

**NO TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCE:
A REVIEW OF *THE DAY AMERICA
TOLD THE TRUTH***

By Tom W. Smith

The Day America Told the Truth, by James Patterson and Peter Kim, purports to be a revelatory study of “what people really believe about everything that really matters” (subtitle). Shown at last, they claim, are the private thoughts and secrets of Americans which all other researchers failed to obtain. In fact, rather than a significant contribution to understanding American society, this book is a stew of hyperbole, wild generalizations, and factoids, based on poorly documented and questionable data, and simplistic and bumbling analysis.

At first glance, Patterson and Kim appear to have collected a rich array of information. The centerpiece of their study is a “Cathartic Method” (CM) survey in which “a randomly drawn sample of 2,000 adult Americans” anonymously filled out questionnaires containing over 1,000 items. By promising anonymity and urging people to be truthful, this CM exercise supposedly led Americans to tell all. The CM survey was supplemented by a “Morality Quizzes” survey, a mail questionnaire of a “random national sample of 3,577 respondents” covering seven “tests” and a total of 171 items; in-depth focus groups concentrating on gender differences; and telephone surveys of 109 people from Beverly Hills and 102 from the South Bronx.

An Unrepresentative Sample

But, there is less here than meets the eye. Basic documentation on such fundamental matters as sampling method, response rate, and representativeness are missing, unclear, or inconsistent. The centerpiece CM survey illustrates the problems.¹ Rather than being a representative, probability sample, it is apparently a variant of a mall intercept survey with demographic quotas. No response rate is reported, and the authors make the ridiculous claim that “nonresponse was a nonissue in this research. Almost 100 percent of recruited respondents finished the entire questionnaire...(p. 251).” This ignores the presumably large number of people who brushed-off the initial approach, and the cryptically described “pre-interview screening for suitability and sample fit (p. 249).” The only evidence on the representativeness is a table indicating a geographic distribution closely matching Census regions (p. 248), and the vague and weak assurance that “the demographic parameters of our sample were compared to the demographic parameters of the desired sample universe and found to be acceptable (p. 251).”

The “mall intercept” approach is, of course, highly unlikely to generate a satisfactory national sample. Patterson and Kim cite the beliefs of a little over 100 employed respondents who are identified by occupation. Compare their profile to that of the entire labor force, from Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data:

	CM	BLS
Farming, Fishing, Forestry	0%	3%
Factory Workers	2-3%	20%
Doctors/Lawyers/Psychologists	13%	1%

Either the CM survey is highly unrepresentative on occupation, the sample of quotes is very unrepresentative of the CM survey, or both.

Poor Data Quality

Nor is there any reason to have much faith in the quality of the data collected in the CM survey. First, taking the survey required a sprinter’s pace over a marathon’s length. We are told that respondents needed an average of 90 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Yet respondents were called upon to answer up to 1,254-1,419 items. Thus, they had to answer 14-16 questions per minute, including open-ended questions “which were often followed by probing follow-up questions (p. 245).”

Second, Patterson and Kim fail to document the wordings of most questions, and those which are indicated are often problematic. One question was, “Who’s for real?” It reminds me of the legendary question on a philosophy final, “Why?,” to which the “A” response was, “Why not?” Another question asked people “if they see a set of current public issues as being morally ‘gray’ or as clear cases of right and wrong (p. 32).” Listed issues included communism, affirmative action, and divorce. What this question is trying to reveal is gray to me.

Third, not a single shred of evidence is presented on the validity of the data collected. The authors simply assume that their respondents told all. But rather than evoking particular candor, their approach, with its large number of strange, hypothetical questions, may have induced frivolousness and carelessness in the responses.

Faulty Analysis

When Patterson and Kim move on to their analysis, things go from bad to worse. First, because they seldom document their question wordings, it’s often impossible to tell what they are measuring. They report various breakdowns for “homosexuals” without ever defining the measure. Second, they report contradictory results. For example, they state that “only one in ten say they are satisfied with their jobs,” but that 20% are “very satisfied”

The Literature/Smith/continued

with their jobs (p. 155). Third, they never report and seem oblivious to the size of sub-groups they are analyzing. Often they are reporting on the characteristics of groups based on, perhaps, only a few dozen cases. Fourth, the authors often make inappropriate and misleading comparisons. For example, they claim that “crime is underestimated by about 600 percent (p. 173).” This is based on a comparison of the *annual* victimization rates from the Crime Victimization Surveys with unspecified questions asking whether one had *ever* been a victim of a crime. Revelation: More people are victimized over their lives than in a particular year!

In another case, Patterson and Kim use data from NORC’s General Social Survey (GSS) to describe “how the American people’s confidence in their institutions has dropped since the mid-1970s (p. 216).” They report on 10 institutions, giving the percentages of respondents who expressed a great deal of confidence, in the 1970s and then in 1989. All institutions show declines ranging from 20 to 55%.² Except for one number they misreport, what they present is correct technically—but it’s very misleading. First, they report baseline readings from 1973, 1974, or 1977—whichever year had the highest confidence reading. Second, they ignore three of the 13 institutions that appear on the GSS. One (US Supreme Court) shows a rise in confidence (up 9%) from the 1970s to 1989 and the other two—the scientific community and medicine—have lower than average declines (-12% and -23%). Third, they ignore the fact that data are available for 14 years in the 1973-89 span. For most institutions the low point was somewhere between 1978 and 1988. Only for banks and financial institutions was 1989 the low point. For the other 12 institutions the 1989 figure is higher than that for some earlier year(s). Fluctuation, not straight-line decline, is the main pattern in confidence trends over the last two decades. Finally, Patterson and Kim wrongly state that “America’s confidence in the executive branch of the [federal] government has fallen since Richard Nixon left the White House (p. 214).” In 1974 and 1975, before and after Nixon’s resignation, only 13% had a great deal of confidence in the executive branch. Confidence reached a post-Nixon high of 28% in 1977, and stood at 20% in 1989—by their calculations, a 54% increase rather than a 31% decline from the Watergate nadir.

Lastly, the authors’ analysis often completely abandons their data and meanders without factual guides into the past and future. They repeatedly assume that things were better in the Good Old Days—without any supporting evidence (pp. 6, 25, 155). In the opposite direction, they spin-off forecasts for the future and allege trends based neither on prevailing, documented time series nor

any model of social change. Among their predictions: “A men’s revolution is brewing—in reaction to the women’s revolution”; and “The number of sociopaths is increasing at a dizzying rate (pp. 236-237).”

Simple-Minded Recommendations

Patterson and Kim also tell us “what America needs fixed first and fixed fast (p. 226).” These assessments and recommendations are generally vacuous. An example:

PROBLEM: The state of our education system is a full-scale national crisis right now.

SOLUTION: Make American schools work....It will take money and intelligence and leadership. We have the first two, but we lack the third (p. 227).

The central conceit of *The Day America Told the Truth* is that “no national study had ever been done on what Americans really think and believe...No research had been completed on what Americans privately think and believe (pp. 4, 5).” Patterson and Kim further claim that they have carried out “the most massive in-depth survey of what Americans really believe that has ever been conducted (p. 4).” Both the contention that nothing else has been done, and that they have managed to get at the truth about America in their “Twenty-Three Major Revelations” (and their “Fifty-Four Revelations”), are without foundation. Many personal matters—from sexual practice to drug use—are difficult to measure reliably, but investigators have increasingly improved their measurement of such sensitive attitudes and activities. To this important, ongoing effort, *The Day America Told the Truth* contributes essentially nothing.

Endnotes

¹Their supplemental surveys are also poorly documented and of questionable quality. For example, in the case of the South Bronx survey, they report no response rate and miss the large number of households without telephone.

²The authors report percentage change, not the more typical changes in percentage points. I follow their convention here.

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