

BOOK REVIEW

Sex By Numbers: What Statistics Can Tell Us About Sexual Behaviour

David Spiegelhalter. London, UK: Profile Books, 2015. ISBN-13: 978-1-781-25329-8. Price: £12.99. Pages: 368 (paperback)

This book is much more than just numbers. The chapter entitled 'Does oral sex count as 'having sex'?' is typical of the tone of this book. The book explores a wide range of subjects; it covers contemporary topics but also puts numbers into a historical context. Although it contains a great deal of statistical information, the book is also a very rewarding read even if one doesn't have a penchant for numbers. It is a far cry from simply being a dry book on statistics.

Within each chapter there is a thorough account of the relevant statistics, where the statistics originate from, and how reliable they are. The author provides the reader with an introduction to statistical methods and their limitations. He explains his 'star rating' system thus: 4*: 'numbers we can rely on' down to

1*: 'numbers that are unreliable'. Readers will be impressed by the wide variety of sources cited by the author, and how he is able to use this information in a sensible way. Some names stand out in the field of research on sexual behaviour; Alfred Kinsey, for example, is deserving of a special mention.

There are comments and reflections on what was thought at the time, how we see things now, and how the data presented influenced public debate at the time. In the chapter 'Together at last; becoming a couple' the author examines how traditions have changed. One of the parameters he considers is the number of women who are pregnant when they get married. He follows this by comparing data on parish registrations in 1538 with modern-day figures, by looking at children born to parents who were registered at the same address.

There are chapters dedicated to different forms of sexual activity and how contraception has affected how individuals are able to be in control of their sex lives without the fear of getting pregnant.

Data from the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyle (NATSAL) are used widely throughout the book.

These data are current, well-known and arise from a population with which SRH health professionals are familiar. NATSAL's methods even have an Appendix devoted to them.

Sex By Numbers is a useful book for general practitioners and health professionals working in the fields of female health and family planning. In addition, I feel that this book should be read by everyone who teaches sexual health and family planning. The book provides a useful summary of many of the data that one otherwise would have to spend a considerable amount of time researching and collating. The book has a very extensive index, and contains a multitude of useful 'facts' and entertaining stories that can make one's lectures more interesting. I thoroughly recommend it!

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