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Americans and Their Sexual Partners

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In the absence of responsible social research about human behavior, poor research and media-generated folk lore become conventional wisdom. The assumptions of such conventional wisdom are seldom questioned and rarely tested. In few areas of human behavior is the power of conventional wisdom so pervasive as it is when the subject is sex. In matters of research on sexual behavior, as in other arenas, Gresham's Law applies – bad research seems to drive out good research. And there is good research on sexual behavior, as the recent lengthy and informative review by the National Research Council details. It is just less sensational than much of the poorer research, and thus less successful in shaping public perceptions about the facts pertaining to our sexual behavior. Perhaps Gresham's Law should be paraphrased in this context as: sensational findings (often the result of poor or superficial research) drive out carefully balanced and less sensational findings, at least from headlines and thus from public perception.

Bad research, like the self-selected reader surveys in popular magazines and non-random samples such as those gathered for the Hite Report, and the popular metaphor of a "sexual revolution" have created a conventional wisdom that "everyone knows" to be true: marital infidelity and sexual experimentation are widespread among Americans.

But if "monogamy" is defined as having no more than one sexual partner during the past year, research based on a scientifically sound national sample indicates that Americans are a most monogamous people. Only 14 percent of all adult Americans interviewed in a 1988 nationwide survey were not monogamous in this sense; and excluding those who were not sexually active, 18 percent were not monogamous. In only one major population group – young men – were a majority not monogamous.

Our study is based on a supplement to NORC's (the National Opinion Research Center) GSS

(General Social Survey) given during the winter of 1988 to about 1500 adults who were scientifically selected from a national probability frame of households in the United States. The questions about sexual behavior were included as a self-administered form during the face-to-face interview conducted in the respondent's home. The self-administered form was sealed by the respondent and returned, unopened by the interviewer, with the rest of the survey. This procedure reassured respondents that their answers were confidential and to be used only for statistical purposes such as this article. The response rate on the 1988 GSS was 77.3 percent, and 93.9 percent of those who responded did answer the questions about sexual behavior, well within the range of "item nonresponse" that is typical for a lengthy interview. There is no evidence in this survey that respondents felt the questions about sexual partners were particularly intrusive or inappropriate.

We use two definitions of monogamy. We report the percentage of sexually active people with one sexual partner (M1) and the percentage of all people with zero or one sexual partner (M2). In both definitions we exclude those few (6.1 percent) who did not answer the question. Each of the two definitions has some appeal as a measure of the tendency for adults to be monogamous, for the sexually inactive – those who report having no sexual partner within the past twelve months – can be considered in or out of the definition depending on its purpose. They are not monogamous in the social sense of being committed to a sexual relationship with a sole partner, but from the epidemiological standpoint of risks of contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, they belong to the category of the monogamous. We caution that as our questionnaire asked the number of partners in the preceding twelve months, we cannot distinguish serial monogamy within the year from having two or more partners in the same interval of time. Our definitions of monogamy exclude persons

with more than one partner in a twelve-month period, serially or otherwise. Thus our definition of monogamy represents a lower bound estimate of its prevalence in this respect.

Table 1 shows the basic facts. These facts indicate that a vast majority of adults report monogamous behavior. Among all adults 86 percent were

monogamous (M2), while among the sexually active 82 percent were monogamous (M2). More women (90 percent) report being monogamous than men (81 percent). More older respondents report being monogamous than do younger ones with the monogamy rate rising from 61 percent among those under 25 to 96 percent and higher among those over

Table 1
Monogamy in the United States
 (Percent of Sexually Active Persons with One Partner During Previous Twelve Months)

	M1 *	M2 *		M1 *	M2 *
All	82% (1072)	86% (1390)	Divorced	62% (125)	73% (178)
Gender **			Separated	78% (36)	81% (43)
Women	86% (568)	90% (793)	Never	52% (205)	64% (278)
Men	78% (504)	81% (597)	Race **		
Age **			Black	69% (144)	74% (170)
18-24	56% (144)	61% (163)	White	84% (889)	88% (1161)
25-29	77% (157)	79% (168)	Religion		
30-39	85% (283)	86% (308)	Protestant	83% (648)	87% (852)
40-49	86% (213)	88% (243)	Catholic	85% (281)	89% (364)
50-59	91% (96)	93% (132)	Region		
60-69	93% (119)	96% (194)	North East	82% (216)	86% (274)
70+	95% (59)	98% (180)	North Central	82% (288)	87% (382)
Education			South	82% (372)	86% (482)
Grammar	81% (70)	91% (146)	West	83% (196)	87% (252)
High	83% (504)	87% (644)	Size **		
College	81% (398)	84% (480)	12 SMSA	73% (202)	79% (265)
Graduate	84% (99)	86% (116)	Other SMSA	87% (353)	90% (440)
Marital Status **			Other Urb	82% (400)	86% (530)
Married	96% (672)	97% (740)	Rural	86% (117)	90% (155)
Widowed	71% (34)	93% (151)			

M1: Monogamy defined as having one partner, people with zero partners, and people who refused to answer are excluded from the sample.

M2: Monogamy defined as having zero or one partner, refusals are excluded.

** Signifies that the percentage differences within this category are significant at the .01 level for M1 and M2. Numbers in parentheses indicate the size of the cell on which the percentage is based.

60. Whites (88 percent) have higher monogamy rates than blacks (74 percent), as do residents of smaller sized communities (90 percent) compared to those in large metropolitan areas (75 percent). There appears to be no appreciable difference between Protestants and Catholics or by region of residence in the United States. Marital status has a major influence, as would be expected, with a remarkably high percentage of married persons (97 percent) reporting monogamous behavior. Among sexually active formerly married people, monogamous behavior appears to be the norm as well. Rates of monogamy appear to vary little with educational level (the anomalous high monogamy rate for M2 in Table 1 reflects the large number

of elderly people with low levels of education, many of whom are widowed and have no sexual partner). It appears that sexual experimentation exists predominantly among the young and the nonmarried.

Age, gender, and marital status are powerful predictors of monogamy, as Table 2 suggests. The rates for monogamy are strikingly high for both married men and married women in all three age groups—over 90 percent of each group reported themselves monogamous.

For those who have a "regular" sexual partner, the rates of monogamy are decidedly lower, typically falling 25 percentage points for women under 50 and about 40 percentage points for men under 50. Other

Table 2
Rates of Monogamy Among the Sexually Active, by Gender, Age, and Type of Relationship

<u>Women</u>			
Age	Married*	Regular Partner	No Regular Partner
< 30*	94% (80)	64% (70)	40% (15)
30-49*	100% (159)	74% (93)	50% (16)
50+*	97% (109)	91% (23)	67% (3)
Total	98% (348)	73% (186)	47% (34)
<u>Men</u>			
Age	Married	Regular Partner	No Regular Partner
< 30*	91% (44)	47% (62)	23% (30)
30-49*	95% (163)	55% (53)	42% (12)
50+*	96% (117)	75% (12)	45% (11)
Total	95% (324)	53% (127)	32% (53)

* NB: Row percentages (by partnership for each age group) are statistically significant at the .01 level for all six groups; the column percentages (by age for a given partnership) are significant at the .01 level for only one group, married women.

research suggests that the half-life of a cohabitational union in the United States is only about one year, so if many of those reporting a regular partner are cohabiting, it is likely that they have been in that relationship for less than a full year. Their having more than one sexual partner within a year may cover a period different from that of the regular partnership they report. Many unmarried persons with a "regular" sexual partner may have no expectation about sexual exclusivity, so the lower rates of monogamy for these men and women may not indicate any infidelity.

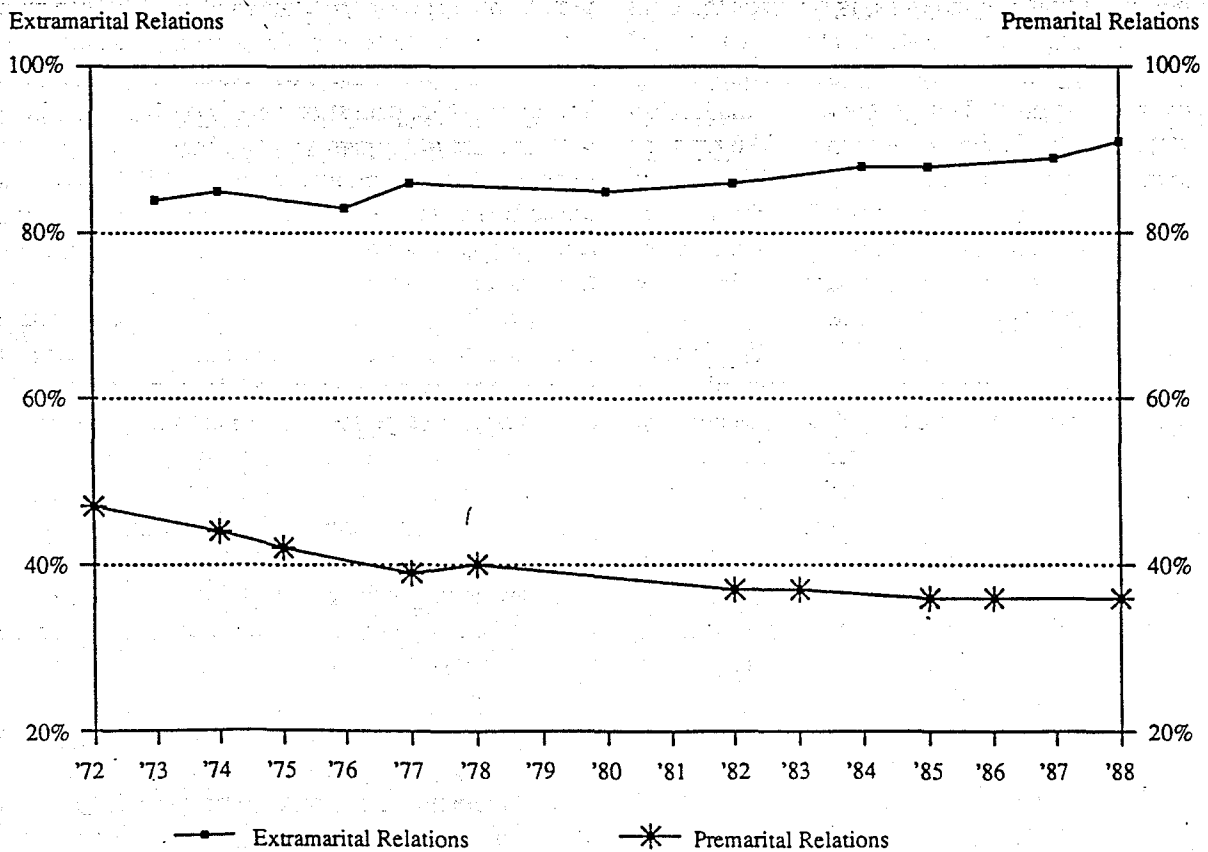
For those who reported having no regular sexual partner, the rates of monogamy – are much lower, about 50 percentage points for women and 60 percentage points for men. They range from 23 percent of the young men to 67 percent of the older women. The rates rise with age and are higher for women. Of the sexually active respondents in the survey who

were not married and had no regular sex partner, about one-third of the men and half of the women nonetheless reported only one partner within the year.

Even among the *nonmonogamous* sexual license is limited. Fifty-seven percent of these women and 32 percent of these men report only two sexual partners. Men, more than women, are likely to report having a large number of partners – and hence to be the primary targets for sexually transmitted diseases. (A quarter of the men who have more than one sexual partner report in fact that they have had at least five such partners and only 8 percent of women had five or more partners.) If we project to life cycle patterns from our cross sectional data, when young people marry or reach the age of thirty or so, a large majority adopt monogamy as their lifestyle.

To see which of these demographic variables had independent effects on monogamy we carried out multiple regression analysis on the M1 definition of

Figure 1
Attitude Toward Nonmarital Sexual Relations
GSS Annual Survey 1972-1988
(Percent Saying Always or Almost Always Wrong)



monogamy. The regressions were run separately for men and for women. They indicate that older people are more likely to be monogamous, that black men (but not black women) are less likely to be monogamous, that those in large cities are less likely to be monogamous, and that compared to the married men and women, those with and those without a regular sex partner are far less likely to be monogamous. The regressions also included information on education level, religion, household age structure, and ethnicity (Hispanics), but none of these variables had any statistically discernible effect on the rate of monogamy.

It is interesting to note, too, that when we reran these regressions on only the persons who were married, there were no significant variables for the women, and only the race variable was significant for the men. That is, marriage is the dominant determinant of the monogamy rate, and within the married population, none of the other factors we looked at — education, city size, household composition, religion, age, (except for race for men) — had an influence that was statistically notable. Again, marital status is clearly the dominant determinant of the monogamy propensity in these data.

One issue that deserves attention, but which we doubtless cannot fully address, is whether the GSS respondents are telling the truth about their sexual behavior. Might they be lying about the number of their sexual partners? Two points can be made. Survey data from the United Kingdom in 1986 reported comparable proportions of the adult population with zero, one and two or more partners. The similarity of these two quite independent surveys provides some face validity for each. The experience of those who have undertaken surveys of sexual behavior is that respondents tend to be remarkably candid. Phrases like "the new permissiveness," "the playboy philosophy," and "open marriage" have become so fashionable and discussions of marital infidelity in popular journals are so commonplace that respondents might be inclined to exaggerate their sexual accomplishments to keep up with the "trends" rather than understate them. Also, if the respondents to the GSS are falsifying accounts of their sexual behavior because of mores which demand monogamy (a circumstance we do not think is the case), then at a minimum they are demonstrating that those mores still strongly support monogamy.

Are the monogamy rates described above "high" by standards of the recent past? Might the situation

of widespread monogamy described by our data reflect a response to the fears created by the AIDS epidemic? Does the high rate of monogamy represent a "retreat" from a previous state of "permissiveness" or "liberation"? Have fear and caution made sexual restraint popular?

As our data is only a snapshot about behavior in the past twelve months, it cannot help us determine directly if the fear of AIDS has affected sexual behavior. Finding that monogamy is relatively rare among young men who have never been married and who do not have a regular sexual partner does not inform us, for they might have had even more partners before they became aware of the AIDS danger.

One way our data might indirectly address this question is if we assume that knowing an AIDS victim inhibits sexual permissiveness. We can compare the sexual behavior of those who do know an AIDS victim with the behavior of those who do not know anyone with AIDS, and that can indicate the magnitude of the behavioral response. But those who do know a victim are significantly less likely to be monogamous. Among all adults 76 percent of those knowing an AIDS victim were monogamous, while 87 percent of those not knowing anyone with AIDS were monogamous. Even those who know an AIDS victim who has died are somewhat less likely to report themselves monogamous (70 percent) than those personally unaware of any AIDS fatalities (80 percent). The direction of causation here is probably that those who are not monogamous, and have a lifestyle that exposes them to greater risks of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, are acquainted with more people who are also at greater risk of contracting those diseases. So this line of inquiry is not revealing.

There is, however, no evidence in our data to support a hypothesis that the current high level of monogamy is the result of fear of AIDS. The demographic correlates of monogamy suggest that sexual behavior varies greatly by gender, age, and especially marital status; these powerful predictors may explain much more of the variation in sexual behavior than does fear of AIDS.

But what might the fear of AIDS have added to the levels of monogamy that had already existed among married people? If there were a more permissive attitude among married people towards infidelity five or ten years ago, how great was this permissiveness? Data from prior years of the General Social Survey (with independent national samples of adults) can inform us about how that attitude has changed over

the past 15 years. It suggests that norms against extramarital sex were strong even 15 years ago. Studying the trend in attitude toward marital infidelity in the annual GSS questionnaire since 1972, there has been a statistically significant increase in opposition to infidelity. There was an increase from 84 percent to 91 percent of the adult population saying that extramarital sex was always or almost always wrong, as Figure 1 indicates. This hardly indicates a dramatic increase in sexual restraint, especially since disapproval of extramarital sex was quite high in the early 1970s when the GSS was first conducted.

It is worth noting that this increase in opposition to extramarital sex has occurred at the same time as there has been a statistically significant increase in tolerance for premarital sex (an increase in tolerance from 53 percent to 64 percent). The notion that social change is always unidimensional and unidirectional rarely is sustained by empirical data. "Revolutions" in which there is uniformity unmarred by complexity usually exist only in newspaper articles and not in the real world.

Three independent national surveys provide data that enables us to gauge the impact of fear of AIDS on American monogamy. A CBS study in 1986 based on 823 cases reported that 11 percent of Americans said that they had changed their behavior because of AIDS. NBC studies conducted in 1986 and 1987 indicated that 7.3 and 7.4 percent, respectively, said they had modified their behavior.

These levels, when reported, were commonly seen as indicating that people were not reacting responsibly to the risks of AIDS, but our findings suggest another interpretation. If many fewer people were engaged in sexual behavior that was risky, it may be quite sensible that few altered their behavior. This is further supported by a 1987 Gallup survey in which 68 percent indicated that no change in their sexual behavior had been made because they did not need to change their behavior. We cannot be sure, and do not intend to be Pollyannas, but our findings that relatively few adults report having sex with many partners may be one reason only about 10 percent of adults report changing their behavior. Another cautionary note – we focus on only the number of partners, and there are several other dimensions of sexual behavior that one might change in response to the risks of AIDS (*e.g.*, care in the selection of partners, avoidance of high-risk sexual practices, use of condoms, *etc.*), and these are beyond the scope of our survey.

The details of the reported change in behavior motivated by fear of AIDS conform quite well to the details in the GSS tables reported above about which groups are most at risk: in the Gallup survey 7 percent of the married people and 22 percent of the never married reported a change of behavior; 10 percent of the whites and 22 percent of the blacks reported a change in behavior, as did 13 percent of the men and 9 percent of the women, 19 percent of those under 25 and 10 percent of those between 35 and 50. The changes for married people are compatible with the change in attitudes towards extramarital sex during the years Americans have been conscious of AIDS. So one can tentatively estimate that, even in the absence of AIDS, the monogamy rate for married men and women would not be less than 90 percent. For the whole population the rate, without the AIDS scare, might be between 75 percent and 80 percent. We note again the face validity here: those groups who report the lower monogamy rates in the GSS – men compared to women, nonmarried compared to married – are those who report in the Gallup survey the biggest change in behavior for fear of contracting AIDS.

The fear of AIDS may have increased monogamy especially among unmarried people and most especially if they are young, but the rates appear to us to have been quite high in any case. Despite the fear of AIDS the promiscuity rate among the young is still high, especially among young, unmarried men, with resultant dangers to themselves and their future partners.

A Sexual Revolution?

Like all metaphors the phrase "sexual revolution" is apt for some dimensions of social behavior over the past couple decades, but by no means all of it. It might be useful to review a few changes in recent years in demographic features such as marriage and divorce as well as to speculate on how they might have affected the rate of monogamy in the United States as measured by our variables M1 and M2.

Consider the changes in marital status. The divorce rate in the United States (per 1000 married women) rose from 9.2 in 1960 to 14.9 in 1970, 22.6 in 1980, and then declined slightly to 21.5 in recent years. As a result, despite a rise in remarriage rates, the proportion of the adult population currently divorced also rose dramatically from 3.2 percent in 1970 to 7.8 percent in 1986. Divorced adults are much less likely to be monogamous than are married adults, so this trend probably has decreased the number of adults

with one sex partner and increased the number with more than one partner and the number with no partner, thus lowering M1 but not necessarily M2.

The median age at first marriage for women in the United States has risen over the past two decades from 20.6 in 1970 to 22.8 in 1984. As a result, the proportion of 20-24 (25-29) year-old men who have never been married rose from 54.7 percent (19.1 percent) in 1970 to 75.5 percent (41.4 percent) in 1986, and for women that proportion for the same age groups rose from 35.8 percent (10.5 percent) in 1970 to 58.5 percent (26.4 percent) in 1986. These are traditionally sexually active ages and the dramatic increases in the proportions still single probably accompany an increase in the average number of sex partners among the sexually active subsets for these growing segments of the population, thus lowering M1.

There has been a relatively large increase in the rate of cohabitation in the United States, from 0.8 percent in 1970 to 2.8 percent in 1988. This rise among young single couples and among the divorced may offset the tendency toward lower rates of monogamy somewhat, if, as the regressions above imply, the rate of monogamy among those with a "regular" sex partner is higher than among those without such a "regular" partner even though it is lower than among those who are formally married. This would tend to lower M1.

Another dimension of the issue is addressed by the earlier onset of sexual activity by teenagers in the United States. For 17-year-old urban women, the proportion who had premarital intercourse rose from 28 percent in 1971 to 41 percent by 1982. The early onset of sexual activity presumably is associated with a decrease in the monogamy rate for the population as a whole. The trends toward earlier age of beginning sexual activity and toward later age of first marriage lengthen the interval of the life cycle in which sexual activity is most associated with multiple sex partners. The resulting increase in premarital sexual activity mirrors the increased acceptance of that behavior, as reflected in the trends in attitude noted above. It probably lowers M1 and also reduces the discrepancy between M1 and M2.

The changes in fertility control through medical technology (such as the oral contraceptive) and legally accepted practices (such as abortion) have dramatically altered the risks of an unwanted birth associated with sexual behavior. That lower risk surely has had some influence, at the margin at least, on the inclination to engage in nonmarital sexual activity. This, too,

may lower M1 and reduce the discrepancy between M1 and M2.

The baby boom of the fifties and early sixties resulted in a disproportionate number of young adults in their twenties over the past decade. As men and women in this age tend to exhibit less monogamy than those in older ages, that demographic bulge itself has tended to lower the overall incidence of monogamy. (This is a trend that can be anticipated with some clarity and as the size of the new cohorts of young adults for the next decade or so will be disproportionately small, this should tend to raise the incidence of monogamy over the next several years, and thus raise M1.)

As this sketchy review of demographic events indicates, there have been several social phenomena that have probably lowered the incidence of monogamy in the past decade or so. Whether these forces have helped create a "sexual revolution" or not, we cannot say. One fact is clear: the high rates of monogamous behavior in the United States exhibited in the GSS data for 1988 do not support the notion that the "revolution," if it occurred, has resulted in a society that does not value or adhere to monogamy.

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