

The Sociological Review

Contents

The changing sociological construct of the family
Patricia Wilson and Ray Pahl

Whose 'family'? A Note on 'The changing sociological
construct of the family'
Jon Bernardes

The family as project
Jaber F. Gubrium

Rhetoric, division and constraint: elements in local
social mobilisation
Ed Young

Tranquillisers as a social problem
Jonathan Gabe and Michael Bury

Research note
'Something sensational . . . * The sexual diary as a tool for
mapping detailed sexual behaviour
Tony Coxon

Viewpoint
The body of intellectuals/the intellectuals' body
(remarks for Roland)
Philip Corrigan

Book reviews

Books received

Notes on contributors

University of Keele

Research note

'Something sensational . . . * The sexual
diary as a tool for mapping detailed
sexual behaviour

Tony Coxon

Abstract

Reliable information about the detail and context of sexual behaviour is crucial for describing high-risk behaviours for the transmission of Aids/HIV, and for estimating parameters of epidemiological models. It is possible to adapt the method of systematic diary-keeping to this end and develop a tool which is also close to the subject's conceptions of the 'chunks' of sexual behaviour.

The structure of reports of sexual behaviour is viewed as akin to linguistic structure, with a basic unit of the sexual act built into a 'session'. Such structure leads naturally to a coding system which allows natural language accounts to be represented symbolically, and parsed and analysed formally. The coded version is easily learnt and used, and is incomprehensible to outsiders.

Examples are given of its use to collect systematic data on homosexual and bisexual behaviour.

Introduction

We here describe the use of a systematically-kept diary of sexual behaviour as a method of data-collection well-adapted to producing reliable and detailed data, especially for epidemiological studies.

Our domain of interest is the sexual behaviour of homosexual and bisexual men and its changes under the impact of Aids/HIV. Despite the pioneering work of Kinsey, who used the sexual life-history collected in a face-to-face interview as his primary mode of data collection, most systematic studies aimed at describing gay sexual behaviour have relied upon the pre-coded self-administered

* 'I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train'. Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

everyday discourse among (British) gays. We believe this to be a crucial element in the success of its use in other groups and cultures.

2 The structure of sexual action

The sexual diary is an egocentric document, at least in the sense that it is written purely from the vantage-point of the subject, and this is a critical characteristic (and perhaps, limitation) of our version. Entries in the diary refer to sexual activity in which the subject (and his partner/s) was *directly* involved. Sometimes a subject's egocentric account will be corroborated (or even contradicted) by his partner's account if one is fortunate enough to have both of them keeping diaries independently, and this is fascinating information that must in some cases be used to 'repair' another account. (How else, for example, are we to know that a given orgasm was faked and therefore not risk behaviour?) Similarly, the subject *may* be able to give a perfectly coherent account of what his partners in a three-some did, but we would normally prefer the pairwise accounts of those directly involved, and we cannot realistically expect that a subject in full sexual arousal is likely or capable of giving accurate dispassionate descriptions of other people's behaviour at this point.

Our account of sexual behaviour, then, is a highly structured one, and owes much of its force to a linguistic analogy, which helps in its exposition.

2.1 Session and act

The basic meaningful unit we take as the 'sexual session' [sentence] fixed in time and usually in space, where sexual activity took place and the participant/s did not change. The *session* consists of a specified *context* in which *sexual acts* take place:

(i) *context*, details the time and place as well as referent information about other partner/s, if any:

Tuesday, May 6th, at 10.30 p.m., with P1 at his flat,
with P1 elsewhere identified as:

my primary partner, 36, accountant, who I live with.
in which (ii) one or more sexual acts occurred, detailing 'who did what and with what and to whom', as the Limerick accurately expresses it.

I wanked him, then he sucked me, and after that I sucked him off till he came.

Any of the sexual acts may have

'*accompagniments*' (such as condoms, lubricant/s, recreational drugs), so that the actual example of (ii) might be:

I wanked him *while he sniffed poppers* [nitrites], then he sucked me *whilst I wore a condom*. . . .

A few words on each component.

The *context specification* is necessary to set the scene and *dramatis personæ*, locating the behaviour, possibly as part of a complex sequence of sessions, and disambiguating partner reference, so that the participants and the roles they adopt will be clear. The context also includes any preparations, such as watching a pornographic video, or having been out to a pub or club.

2.1.1 The sexual act

The sexual act (or acts) form the core content of a session, and constitute the words of the sentence. Each sexual act can be thought of as a verbal *root* (specifying what is actually done), with a prefix (indicating the *modality* of the act) and a suffix (indicating if – and how – *orgasm* occurred).

Currently, the basic behaviours are primarily homosexually oriented, but can readily be extended simply to bisexual and heterosexual acts. They consist of a set of common *behaviours* (masturbation, fellatio, an intercourse, vaginal intercourse), and a longer list of less common behaviours (ano-brachial insertion, femoral intercourse . . .), all of which are readily encoded by the first letter of the most common 'street' name (masturbation by *Wanking*, etc). Note that these include behaviours which may well not be genital *stricto sensu* (such as corporal punishment using belts) or which are 'safer sex' variants of more common genital acts, such as inter-femoral as a substitute for anal intercourse. The set of sexual behaviours is of course not closed, since we are limited only by physical capability and human imaginativeness.

The *modality* of the sexual act refers to the binary, directional relational specification of the act performed: '*who* [does what] *to whom*' (of ego and alter), and we currently use *five* variants:

(unary, reflexive):

(1) SELF: Ego performs the sexual act on himself

(binary, asymmetric):

(2) ACTIVE: Ego performs the sexual act on/to Alter

an accompaniment to sexual activity. In any event, we use it to include:

- *drugs* such as amyl and butyl nitrites used to enhance orgasm, but including other recreational drugs
- *prophylactics*, typically condoms, but also including finger stools where digital insertion is protected, and veterinary gloves where brachial insertion is practised
- *lubricants* may be used either alone or with prophylactics, and need to distinguish water-based (KY, 121) which do not harm the rubber, and oil-based ones (Vaseline) and vegetable-oil based variants such as Crisco which do, and are hence dangerous, or unsafe. Saliva also has to be included as an emergency lubricant, which may well be a missing element in Joe Orton's account, and in any event could *in principle* be implicated in transmission. Finally,
- '*toys*' objects used to heighten or prolong arousal (cock-rings), inflict painful-pleasure (belts, whips, nipple-clamps), or to stimulate the prostate (dildoes). Since toys are often used with lubricants, are sometimes shared and may draw blood, they may be a far from trivial component in virus transmission in some patterns of behaviour.²

'Accompaniments' are symbolised in our Subjects' Coding by appending the relevant letter to the sexual act to which it applies. Since accompaniments often continue over several sexual acts, they sometimes need to have the range of their activity extended, and in case of ambiguity this can be encoded with the use of bracketed sequences, such as:

- (MW + AS)/p (Mutual-wank then active-sucking)
all accompanied by the use of
poppers
- (AFOX/c + PS + SWO/1)(I fucked him; I came to orgasm
wearing a condom, he didn't come.
Then I was sucked (no condom,
i.e. removed), and then I wanked
off using a lubricant).

2.3 Coding considerations

The structure outlined in this section has developed over several years and many revisions, as new detail of reported sexual behaviour forced us to clear ambiguities. Even in the last examples, the astute reader or listener may detect that in some

cases of 'accompaniments' it can be ambiguous who wore the condom – an important fact! Suffice it to say here that the Crisco version, being more detailed, is also less ambiguous. The structure together with associated codes form the basis of our SIGMA/ Sexual Behaviour Coding Scheme (Σ /SBCS), which we use throughout Project SIGMA research instruments, and not simply in the Sexual Diary.

There is clearly a trading relation between the complexity of such a scheme and the willingness of subjects to use it; moreover one would be foolish on logical or practical grounds to attempt completeness. At certain junctures it simply becomes counter-productive to add to the complexity, especially if the events that motivate change in the scheme are infrequent or occur in only a small subgroup. Indeed, the vast proportion of gay sexual behaviour is encompassed in three acts and three modalities!

Nonetheless, the rarity of the 'surprisal' of an event is not a sufficient criterion for excluding it, since some rare behaviours (such as 'fisting' [ano-brachial insertion]) are, or may turn out to be, highly implicated in HIV transmission, even if subjects are initially unaware of them. Instructions to subjects make this clear, and encourage him to use natural language where necessary to supplement or supplant the letter-code.

2.3.1 The several codes

After several years of experimentation (including once abandoning the abbreviated letter-code for subjects' use), we now distinguish three levels of coding for the sexual diary:

- (i) the (natural language, but structured) report of the subject (which may include differing amounts of Subject Code)
- (ii) the (full) Subject Code, which is defined in Appendix 1 below, and the subject in *Notes For a Sexual Diary*.³ It is rarely used in complete detail by any subject. The letter-code symbols are as close as possible to being mnemonics of the relevant word, so it is quite easy to 'read' after a little practice. It is actually (but to the Subject, invisibly) parasitic upon:
 - (iii) the fully-defined 'Chriscode' version, which is the machine-held data script in one-to-one correspondence with the Cardbox Subject Code record, but is more explicit and efficient for sorting and search purposes. This is the representation operated on by the retrieval and analysis programs.

An example of the different variants of these codes is given in Appendix One. This written version (transcribed and slightly

1970s frequently involved (unprotected) sessions involving the repeated sequence: PFi + PFXO. It is not difficult to see how the advent of the HTLV-3 virus in such a context was easily spread. It is also worth commenting that unless sequences of sexual acts are mapped, simple frequencies are useless and misleading.

3 Notes for a Sexual Diary provides the subject with an introduction to the Sexual diary, and (if desired) to the Coding. It is available from Project SIGMA at cost.

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Appendix One: Syntax of Diary Codes (Subject code; Sept 1987)

<session> ::= <subsession> | <subsession> <conjugator>
 <session>

<subsession> ::= <event> | ((session)) <modifier>
 <event> ::= <mode> <act> <respondent's orgasm> <other's orgasm> <modifier>
 <mode> ::= S | M | A | P | H
 <act> ::= F | W | S | VF | FI | MA | BR | TF | CP | FG | RI | WS | TT . . .
 <respondent's orgasm> ::= O | X | P
 <other subject's orgasm> ::= O | X | P
 <modifier> ::= null | / <associated object list> <modifier>
 <object> ::= C | L | P | D | DR | T . . .
 <conjugator> ::= space | & | +

Diary

WEEK BEGINNING	/	/19
(day)	(month)	(year)

Remember: Each entry should include:

Time / Place / Number code of other person/s (if any), from Partner list / What happened: (who did what to whom), viewed from YOUR position. Including Who (if anyone) came to orgasm and whether the orgasm was ON or IN the person / and finally: Accompaniments [Condoms, Lubricants, Dildoes, Poppers, Toys, Drugs].

Monday Met P3 at a nightclub in S/W London, went back to a friends place. We took some acid, and some joints, then I gave him a blow job where he came in my mouth, also I was fist fucked where I came over myself. Also we got into some s/m scenes later that morning, he fucked me and come inside me. We also used some poppers (English).