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Study debunks image, finds sex partners faithful

By Thomas Maugh

The media may portray American culture as a cauldron of steaming sexuality, but the private lives of Americans are more like a comforting bowl of warm oatmeal.

A long-awaited landmark study of adult sexuality in the U.S. has found the sexual practices of Americans are surprisingly conservative. It is a portrait of a land of faithful partners who have sex conventionally, about once a week.

The research – billed as the most comprehensive look at the subject ever – disputes many widespread myths about sexual practices in the U.S., researchers at the University of Chicago said. They added that the results will help Americans deal with issues related to the spread of AIDS, increasing numbers of abortions, teenage sexuality and the future of marriage.

Among the findings: Though Americans have sex once a week, on average, a full third have it only a few times a year or not at all. More than 80 per cent had only one sexual partner or no partner at all in the past year and just three per cent had five or more partners in that period. Only 2.8 per cent of men and 1.5 per cent of women said they were homosexual or bisexual, well below some previous estimates.

Fully 72 per cent of women who have undergone abortions have had only one. This disputes the idea, the researchers say, that abortion is routinely used as a form of birth control.

The researchers also conclude the high degree of monogamy, linked with observed patterns for selection of sex partners, make it unlikely that AIDS will spread through the heterosexual population in the epidemic fashion that some experts have predicted.

The findings are contained in two new books, one for scientists to be published Monday and one for the lay public to be published the following Monday.

The new study is "light-years better than Kinsey," the prototype sex study published in 1953 by pioneer sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, said Dr. Joseph Catania of the University of California, San Francisco. "It is a great leap forward," he said, because it provides the first look at a cross-section of Americans rather than at the limited, self-selected populations explored by Kinsey and others.

Sociologist Edward Laumann, a leader of the study, predicted the results will be "empowering information" to the vast majority of people who may feel sexually inferior after being exposed to the hypercharged eroticism of television, movies and advertizing. "These images of hot sex have people saying, ‘What am I missing?’ This will bring the temperature down a bit."

The study involved 90-minute, face-to-face interviews with 3,432 randomly selected Americans aged 18 to 59.

Some of the results should be very encouraging to anyone who honours family values, according to Laumann and co-leader Robert Michael. Almost all Americans marry, and 75 per cent of married men and 85 per cent of married women say they have remained faithful. The people who have the most sex and are happiest with their sex lives are monogamous couples, whether married or not.

The median number of sexual partners American men have over a lifetime is six. For women, the median is two.

Of all the items on a long list of sexual practices, only three were appealing to more than a tiny fraction of heterosexual Americans, and only one of those stood out. Heterosexuals universally find vaginal intercourse appealing and they include it in almost every sexual encounter. Watching a partner undress is a distant second in appeal, followed by oral sex.

The researchers found marked differences in sexual behaviour and attitudes between men and women, but perhaps the most dramatic involved coerced sex. Fully 22 per cent of women said they had been coerced in a sexual encounter, while only three per cent of men admitted they had ever coerced a woman. "That represents a dramatic difference in the character of how men and women are interpreting events," Laumann said.

The conservatism explicit in the study is good news for researchers hoping to block the spread of AIDS. People tend to mate only within groups of people who are like themselves, Laumann said, and there are relatively few opportunities for sexual diseases to pass from one such group to another.

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REFERENCE: Laumann, E.O. and R.T. Michael: *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States.* The University of Chicago Press, 1994. ISBN: 0-226-46957-3 (cloth), 0-226-47020-2 (paperback). [Arts Library call number: RC261.U47]

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