

Jointly launched in December 2011 by the counselling charity Relate and the lingerie and sex toy chain shop Ann Summers, the results of the Sex Census 2012 were made public in May this year.¹ When they launched the survey, Relate hoped it would encourage more people 'to talk about their sex lives and take action if they think things aren't right'; a spokesperson for Ann Summers commented that, since 'more and more couples are visiting our stores looking for solutions and enhancement and asking questions along the way', they needed 'the expertise and support of a charity like Relate to help fulfil this obligation'.²

In the report, Jacqueline Gold, Chief Executive Officer at Ann Summers, says the aim of the survey (said to have been completed by some 20,000 people) was 'to create a credible piece of research that could be referred to when it comes to understanding and monitoring sexual attitudes and behaviour in the UK'. Paula Hall, sex therapist at Relate, acknowledges that 'enjoying a good sex life... takes work and commitment' and that 'our sex lives do not exist within a void' but are influenced 'by how we feel about ourselves, our partners and families, our day-to-day lives and the messages we receive from the media and society'.¹

But what kind of message are Ann Summers and Relate conveying, considering that the survey carries all the hallmarks of a PR exercise? Is the Sex Census helpful to people seeking counselling for sexual issues? And doesn't Relate's participation risk bringing the work of counselling into disrepute? Some commentators have

questioned whether a counselling charity such as Relate should join forces with a sex shop, promoting a survey which offers anyone who completes it a 10 per cent discount in Ann Summers stores.²

It is tempting to see the whole endeavour as yet one more example of the commodification of sexuality – part of what the writer Michael Sandel has called the 'market society', where money rules and every human interaction is up for sale.³

Both Relate and Ann Summers have refused to provide details of their methodology or to reveal any of the raw data. This, as one commentator wrote, makes it difficult to say what its findings mean and to whom they apply.² 'Have they been adjusted for gender, sexuality, age or class to make them more representative of the UK population as a whole?'² That does not mean the survey was a sham, or pointless. For one thing, it did generate considerable public debate. This in itself could be valuable, providing therapists with much food for thought.

Middle-aged swingers

So what does the survey show? Among other things, we learn that 50 per cent of 30 to 39 year olds are 'unable to say categorically that they have good sex', and 50 per cent of women and 63 per cent of men 'want more sex'. It shows that, for men, the main barriers to more sex are tiredness (24 per cent), low body confidence (12 per cent) and work (11 per cent), and for women they are body confidence (22 per cent), tiredness (20 per cent) and low self-esteem (14 per cent). Low body confidence and low self-esteem are

rated by both genders as the second (34 per cent) and third (21 per cent) biggest passion wreckers. We also learn that 'by the time women reach 40, their sexual confidence increases, before peaking between 60 and 69'.¹ And so on and so forth.

Writing in *The Guardian*, Christa D'Souza⁴ lamented the inaccuracy of the picture painted by the survey of a nation consumed by middle-aged lust; a picture of renewed passion for sex in the over-40s who, no longer overwhelmed by concerns such as child-rearing and mortgages, are ready to indulge their wildest sexual fantasies. 'Who are these middle-aged chandelier-swingers?' she asks in disbelief. Are they really telling the truth? We may be willing to admit to most things, from shoplifting to having a drink problem to being bankrupt and having affairs. But we would never openly admit to living in a sexless marriage or relationship. Celibate relationships, she argues, have become a modern taboo.

As some of us know through our work with clients, there is considerable societal pressure to have sex. There is an explicit and subliminal connection drawn between happiness, health and an active sex life. Against this pressure, it seems only legitimate to assert one's real needs. The trouble is, this stance is often accompanied with a subtle or not-so-subtle vilification of the body. This is problematic, and goes beyond a natural resistance to the pressure of consumer society. For instance, in the same article D'Souza states that having sex with someone you have lived with for 15–20 years, when you have seen them walking naked around the house

Sexuality in a market society

Relate has joined forces with Ann Summers to survey our sexual habits.
Manu Bazzano unpacks what this alliance says about attitudes to sex today

a million times, feels 'inappropriate' and that 'there's a reason... why kids retch at the idea of their parents doing it'.⁴

D'Souza draws valuable conclusions from the survey; the census does foster a split between myth and reality; it does encourage people to pretend; it certainly fetishises youth and beauty. Nonetheless, her critique itself displays a fetishised attitude to beauty and youth and fails to acknowledge the fragile and subtle beauty of the human body of any age.

It is problematic to hint, as D'Souza does, at the advantages of a 'post-sex state'.⁴ It is problematic to assert, quoting self-help sage De Botton, that 'we might be better off if we didn't have a sex drive', given that 'for most of our lives, it causes us nothing but trouble and distress'.

Paradoxically, those who endorse a 'post-sexual' view of relationships have a lot in common with those who wholeheartedly promote sex as an essential consumer item. In both cases, there is an avoidance of the complexities, rewards and difficulties of sexuality, a basic misunderstanding about it, and a subtle (and often not so subtle) denigration of the human body.

Sexuality as biology

There are many reductive views of sexuality but they seem to cluster around two main matrixes: sex as biology and sex as mental representation.

One predominant view reduces sexuality to biology. Here, sex represents a sort of 'basic instinct', the underlying core of our social being. Sex is a natural 'drive', hard-wired into the brain and nervous system, that we cannot help

but try to satisfy. However, since we are also social creatures, we need to contain our impulses (repress them or, better still, sublimate them) for the sake of society and civilisation. This view is often linked to a 'materialist' perspective, according to which our senses passively respond to external stimuli.

The other, equally influential view associates sexuality with psychological or emotional states like pleasure or pain, with ideas or representations. Here it is the idea or mental image of sex that brings into existence the erotic pleasure with which it is associated. This view is often linked to an 'idealist' perspective according to which we actively project our mental images onto reality.

Sexuality as living dialogue

A third view of sexuality is presented by Merleau-Ponty,⁵ a French philosopher and phenomenologist whose influence is gaining momentum in the field of counselling and psychotherapy. Sexuality, he says, is a living dialogue. To the extent that a person's presence implicitly beckons to me, that person cannot be inert; to the extent that I feel myself drawn towards that person, I cannot be simply projecting mental images onto reality. Human sexuality, unlike mere biology, involves what Merleau-Ponty calls a physical aura: it is this particular body that acquires for me 'sexual significance', not just any body, even though all bodies have roughly the same physiological features.⁶

For Merleau-Ponty, biology is a given; we are born with it, whereas sexuality is a form of transcendence of biology. Transcendence here does not mean a

spiritual process but more simply what we do with what we are given: a process of continual transformation, a creative act. A good example of this is kissing. A gesture as natural as the kiss is a cultural and invented usage of the body. 'It is impossible,' Merleau-Ponty writes, 'to superimpose on man a lower layer of behaviour which one chooses to call "natural", followed by an invented cultural or spiritual world. Everything is both invented and natural in man.'⁶

Conclusion

Sexuality remains a taboo in spite of its ubiquity. Sexuality is complex – both natural and cultural. It cannot be reduced to a technique that, once mastered, will make us happier. To do so would mean translating a potentially meaningful and profound experience into a mere commodity. By the same token, we cannot ignore biology, nor the 'blood, sweat and tears' of our human condition, and hope to dream into being (as some fashion and style magazine have it) our 'ideal sexual partner'.

The therapy room might well be one of the few places where the complex domain of sexuality can be safely and fruitfully explored. This is more urgent today, when the media representation of sex as desirable commodity collides with our natural human desire for mutual exploration, communication and for passionate engagement, leaving us muddled and confused. ■

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