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Metrolina AIDS Project

GLAAD NOTES

by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance
Against Defamation

Journalism that counts

The cover story of the October 17 issue of *Time* magazine is "Sex in America: Surprising News from the Most Important Survey Since the Kinsey Report." The magazine's table of contents further heralds the new study as the "first truly scientific survey of who does what with whom." The title for the article — which runs to several pages — reads: "Now for the Truth About Americans and SEX."

At issue is a new University of Chicago study of the sexual behaviors of 3,500 randomly selected Americans. Despite the incredible hype, the article (though not necessarily the study itself) suffers from a number of problems common to mainstream reporting on sex surveys.

In his article, *Time* correspondent Philip Elmer-Dewitt writes: "Most Americans don't go in for the kinky stuff. Asked to rank their favorite sex acts, almost everybody (96%) found vaginal sex 'very or somewhat appealing.'" The heterosexist bias here is clear. Only vaginal sex is normal; everything else is "kinky stuff."

Among the new survey's "key findings," Elmer-Dewitt reports, is: "There are a lot fewer active homosexuals in America than the oft-repeated 1 in 10. Only 2.7% of the men and 1.3% of the women report that they had homosexual sex in the past years." There are a number of problems with this "key finding."

First, this is not a key finding of the Chicago study. Elsewhere in his own article, Elmer-Dewitt quotes one of the Chicago researchers who cautions: "There is probably a lot more homosexual activity going on than we could get people to talk about." Elmer-Dewitt's conclusion was not supported by the limited facts of the survey.

Interestingly, Elmer-Dewitt only uses the adjective "active" to refer to homosexuals. The bias here is slightly more subtle, but no less insidious. Heterosexuality is something you are, homosexuality is just something you do. Homophobic "change ministries" thrive on this distinction, always reducing homosexual orientation to genital activity (because then a homosexual person only has to be "inactive" in order to be "cured").

To its credit, the *Time* article includes a boxed insert "But Should We Believe It?," which identifies some of the methodological problems associated with a survey of this nature. Nonetheless, the article clearly spins this survey as if it were sexual gospel. Lost in hype is any substantive consideration of the factors that diminish the study's authority on the issue of homosexuality.

About their new survey, the Chicago researchers are quoted as saying: "Our feeling was that you could get people to talk about anything if you approach them right." In some cases, in fact, reluctant participants were visited 15 times by a pollster trying to "win them over." All of the surveys were conducted face-to-face without anonymity.

What the *Time* reporter (like so many others) failed to do is provide a meaningful context for understanding why lesbian, gay and bisexual respondents might not "talk about anything." The author makes only a passing reference to the group as "stigmatized." Instead, he could have specifically noted that:

- According to the US Justice Department, lesbians and gays are probably the most frequent victims of hate crimes.

- Numerous surveys have demonstrated pervasive patterns of discrimination against lesbians and gay men in employment, public accommodations, health care, credit, parenting, police protection, insurance, and education.

- In one national survey of young men (15 to 19 years old), 89% said that sex between two men is "disgusting" and only 12% "felt confident that they could befriend a gay person."

- Lesbian and gay love is actually a criminal offense in half of the United States, and homosexuality is still cause for official government discrimination.

Now, it isn't all that hard to imagine how this climate can impact survey results. In fact, it's easy to understand how a 19-year-old man might think twice when asked by a pollster — who has hounded him 15 times — whether or not he has had sex with other men. Or how

about a 30-year-old lesbian mother? What has she got to lose by "talking about anything" (besides her job, her child and, possibly, her life)?

Notably, the *Time* article is followed by a "response" piece, written by heterosexual author and radio personality Garrison Keillor. Given the problematic nature of surveying homosexuals in America, did it not occur to *Time's* editors that they might include a response written by a homosexual American?

Lesbians and gays have a right to be heard, as well as counted. And the mainstream press has a responsibility to listen. Send you feedback to "Letters," *Time* magazine, Time & Life Building, Rockefeller Center, New York, NY 10020, fax (212) 522-0601.

Gently Gay

The October '94 issue of *Gentlemen's Quarterly* includes "A Gay Man's Risks for Love," by Dudley Clendinen. In just over three pages, the essay provides an intentionally personal — perhaps idiosyncratic — look at HIV/AIDS, from the perspective of an HIV- gay man. The quality or worth of this essay must be left to the determination of individual readers, but it is significant that the work finds itself nestled between the covers of *GQ*. And it's more significant still to find the word "gay" on the magazine's cover. For too long, men's fashion magazines — ludicrous, hypocritical to the extreme — have posed as if their readerships were exclusively heterosexual.

Send comments to Martin Beiser, Managing Editor, *GQ*, 350 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10017, tel. (212) 880-8800, e-mail gqmag@aol.com.

Covering Gender

Recent issues of both *Harper's* and *Details* magazines cover transsexual subjects. The "Readings" section of the October '94 issue of *Harper's* includes "I Am Mauve, Hear Me Roar," an excerpt from *The Apartheid of Sex: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Gender*. Transsexual author Martine Aliana Rothblatt debunks "the division of humanity into two sexes" and argues that "to identify the meaningful elements of sexual identity it is necessary to abandon entirely the male/female, masculine/feminine lexicon." Rothblatt posits a "chromatic" lexicon instead: "Anatomically, we may have penises or vaginas, testicles or ovaries. Sexually, we are a rainbow of color, a spectrum of gender."

In the November '94 issue of *Details*, Emily Yoffee "explores the meaning of gender in the world of female-to-male transsexuals." The six page feature effectively uses individual biography to anchor a wide-ranging examination of female-to-male transsexuals. This feature continues *Details'* admirable record of covering queer subjects.

Encouragement may be directed to *Harper's* magazine, 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012; *Details*, 632 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Some humanity on Wall Street

"I'm just calling to tell you I'm thinking about you and praying for you." So said Bill Clinton in a call to Pedro Zamora, the twenty-something gay AIDS activist who recently achieved international celebrity as a cast member on MTV's *The Real World*. Significantly, the President's call is mentioned as part of a front-page tribute to Zamora in the October 21 issue of *The Wall Street Journal* (Western Edition). Zamora is currently hospitalized for an AIDS-related neurological disease for which there is "no proven treatment" and he is "now gravely ill."

Staff reporter Eric Morgenthaler first wrote about Zamora in another front-page *Journal* article in 1991 and, he says, they have since become close friends. The article reflects that friendship, and also includes comments from many lives — famous and obscure — that have been touched by Zamora's public battle with AIDS.

For example, Morgenthaler quotes a young South Carolina woman who wrote to Zamora: "I never thought anyone could change my opinion on homosexuals and AIDS. Because of you, I've seen the human side of something that once seemed so unreal to me." Also quoted is a 22-year-old gay man from North Carolina, who never met Zamora but wrote to

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