

Sex statistics unreliable

SIR—Whether or not the British government is right to cancel a proposed social survey of contemporary sexual behaviour, intended to help understand the mechanism of the spread of AIDS, as being “too intrusive” to be supported with public funds, at an estimated cost of £750,000, is perhaps arguable (*Nature* 341, 87; 1989). It would certainly give rise to much salacious comment in the news media, although that would not necessarily have done much harm.

But the real argument against this survey is that its results were bound to have been unreliable. First, although a random sample of people would have been invited to participate, anyone would be free to refuse, so the respondents would be self-selected and probably not representative of the population as a whole. And second, “the questionnaire would have been self-completed in the argot of the social science trade: respondents would have completed the questionnaire themselves, sealing it into an envelope provided, referring to the survey official delivering the questionnaire only in case of ambiguity”.

As this questionnaire, devised by “a large group of British AIDS researchers”, is likely to have been long and complicated and rather technical in parts, it would not have been easily understood by many of those asked to complete it by themselves. Nor can it be assumed that they would always be willing to discuss some of the embarrassing points they did not understand with the survey official. So, quite apart from deliberately false or frivolous answers, a good many of the questions would probably be misunderstood and answered incorrectly, and there would be no possible way of estimating how many of these there were.

The same problems arose with a long and complicated anonymous questionnaire distributed in 1966, designed to produce statistics relevant to the reform of the abortion laws, with demonstrably dubious results (C. B. Goodhart, *Population Studies* 27, 207; 1973).

When trying to decide what should be done, it is a fallacy to suppose that it is better to have bad statistics than no statistics at all.

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Permian of Spiti

SIR—I read with interest the article by A. D. Ahluwalia (*Nature* 341, 13; 1989) under the heading ‘Upper Palaeozoic of Lahul–Spiti’, having just spent 20 days

doing fieldwork near Losar in the Upper Spiti Valley. Ahluwalia’s observations are not correct and are not based on the section exposed in the Savita Nallah. I have worked in the section for the past two years and have made a systematic collection of rocks exposed in the area. Contrary to Ahluwalia’s observation, a complete succession of Ganmachidam section is exposed in the Savita Nallah and has yielded fossils from different strata. The fauna collected from this formation range in age from Middle Carboniferous to Middle Permian. A systematic study of fauna collected from the section is in progress and will be published shortly. The Ganmachidam Formation in this section is overlain by black carbonaceous shales that are rich in fossils and have yielded well-preserved brachiopod fauna including *Lamnimargus himalayensis*, *Spiriferella rajah*. This fauna corresponds to the *Lamnimargus himalayensis* zone widespread throughout the entire stretch of the Himalayas and considered to be of Punjabi age.

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Working in Japan

SIR—Although I have yet to visit Japan, I have taught myself rudimentary Nihongo and the most elementary reading and writing in *Kana* (the syllabic ‘shorthand’ Japanese characters) and *Kanji* (the Chinese characters). Thus I feel emboldened to comment on Shahid S. Siddiqui’s question, “Under these attractive conditions, what prevents young US and (*sic*) other European researchers from coming to Japan?” (*Nature* 340, 337; 1989). In answer, Siddiqui mentions most briefly “cultural differences” and “language”.

The Japanese spoken language is admittedly very different from Romance and Teutonic tongues, both in structure and nuance. The written language, however, is virtually incomprehensible without arduous study (as is Chinese). This is the single biggest barrier in the long run.

To visit a foreign country has many benefits, but it can also be a formidable source of anxiety. Very few Americans (or other Westerners) can speak, let alone read or write, Japanese. Thus to live and work in Japan must appear to prospective visitors as virtually impossible.

Few Westerners know that most educated Japanese speak English fairly well (pronunciation excepted). Thus they see themselves faced with an unintelligible tongue in a land where both spoken English, and all the signage are equally unintelligible. It is a far cry from visiting Britain or the Commonwealth, or even the Netherlands or Scandinavia. Most educated Westerners know enough of

other alphabets to cope in Eastern Europe. The Arab countries and Israel, with their seemingly undecipherable alphabets, have considerable English signage, but at least the characters *are* an alphabet. Consider then the situation for foreigners in Japan where the *Kana* (46 each of two types) represent syllables, not letters, and the *Kanji* (all 1,940 of them) represent complete words.

So, I humbly suggest that Siddiqui misses the main point of his question almost totally. The only steps that could easily be taken on a short-term basis would be crash courses in *Nihongo* in our institutions of higher learning and a change to bilingual Japanese and English signs in public places. The Japanese might also consider their signage in terms of broad use of *Romaji* (Japanese terms in Roman letters) to help accommodate visitors.

In my perhaps limited experience, the cultural differences between the West and Japan are insignificant compared to the language problem.

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SIR—Several errors crept into the article “Basic research comes alive in Japan” (*Nature* 340, 339; 1989). The KEK laboratory is in Tsukuba; the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is Monbusho; the new Institute of Advanced Study is being launched by Kyoto and Osaka; and Riken is more naturally not completely capitalized, as it is the common abbreviation of Rikagaku Kenkyujo — the Institute of Physical and Chemical Research — and not an acronym. These small mistakes do aptly illustrate one of the points in the preceding article (“Too few foreign scientists in Japan” *Nature* 340, 337; 1989) — language is indeed one of the problems facing foreign researchers in Japan. However, the English ability of most Japanese scientists and the assistance offered by many fellowships ensure that the problem should not be so large as to discourage those interested in working in Japan.

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Horrorstruck

SIR—You incorrectly identified Boris Karloff (*Nature* 240, 591; 1989) as being on the left in the picture. He is on the right; Bela Lugosi (seen in other movies as Count Dracula) is on the left.

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