

Book Review

Doing it Down Under: The Sexual Lives of Australians

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If popular media was one's only source of information, it might appear that Australia, or indeed any other developed country, devotes most of its time and resources to having sex, thinking about sex, or pondering the various permutations of an assortment of turgid relationship issues. There are few resources that document the real-life sexual experiences of communities, let alone attempt to tease them out from pseudo-facts. *Doing it Down Under* provides a welcome reality check: an antidote to the myths apparently invented by bored journalists or marketing executives in a bar.

Doing It Down Under is based on the Australian Study of Health and Relationships, a large, national telephone survey of randomly selected people aged between 16 and 60 years. For those who work in sexual health in Australia, it would be difficult *not* to have heard of this research. The results were published as a suite of articles in the April 2003 volume of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, and have rapidly become essential reading for health professionals, epidemiologists and educators involved in sexual health. For those who are unfamiliar with the survey, it provides a snap-shot of a range of aspects about sex and sexuality: from average age of first sexual intercourse, contraception, prevalence of sexual assault and sexually transmissible infections, rates of same-sex sexual activity, frequency of sexual activity, relationship patterns, prevalence of sexual difficulties and many other topics.

Doing It Down Under takes the key findings of the study and re-packages them in an accessible format. For those involved in sexual health medicine, family planning, gynaecology or urology, sex therapy, counselling, sex education or high-school education, the book provides a useful source of answers to the questions that consumers ask every day. Answering those questions accurately, with sensible, well-performed research, provides essential normalising information. It provides useful insights into the perceptions and mythology of sex, and contrasts it to the cold, hard facts of sex life in an industrialised society.

Readability is excellent. The authors have adopted a style of language that avoids being too dry, yet steers away from becoming sensational or populist. The well-chosen chapters

are suitable for focussed reading on a specific topic, or random dipping. Cases break up the text and provide gritty relief, at times vaguely titillating, but never gratuitous. Clear tables and graphs concisely summarise some of the more complex data and complement the points made in the text. Key findings highlighted in textboxes keep the tone informal, and draw the reader to the points of interest.

This book does not replace the original study for detail and academic rigour: nor is it meant to. It is useful for the clinician or educator who wishes have ready reference to the key findings of a landmark study, particularly when preparing material for lay audiences or professionals from outside sexual health. For readers with a more academic interest, or the beginnings of one, the appendices provide more detail about the methodology. Indeed, for the nascent researcher, this provides insights into how to conduct high-quality behavioural research and how the results can be responsibly translated into messages of wide appeal and relevance.

In summary, *Doing it Down Under* provides an important touchstone linking the academic domains of behavioural researchers with the service domain of clinicians and educators and the hunger of the general community for accurate knowledge about sex in Australia. Like its parent research papers, it deserves a place on the bookshelves of all of us who are involved in translating behavioural research about sexuality into meaningful messages for the wider community. Bored journalists, beware!

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