

Sex studies often measure repression, not promiscuity
- by Lloyd Robertson

Is it true that the average man has 8.2 sexual partners during his lifetime while the average while the average woman has only 4.2? These figures are the result of a random sample survey recently completed. Other such surveys completed over the past 20 years have had similar results. Some suggest this shows that men are more promiscuous than women. But, in fact, these studies have nothing to do with gender differences in sexual promiscuity.

Perform this simple thought experiment. Make a list of any number of women that you know and then make a list of the same number of men. You can use graph paper if you wish. You will probably want to put the men on the "y" axis and the women on the "x" axis. Then imagine who has slept with who. If you don't know, make it up. It doesn't matter for the purpose of this experiment. Put check marks where the column for the woman intersects with the column of the man if you think they had sex. Then count up your checks for the women and for the men. You will find, no matter how you have constructed your chart, that the average number of sexual partners for the men is exactly equal to the average number of sexual partners for the women. That is, unless you have men sleeping with other men.

Okay, let's take a look at how homosexuality could affect these statistics. If you assume that all men are bisexual and all women are heterosexual and that men have, on average, 4.2 female partners and 4.0 male partners while no women has sex with another woman then you would come to an overall average of 8.2 partners for men and 4.2 partners for women. Or, if you assume that 50% of men are hetero and have an average of 8.4 partners and 50% of men are homosexual and have an average of 8.0 partners and that there are no lesbian women; then again, you would come up with the figures reported in the study. None of this helps explain the survey results because only 5% of the population are homosexual and almost half of these are women.

The only reasonable explanation for the survey results is that many people are not telling the researchers the truth. I assume that most people, if they agree to be interviewed, will tell the truth as they understand it. After all, the interviewers are strangers bound by confidentiality. As we learned in my last column on false memories, however, memory is a fragile thing. People can and do believe things happened to them that never really happened. Alternately, people can and do repress memories of actual events.

Some young men do brag about their conquests. Some of these may embellish their stories. If the story is repeated several times then, in later years, the man may "remember" events as imagined. This would result in a certain amount of over-reporting by men when interviewed.

On the other hand, sex is still very much a taboo topic in Canada. The apostle Paul said "It is better that man not know of woman" and this attitude is still projected from many Christian pulpits. There is the attitude that someone who is sexually active is "sinful".

We all want to believe that we are good people. If we have been taught that only bad people have numerous sexual partners then we will tend to minimize the number of sexual remembrances using a number of psychological defense mechanisms. We may repress the memory. A sexually

active person who has had 100 partners, for example, may only remember 50. Alternatively, there is the "Bill Clinton" solution. If there wasn't actual vaginal penetration, then it doesn't count. Some women have rationalized that they did not really participate, so that their partner had sex but they did not. Other people have said they were drunk and that they can't remember so it does not count. Still others have, in a form of projection, come to believe that it was someone else who had the sex, not them.

I believe that there is a certain amount of under-reporting by both genders. The fact that there is more under-reporting by women suggests that, despite 1960s "Women's Liberation", women are still more repressed sexually than are men.