation. A large scale study will be looking at how people behave and what the social aspects of their behavior are. The aim will be for it to describe patterns of behavior. By following these objectives the study is a sociological study rather than one driven by bio-medical concerns, such as the spread of sexually transmitted infections and diseases. The survey is measuring facts, attitudes and behaviours, and the participant will answer questions that they understand and can answer. It is also testing whether the hypothesis or research agenda set at the start is met and then confirmed or falsified. This is why it will need to look at all of the sociological aspects of the topic, and not be caught up in one aspect, such as HIV, and just looking at that to help with it's medical advances. If this were to happen the survey would not show significant representativeness. The sample would not be representative of the population, and the findings would therefore not be statistically significant, because only the target group specific to HIV would be targeted.

Funding is a very important aspect of a national survey. Without substantial capital a survey will not have the impetus required to reach as many sections of the population as

would be necessary to get a good cross section. The funding can however impinge on the research agenda because most of the funding is likely to be provided by pharmaceutical or other drug related companies who would be able to use the collected data to help advance efforts to find drugs to cure sexual transmitted diseases, or contraception companies looking to target specific areas of the market. However, the therefore scientific survey would be linked with contemporary social and health issues. This would make see the general applicability become limited to a narrow focus or too limited a sample. The policy implications of the data from the national survey had clear relevance to the planning of health services relating to areas such as fertility control for example. They also have implications for education, particularly relating to sexuality, personal relationships and parenthood. By the study having a range of important areas looked at, people are more likely to want to be involved in giving money to the study. They will be gaining the opportunity to promote their field of study and have access to reliable statistics to further the research into their concern. One of the agenda's may however have more to gain. The prime minister at the time of the study Margaret Thatcher reneged on an earlier commitment to fund the Welling's study/ project because her government did not feel that the data would be reliable, and so it was an unwanted invasion of people's privacy. Why would the government want to be linked with research of AIDS and HIV? The data would not fit in with the party's policies, because any negative aspects of the results which were found would be questioned by the general public, and these would be expected to be tackled and improved, and the health policy would come under close scrutiny. When a similar study was carried out in America, the true official norms of sexuality were not in line with what was thought to be officially practiced in the American society, but also understood that sexual conduct that did not match those norms was harshly judged. The publication of the study by Kinsey exposed to an entire society the difference between official dogma and the actuality of people's lived experience (Gagnon, 1988). If Thatcher had been faced with such inconsistency, it could have been detrimental to her government and their hold over the country. It was better no not be involved at all.

There are several ethical considerations involving a study of this nature. The study obviously has to be a confidential one. The information on the participant will remain always need to remain private. Informed consent needs to be gained and the participants must feel no pressure to answer questions. However they must understand the importance of the study and not answer the questions incorrectly, or feel they have to lie about certain questions as they are in doubt as to whether their information does not remain private, and so their trust must be gained.

The design of the experiment must reflect the type of data needed to be collected because it is a sensitive subject but a great deal of information is sought. A face to face style interview allows a rapport to be built between the interviewer and participant, and allows the questions to be put in a certain manner, and any confusing issues to be clarified. It also allows the participant to ask questions if there is something that they are unsure of or do not understand fully what is being asked of them. There may also however be biases as the requirements may lead the participant to answer a question purposely wrong, as they feel this is the answer the interviewer requires, and as there is no anonymity when answering the questions the participant may not feel inclined to answer truthfully. The other possibility would be to conduct a self-completion personal interview. This would allow for more privacy when answering the personal questions, and relieve some of the discomfort that might be felt when an interviewer had to ask the participant very personal questions. In the national survey, the participants were selected by the small user address postcode file, in which small residential properties are listed, and which is constantly being updated. There was a sub-strata systematic selection in which the interviewer selects one person at random from a household. This means that there is an uneven chance of selection due to differing household sizes and so the data has to be re-weighted. This is because the sample was from a registrar of addresses, and there were differing numbers of occupants in each. It is obvious that a lone occupant has more chance of being selected than a multi-populated residence. The location of the respondent is also important because an even response is wanted across all geographical areas. By re-weighting the data, all the results are a product of the regional weight and the household size scaled to the sample size which in turn shows a more balanced picture. It was

decided that they would use a combination of face-to-face interviewing with a self-completion section. Questions of a more personal and sensitive nature were asked in a booklet which was sealed by the respondent after they had answered the questions, and it was only identifiable by a number.

Some difficult issues in measuring data about sexual attitudes is that people have to understand what point you are trying to make, but not feel that they are being patronized. Every participant will have had different experiences and have differing levels of knowledge. The questions have to be expressed in a manner that the point of it is clear, but it does not read so basic that it is not taken seriously, or that people feel they are being talked down to. By putting the entire sensitive questions in a booklet, such as in the national survey, and by putting a glossary at the back people are able to look up any parts they do not fully understand and avoid any unnecessary embarrassment. Also, by allowing the participants the opportunity to answer using multiple choice such as by for example answering a, b, c or d, they do not feel that they are as pressured to answer, and as the answers are all ready laid out they don't have to worry that their answer is a socially unacceptable one and which they feel they can not write out. By seeing their answer written down, it gives an increasing confidence to answer truthfully.

Reliability and validity are very important when wanting to find out information and present the findings to the public. When examining sexual behaviours there are not many opportunities to check the data provided is correct because sexual behaviours are mostly private affairs. No other sources can be used, and it is not likely that anything can be verified without disrespecting the respondents' privacy, so it is important that the survey appeals to the respondent to be honest with their answers. The respondent needs to be reassured constantly that their data is going to remain private and that the data collected is very important, and what the implications of the study might be in helping the AIDS cause and improving the public's general health. In search for validity it is however possible to see how consistently one participant answers all their questions. By checking that their answers were constantly along the same line, it suggests they are answering truthfully. In the Wellings study inconsistency checks were carried out on all the

questionnaires and it was found that around 80% had no inconsistencies at all (Wadsworth, Field, Johnson, Bradshaw, Wellings 1993).

Surveys that break barriers and report information that has not been collected before because of there controversy, are often hard to perform due to all the difficulties it entails. The public are often not willing to participate if they feel their private life is being intruded and the questions are too personal. There may be problems finding funding and backing for surveys from the companies that the data concerns if they believe the survey will not be successful and they won't want their name attached to failed work. Such surveys though, if researched and carried out successfully could be highly publicized and fulfill most of the agenda set at the start with ease.

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