

secrets of
sex and
marriage
ONLINE APPENDIX

APPENDIX

our methodology and research process

the marriage intimacy project study

The Marriage Intimacy Project (MIP) is a research study conducted by Shaunti and Jeff Feldhahn and Michael Sytsma, PhD. The first phase of the research and analysis extended from February 2020 to February 2023. The next phase of research and analysis is ongoing.

Overall Research Process and Results

The research question was: What surprising truths could create opportunities for married couples to have greater connection, pleasure, and a rich sex life? Our goal is to reveal the most helpful, surprising truths that will transform a couple's

marriage around their sex life. These truths are being published in the popular book *Secrets of Sex and Marriage* (Bethany House, 2023), whitepapers, and journal articles.

The content in *Secrets of Sex and Marriage* is informed by not just the Marriage Intimacy Project but twelve other relationship research studies I (Shaunti) have conducted since 2003. It thereby incorporates data from nationally representative surveys, interviews, and focus groups with more than 40,000 men, women, and teenagers. We have invested \$850,000 on this research in order to uncover findings that are based on good, robust data—not just our opinions.

For the Marriage Intimacy Project, specifically, we and a fairly large team (ten staff members, two professional survey companies, and dozens of other partner organizations and individuals) gathered and analyzed input from more than 5,300 married and unmarried men and women both in the U.S. and around the world. The hard costs of this research and analysis (\$120,000) were sponsored by two major silent donors, to whom we are very thankful.

The surveys

The most important data comes from four major surveys about participants' thoughts, feelings, and actions around the topic of sex and intimacy. Three of these were anonymous surveys of married people. (Our surveys were limited to those who are married, as our research has found that married

and unmarried people often approach the topic of sex quite differently, and our ultimate goal is to help marriages.) A fourth survey was conducted among counselors, therapists, and others who work with marriages and individuals.

Two of the aforementioned surveys were nationally representative and are the primary surveys used in the book and elsewhere. These survey-takers were randomly recruited by survey companies from high-quality panels, and were generally representative of the demographics of the United States across factors such as gender, age, racial background, religious attendance, geographic area, sexual orientation, education levels, and other factors.

One of these nationally representative surveys was a “matched pair” survey of 501 married couples (1,002 individuals who were married to each other) conducted April 20 – June 7, 2021.¹ Titled the “Sex Attributions and Behaviors Matched Pair Survey” (which we call the “Matched Pair Survey,” or MPS), this survey was conducted online by our long-time partner company, Decision Analyst. We believe the MPS is the largest nationally representative matched-pair sex survey ever done with married couples in the United States. While complex and difficult to analyze, these types of surveys

1. Because recruiting *couples* from a high-quality panel is more complex than recruiting individuals, we prioritized national representation over speed, in order to ensure we had survey-takers who were representative ethnically and otherwise.

are also rich and revealing, as we can compare the answers of the two partners to one another.²

The second nationally representative survey, the “Sex Perceptions and Behaviors Married Individuals Survey” (which we call the “Married Individuals Survey,” or MIS), was an online survey of 1,097 married individuals, conducted June 2–14, 2021, in partnership with Dynata, another excellent company that we had worked with before.

The third survey is a specialized one. Called the Churchgoers’ Matched Pair Survey (MPS-C), it was almost identical to the primary matched-pair survey but was taken by 250 mostly churchgoing couples (500 individuals who were married to each other) at six diverse church events across the country.³

This is what’s called a “convenience sample”—taken by whomever happened to hear about it, and with self-reported demographics. However, the data is valuable because of how we gathered it. In most cases, survey-takers were at an in-person marriage event to hear Shaunti and Jeff speak (for example, at a date night), were asked to participate before

2. Note that in the book and research document, where an MPS-based chart presents couple data, the “n=” reference is for the number of couples and will always be 501 couples or less. Otherwise, “n=” refers to the number of individuals, which will always be greater than 501.

3. The events were at Cornerstone Church, Fuquay-Varina, NC; Ephrata Community Church, Ephrata, PA; Fellowship Bible Church, Topeka, KS; Harvest Christian Fellowship, Orange County, CA; Mountain West Church, Stone Mountain, GA; and Victory World Church, Norcross, GA.

the talk, and women and men took the survey on opposite sides of the room. (To ensure independence, all our surveys of couples are designed so that spouses cannot see one another's answers.) This strategy provided valuable input from couples across all levels of happiness in marriage, since our professional matched-pair survey was a bit more likely to be taken by happier couples (as unhappier couples were slightly less likely to *both* agree to the survey company's request to participate).

The fourth survey is also specialized, and was conducted online with 801 mental health professionals who work with others—licensed therapists, executive coaches, clergy, and so on—through the American Association of Christian Counselors. The goal of this survey was to learn the attitudes and experience of people-helpers in working with sexual issues.

Other Data-Gathering Methods

Prior to conducting the four main surveys, there was a great deal of other qualitative and quantitative data gathering.

Interviews—and getting candid input on a sensitive topic

In all previous studies, my (Shaunti's) approach has been to conduct not just big surveys but hundreds of random

interviews, stopping strangers in coffeeshops, grocery stores, on the subway, and dozens of other places to ask them for their anonymous input on the topic under study. I would never know their name, and they could be completely candid about, for example, how they resolved arguments, or what they felt about how their spouse handled money, or their parenting concerns.

Those random interviews wouldn't work on this topic. Stopping strangers to ask questions for *this* project would have ensured we needed a budget line item called "bail money."

So to get that sort of candid input on such a sensitive topic, nearly one hundred strangers from all walks of life and demographic categories agreed to other types of anonymous interviews instead. Many of these took place over Zoom: As Jeff and I spoke to them, they could see us on camera, but their camera was turned off. And we never knew their real names; they picked names like Wanda and Vision, Lois and Clark, Mrs. G and Mr. B, Farm Boy and Buttercup, and every other combination you can think of. Also, where we met or came across people at our events or in other venues, many were willing to privately share their thoughts on the topic. Many others had questions that allowed us to learn a great deal from what they were asking.

Pre-surveys

During late 2020 and early 2021, we conducted initial, anonymous matched-pair and individual pilot surveys of 1,329 married people, to test the questions and ask these initial survey-takers their thoughts in more detail—including giving them a chance to comment in an open-ended way. These pilot surveys were held to the same data-quality standards as the final, nationally representative surveys and provided excellent qualitative feedback and candid comments.

Additionally, in 2020, our first survey was a one-question open-ended survey of 505 people, drawn from a convenience sample of our followers and others on social media, asking what one question the person would want to ask a sex therapist about their own intimate life.

Our Research Approach

There are two main approaches when gathering data from people: an academic or “pure” research approach, and an applied research approach. Academic research is designed to carefully build on academic research that has come before, making precise and usually incremental advancements in specific informational areas of study. Applied research is designed to dig out truths that are immediately practical.

Either type of research must be well-designed, unbiased, and rigorous to uncover what is *true*, but the point behind each type, and how findings will be used, is quite different.

This is an inexact analogy, but consider how leading hospitals and medical centers studied Covid-19 when the pandemic first hit in 2020. “Pure” researchers in the lab began exacting, controlled, and incremental lab experiments to precisely investigate the biological characteristics of this new virus (which would be necessary to eventually create a vaccine). “Applied” researchers went into emergency rooms and intensive care wards to study and survey patients and doctors to understand how the virus seemed to spread (so we could prevent it), and what on-the-ground methods and treatments worked and didn’t work (so the effective methods and treatments could be publicized to immediately help doctors and save lives).

All of Shaunti’s and Jeff’s previous studies over the years have been applied research, and guided by an eminent leader in both types of survey design, Dr. Charles Cowan, the former head of survey design at the U.S. Census Bureau. My (Shaunti’s) primary goal is *always* to dig out the little things that make a big difference in relationships—so that a reader will know what to do differently tomorrow.

In this study, however, we branched out a bit. The main focus of Marriage Intimacy Project is still applied research. However, Dr. Michael Sytsma will be leveraging his academic

background to advance the findings and conversation on sex in the academic community as well.

Strict Data Quality Controls

For any project like this, it is extremely important to get high-quality data that we can trust is true. Some of that comes from using a professional survey company with a high-quality panel of those who are committed to and compensated for their honest responses. Using a panel also allows us to know the actual demographics of the respondent (e.g., this survey-taker is a thirty-four-year-old African American man living in California and not a sixteen-year-old Caucasian girl pretending to be a different demographic for kicks). But trustworthy data also comes from quality controls on what surveys are accepted. Many surveys (including those used for academic research) include data from everyone who responds, including respondents who do not finish the survey or those who speed through without enough attention.

We chose to accept surveys only from individuals who seemed to be taking the survey seriously. Thus, all our nationally representative surveys over the years (including those for this Marriage Intimacy Project) are designed to be short (usually thirty to forty questions) and taken in ten to fifteen minutes at most, so the participant sees it as manageable and will complete it. Also, we include data only from completed

surveys that meet quality control standards. For example, respondents were tossed out if they did not complete the survey,⁴ answered specific questions in an impossibly contradictory manner, sped through the survey in a time that could not have allowed them to actually consider the questions, or did not pass other quality-control measures.

Such quality controls mean that it may take us weeks to fill and close our surveys, but we have high confidence in the data.

4. The only partial exception was the specialized survey of counselors and other people-helpers through the American Association of Christian Counselors. Although we implemented most of the other quality controls, we did accept surveys from these busy professionals even if they did not fully complete the survey.