Asking sensitive questions in surveys: is sex special? The Second Australian Study of Health and Relationships

Australia's first large national representative-sample sex survey was carried out in 2001–2002 and the second one in 2012–2013. We interviewed 20,094 men and women aged 16–69 about their sexual and general health, relationships, practices and attitudes, achieving a participation rate of 66%.

In this presentation Juliet will present an outline of some of the key results on sexual behaviour, particularly in areas where other national surveys have not ventured, including masturbation, pornography, sex toy use, swinging, and other minority or subcultural sexual practices. Our success in collecting data on these topics shows that telephone interviews can successfully elicit reports of less common and stigmatised sexual practices without offending respondents. Techniques that assist in achieving good data include ‘no-face’ interviewing, human conversation, careful question wording and sequencing, and sceptical analysis.

Most of the challenges in researching sexual behaviour in surveys also apply to other social behaviours such as diet, alcohol consumption, childrearing practices and exercise.

Professor Juliet Richters biography

Juliet Richters has worked for over 30 years in sexual health research and education. Her work includes national and local surveys of sexual behaviour and attitudes, in-depth interview studies, and theoretical work on the sociology of sexual practice. Topics include family planning, condom use, circumcision, and prevention of HIV and other sexually transmissible infections. Juliet is currently leading two major research projects: the Second Australian Study of Health and Relationships, and a qualitative study of women’s experiences and understandings of contraception.