

Book section: ESSAYS AND REVIEWS

The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States, by Edward O. Laumann, John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael and Stuart Michaels (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 718 pp., \$49.95.

REVIEWED BY
Stephen M.
Marson, Ph.D.

The 20th century has witnessed the publication of four monumental works on sexology: Havelock Ellis's *The Psychology of Sex* (1905);¹ Alfred Kinsey et al.'s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948)² and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953);³ Masters and Johnson's *Human Sexual Response* (1966)⁴ and *Human Sexual Dysfunction* (1970);⁵ and Laumann et al.'s *The Social Organization of Sexuality* (and Michael et al.'s non-scholarly version, *Sex in America: A Definitive Study*⁶).

The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States by Laumann et al. is the first national study of sexuality that complies strictly with contemporary scientific sampling standards and addresses virtually every facet of human sexual behavior. The best way to appreciate the importance of *The Social Organization of Sexuality* is by contrasting it to research that employs nonprobability samples. In her national sex survey that ignored standards of probability sampling (*Women and Love*, 1987⁷) and publicly denounced their importance (*Women as Revolutionary Agents of Change*, 1994⁸), Shere Hite proclaimed that 70% of women married for more than five years commit adultery. *The Social Organization of Sexuality* estimates with 95% confidence—give or take three percentage points—that only 15% of married women commit adultery. The differences between these findings are dramatic, but not surprising to the social statisti-

cian. Nonprobability samples rarely reflect reality *and can be misleading and harmful* when attempting to generalize from them. For example, Hite's research may well have provided the basis for rationalizing adultery by women. One can only wonder how many wives committed adultery because they believed that everyone else was doing it. The mass media have a long and embarrassing history of providing legitimacy for incorrect generalizations drawn from nonprobability samples. Findings derived from nonprobability samples *cannot* be trusted, whereas findings from probability samples usually can be accepted with confidence.

The importance of *The Social Organization of Sexuality* goes beyond mere number crunching. The authors formulated the questionnaire upon which their research is ultimately based by synthesizing three theoretical traditions: scripting theory, choice theory, and social network theory. Employing theoretical frameworks in survey research is done rarely or done incompletely. When surveyors employ theory, as these authors do, they give the reader a deeper understanding of the findings; most importantly, they avoid the problem that statisticians label the "type I error" (proclaiming that findings are statistically significant when they are not). The combination of highly structured probability sampling and theory takes us a giant step forward in understanding human sexuality.

The Social Organization of Sexuality is a monumental achievement for at least three other reasons. First, it is an excellent teaching tool to illustrate social science research and sampling strategies. The authors thoroughly describe their research process. Second, the database accumulated is a superb resource for hypothesis testing and theory development. For example, an attorney may have a legal theory that must be tested prior to introducing it in court. With this database, it would take little time, effort, and money to run a series of critical inferential statistics. Third, theory-construction professors can retest theory by employing this database. Attempts can be made to replicate many older studies, thus

advancing our knowledge of human behavior. Each time a new probability database becomes available, social science gains enormously.

Where are the study's weaknesses? (The authors' preface warns that their work is not perfect and encourages readers to build from it.) The major weakness is in the "homosexuality" section. For decades virtually every human sexuality textbook has estimated that 10% of the male population is homosexual, a statistic derived from Kinsey's nonprobability sample. The authors note that this is *not* an accurate descriptive statistic. In describing their own data, the authors skillfully integrate past homosexuality research and theory. They find that the concept of homosexuality is extremely complex, if only because different age cohorts have different rates of homosexuality. In fact, the authors *almost* suggest that maturation decreases homosexual tendencies. Further, the frequency of homosexual behavior is problematic. If a subject has a few homosexual encounters, does that define him as a homosexual? The authors emphasize that sexual orientation is a continuous rather than a discrete (or categorical) variable. Finally, the research data support huge behavioral differences between male and female homosexuals. Such are the reasons that the authors cite for their failure to offer an operational definition of homosexuality. This is disappointing but, I suppose, politically correct.

Many discrete variables in social science present the problem that the authors experienced with homosexuality. Race is an excellent example. Physical anthropologists have given clear scientific evidence that racial categories are dubious at best and rarely mutually exclusive—just as the authors describe homosexuality. However, race is constantly employed as a successful prediction variable in a wide variety of settings (e.g., election predictions, jury selection). Further, conceptualizing homosexuality as they did, the authors may have made the concept more complex than it deserves to be. I wish they had offered an operational definition of homosexuality;

yet I am acutely aware that had they attempted to define the term, they would have been harshly criticized. Offering an operational definition of homosexuality is, I think, a no-win proposition.

Every lawyer who specializes in divorce and/or family practice should own this book so as to learn how to be effective in generalizing findings to a judge and a jury. Expert witnesses and judges must also be intimately familiar with the findings, implications and controversies described by the authors. They will certainly be called upon to draw inferences from specific situations. In addition, all medical and allied staff employed in public health departments should be familiar with these findings, as should professors with specialties in statistics, social science research, and human sexuality. Finally, no academic library should be without *The Social Organization of Sexuality*, and public libraries should at the very least acquire the non-scholarly version, *Sex in America: A Definitive Study*. The findings in these two books will profoundly influence research, social policy, and epidemiology for decades to come.

- Notes
1. Havelock Ellis, *The Psychology of Sex* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, 1905).
 2. Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co., 1948).
 3. Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin and Paul H. Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co., 1953).
 4. William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966).
 5. William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Dysfunction* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970).
 6. Robert T. Michael, John H. Gagnon, Edward O. Laumann, and Gina Kolata, *Sex in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

7. Shere Hite, *Women and Love: A Cultural Revolution in Progress* (New York: Knopf, 1987).
8. Shere Hite, *Women as Revolutionary Agents of Change: The Hite Reports and Beyond* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).