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## “Oh! Dr. Kinsey!”: The Life and Work of America’s Pioneer of Sexology

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### INTRODUCTION

Alfred Kinsey’s two most famous books *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* characterized the sexual behaviors of thousands of Americans. The content of these texts shocked the nation and initiated public discourse on one of the last great taboos in our society. Sex was a controversial topic of discussion in the mid-twentieth century and many researchers had flirted with sex research as it related to hygiene, or as we would refer to it today, the prevention of sexually transmitted infections. But for all the research that was available, no one really knew what people did sexually. Kinsey took sexual behavior to task. He interviewed thousands of Americans to discover and report not what people were supposed to do, but what they were actually doing. The publication of his findings and his testimony to the outdated nature of 1950s sex laws started a discourse on sex that is still alive and well today. Looking back, Kinsey’s work has not only influenced our culture, laws, and public opinion, but it set the stage for generations of sex researchers to come.

#### Childhood and Education

Alfred Charles Kinsey was born in Hoboken, New Jersey on June 23, 1894. His family lived there until he was ten years old. During that time, Kinsey suffered a variety of childhood illnesses that affected his health for the rest of his life. Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, one of Kinsey’s most recent biographers notes, “Not just measles and chicken pox and the other ills of childhood which, a delicate child, he had in abundance, but diseases now largely confined to Third World countries—rickets and rheumatic fever” (Gathorne-Hardy 5). The rickets left Kinsey with a curved spine and the rheumatic fever contributed to the heart problems that eventually killed him.

Kinsey’s two most recent biographers present very different pictures of Kinsey’s childhood. Gathorne-Hardy and James H. Jones both portray the young Kinsey as an isolated boy who was frequently bullied by his peers and his father. Jones creates an elaborate series of inner demons that supposedly

resulted from this difficult childhood experience and plagued Kinsey for the rest of his life. Gathorne-Hardy, however, only attributes Kinsey's pronounced habits and attitudes, exhibited later in life, to these experiences of his early years.

Kinsey's father, Alfred Seguine Kinsey, worked at the Stevens Institute of Technology nearly all his life. "In 1886, when he was fifteen, his own father, a carpenter, placed him as a lowly shop assistant in the Stevens Institute of Technology. Kinsey Senior remained here his entire working life of fifty-five years, grimly grinding his way up until eventually in 1908 he became a full professor" (Gathorne-Hardy 4). Gathorne-Hardy goes on to say that Alfred Seguine Kinsey never really had the respect of the students and, in order to compensate, was known to be particularly egotistical.

Gathorne-Hardy and Jones both found Kinsey's social class throughout his childhood to be particularly meaningful throughout his adult life. Gathorne-Hardy claims that the middle class status Alfred Seguine Kinsey worked so hard for was treasured, but or someone who has worked their way up to the middle class may be fearful of losing that status. The Kinseys were at the border of the middle class when they moved to a new neighborhood in South Orange. "Mellville Woods had become a middle-class enclave in a prosperous neighborhood where practically all except the Kinseys owned their homes" (Jones 26). This is why Kinsey Senior saw that his family fell within strict middle class social norms of behavior.

One method of maintaining a middle-class identity was through religious belief. Kinsey's father was a self-ordained Methodist minister and strictly enforced dogmatic rule in his family.

The Kinseys belonged to a group of Methodists so strict they could, doctrine apart, have been described as Calvinists. And of all that little group of Hoboken Methodists, Alfred Seguine Kinsey was the sternest, the strictest, the most unforgiving. The effects of Kinsey's religious upbringing were fundamental to his character and affected his whole life. (Gathorne-Hardy 7)

The influence of such a strict upbringing was evident in Kinsey's brutal work schedule, precise routines, and general intolerance for frivolity as an adult. The restrictive nature of adherence to class roles and his father's interpretation of religion reinforced each other to create an incredibly repressive environment against which Kinsey eventually rebelled.

Kinsey's upbringing influenced him in other ways as well. People mentioned most frequently about young Alfred was his shyness.

The Kinseys had very few friends...The effects of years of isolation through illness, with few if any close friends, the feeble role models of ordinary social life, all to be reinforced, combined to make this—the small talk of society—an area which Kinsey refused, often with considerable impatience, to enter. (Gathorne-Hardy 8)

Not until Kinsey became active in Boy Scouts and eventually the YMCA did he really begin to interact with other people, though even then, he still maintained at a distance by serving as the leader, guide, and instructor. The last role was one he would readily adopt at every opportunity in his adult life.

Another way in which the young Kinsey found fulfillment was in nature. Once his family moved to South Orange his health greatly improved, and Kinsey began to spend time on his own outdoors. The recent PBS documentary on Kinsey describes Kinsey's relationship with nature: “Nature gives Alfred Kinsey an area in which he can define himself” ([Kinsey](#) PBS). It did not take long for Kinsey to bring science along with him on his outdoor excursions. His high school biology teacher, Natalie Roeth, was a very powerful influence in introducing Kinsey to science and was instrumental in encouraging his early success:

[H]is first scientific paper written when he was about sixteen. It had a faintly lugubrious, Thurber-like title, What do birds do when it Rains? But it was the result of hours of careful, and presumably wet observation and was, to Natalie Roeth's excitement, as well as his own, published in a nature journal. (Gathorne-Hardy 27)

Once equipped with the scientific method, Kinsey began a course he would follow for the rest of his life. After his first publication, the next step on this path was college.

Kinsey Senior wanted his elder son to become an engineer, a respectable career choice that would firmly entrench Alfred Charles Kinsey in the middle class. To that end, he pushed Kinsey to attend Stevens Institute of Technology. “For Kinsey, the thought of becoming an engineer was abhorrent. His desire for a career that could combine biology and the outdoors was heartfelt and pressing. It rested on intense curiosity, intellectual passion, and much more” (Jones 88). Kinsey had firmly established his identity as a biologist by this point and had no desire to go to Stevens, but he had not yet established his independence enough to defy his father's strict authority. Kinsey attended Stevens for two years struggling with a curriculum he did not enjoy. Eventually Kinsey found the courage and means to pursue his own desires and goals. In 1914, Kinsey transferred to Bowdoin where he pursued biology and

psychology. “Kinsey was graduated magna cum laude from Bowdoin in June 1916 with a B.S. degree” (Christenson 29). Kinsey then studied at Harvard University’s Bussey Institute on scholarship. While there, his research focused on the taxonomy of gall wasps. He would continue to study gall wasps for decades after he earned a Sc.D. in 1919. He took a ten-month trip around the country to collect gall wasps before beginning his job as a professor of zoology at Indiana University in Bloomington (IU).

Kinsey’s early years were difficult physically and emotionally, but once Kinsey discovered scientific inquiry, he began to make up for lost time. Something about science connected with Kinsey and became a part of his identity. Science slowly took over for the religious and even class ideology of his childhood. As Jones explains:

Science was not merely his profession; it had become his religion. Science was a moral issue, a matter of right and wrong. When he vowed to uphold the highest canons of scientific rigor, with no thought to the cost in time or labor, Kinsey sounded like some born-again Christian dedicating his life to Christ. (Jones 204)

There were, then, some elements of his evangelical upbringing that Kinsey could not shake. His method of teaching was the lecture that sounded more like preaching than teaching. In ideology, however, the shift from religion to science was complete. “Repeatedly, Kinsey the scientist would side with biology when it conflicted with accepted social mores” (Morantz 149). This ability to logically and systematically approach topics served Kinsey very well in his eventual studies of sex.

## Sex and Sexuality

Kinsey’s early education was limited, at best, when it came to sex. The Kinsey household was not an environment conducive to frank discussions of sexuality and such things were not discussed in schools. As Jones notes, “[d]eprived of a sex education in school, Kinsey did not receive one at home, at least not in the formal sense” (Jones 68). The only education Kinsey received regarding sex was through his involvement with the Boy Scouts and the YMCA.

Although sex hygiene courses were not included in the curriculum of Columbia High School, the moral agenda advanced by social hygienists was adopted by the two youth organizations that touched Kinsey’s life daily: the YMCA and the Boy Scouts. Both regarded sex education as a vital part of their program for training boys to become men. To safeguard

Christian character, the YMCA and the Boy Scouts instructed boys to abstain from premarital intercourse and masturbation alike. (Jones 69)

While there are letters between Kinsey and friends that serve as evidence that Kinsey did not uphold the latter instruction, he definitely abided by the former. According to Gathorne-Hardy, Kinsey remained a virgin until well after his marriage to Clara Bracken McMillen in June of 1921. “Kinsey told a close friend that he had been unable to make love to his young wife until they got back to Bloomington [from their honeymoon hiking trip]. This must have come as a bitter blow after the long years of acute sexual frustration” (Gathorne-Hardy 59). According to both Gathorne-Hardy and Jones, the problem was both a physical barrier with Clara and general anxiety and ignorance.

Kinsey had a complicated relationship with sexuality from a young age. Both Gathorne-Hardy and Jones argue that Kinsey was a very sexual individual. The deeply religious and repressive household he grew up in condemned any form of sexual expression. Masturbation, therefore, was proclaimed a sin. Since Kinsey had no premarital sexual experience, he was left with no acceptable avenue for the expression of his sexual feelings and desires. This had a profound influence on his later work.

For years he tried, this highly sexed young man, to force the boiling lava flow of sexual feeling underground. . . . The most basic force behind his sex research was deeply personal and extremely simple and it lies here: that no one else should have to suffer as he had suffered. (Gathorne-Hardy 24)

The frustration and pain Kinsey experienced were powerful motivators. Along with the intellectual curiosity and scientific methodology, Kinsey would eventually deconstruct the social mores that had been so repressive.

Jones argues that the drive to conduct sexual behavior research springs from an internal demon. Jones claims that Kinsey suffered from the stigma surrounding his sexuality: “Beginning with childhood, Kinsey had lived with two shameful secrets: he was both a homosexual and a masochist” (Jones 4). While Gathorne-Hardy acknowledges Kinsey’s sexual experiences with men, he does not come to the conclusion that Kinsey was a homosexual. Discussing Kinsey’s love and sex life, Gathorne-Hardy says:

Kinsey was to fall in love three times in his life, and twice it was with people whose relationship with him was that of pupil/follower to leader/counselor; all but one of his known sexual affairs were with men or women younger than himself.

The single exception was with a woman over sixty when he was about fifty-five. (Gathorne-Hardy 27)

Kinsey's sexual partners were both male and female, as were the individuals he loved, which is a strong argument against the rigid homosexuality Jones ascribes to the researcher. Even Jones himself presents damning evidence against his own argument:

While his attraction to men no doubt vitiated his sexual interest in Clara, Kinsey was able nevertheless to maintain a sexual relationship with her until near the end of his life. He remained deeply devoted to her throughout their marriage. Indeed, with no disservice to language, he never stopped loving her. Nor she him. (Jones 394)

While the use of the term homosexual in today's society may hold a variety of meanings based on the perspective of the speaker, Jones appears to use a rather strict definition in labeling Kinsey. Given that Kinsey had romantic and sexual relationships with both men and women throughout his sexually active life, Jones' claim is invalid. There is a term in current sexuality discourse that, while anachronistic, would more accurately describe Kinsey's sexuality and that is bisexual. The descriptive error in stating Kinsey's sexuality might not make much of a difference except that this is the argument that Jones uses to undermine the legitimacy of Kinsey's research. A misuse of the term homosexual to categorize Kinsey undermines the invectives Jones issues against him. Thus, it is important to have a clear understanding of what Kinsey's sexuality was to evaluate its potential influence on his own research as well as the research of those who wrote about him.

### Personality

There are many aspects of Kinsey's personality that had a direct bearing on his research. Some of Kinsey's particular eccentricities helped him push forward on one of the largest sexual behavior studies ever conducted. Others, however, may very well have contributed to the cessation of funding and the inability to acquire replacement sources of funding for the very same research. Gathorne-Hardy notes that many of Kinsey's pronounced personality traits were already evident in his childhood. "A particularity of Kinsey's character until quite late on was that where many people change with time, dropping elements, refining, Kinsey just became more and more definitively what he was" (Gathorne-Hardy 30). Perhaps the only area in which this is not evident is communication. Kinsey was a shy, reserved child, yet by adulthood, Kinsey had a very different communication style. John Money explains:

The cumulative effect of Kinsey’s way of communicating with people could not have been better calculated to antagonize. He appeared to assume for himself the role of an almighty who, in his superior wisdom, knew all, and had the special prerogative of passing judgment. (Money 321)

This perception of Kinsey follows from an encounter with him at an academic conference. There is a distinct difference between Kinsey’s style of communicating in lecture versus conversation. Gathorne-Hardy recounts the perspective Kinsey’s staff had on his personality:

At the same time, they remembered his sudden warmth, his smile when he returned from a trip—‘How are you?’ ‘You felt it was meant,’ said Pomeroy. Kinsey was unfailingly polite. He was a kind man and if they had a genuine grievance he would listen and comply. (Gathorne-Hardy 219)

This ability to be both incredibly self-assured and attentive to others helped Kinsey interact with a wide variety of people in taking sex histories. Kinsey was known to be a chameleon, able to take on the traits the interviewee needed to feel at ease and share his or her sexual history.

Kinsey’s unique personality characteristics extended far beyond his communication style. It may be that Kinsey either did not realize the extent to which his research would influence society or he just did not care. Jones seems to think that Kinsey simply thought the best of people. “Kinsey honestly believed that if people knew the facts, they would rid themselves of guilt and shame. Few assumptions better illustrate the optimism of the man or the age that produced him” (Jones xii). Along with the optimism Kinsey harbored was an enthusiasm for research. “Kinsey’s delight in the wonders of nature and his insatiable curiosity were infectious. Everything interested Kinsey” (Jones 212). Kinsey’s pure excitement translated into devotion to the work. “The man was thorough, no doubt about it, and he was obsessive about his work. He drove himself continually, dashing all over the country to lecture and record interview” (Boyle 185). It was not just Kinsey’s interest in or enthusiasm for the research that drove him so hard. Jones argues that what ultimately drove Kinsey was a desire to excel.

Kinsey had to be the best at everything he did. Throughout his life, he showed a passion for complex and difficult activities, but he could never be satisfied with being merely good at something. As Gebhard observed, “This man had a real demon on his back. He had to excel, and if he couldn’t excel in an area, he wouldn’t have anything to do with that area. ... He had this real obsession that he had to excel.” (Jones 37)

While it is impossible to determine what instilled this powerful desire to succeed in Kinsey, there are several factors that may have, logically, played a part. The middle-class work ethic of Kinsey's childhood would be an easy source of influence. There may even have been some desire to surpass his father's achievements. Whatever the cause, Kinsey's drive served his research well and simultaneously drove him to the grave.

Another characteristic Kinsey exhibited in childhood that became more prominent as he aged was collecting. Kinsey began collecting dried flowers as he first ventured out into nature as a child. Then he moved on to collecting records, snakes, gall wasps, and eventually sex histories and erotica. Gathorne-Hardy identifies a clear motive for Kinsey's collecting. "By collecting something... you also control it. To collect anything is a way of imposing control" (Gathorne-Hardy 30). For someone coming out of a very repressive environment where everything is beyond one's control, it would make sense that regaining control of small things would be comforting, even necessary. Indeed, Jones explains how collecting served several purposes for Kinsey. "But collecting itself was important to Kinsey, and in time this interest would become an obsession. The adult Kinsey would transform his collecting into a science, combining personal need and professional identity to good advantage" (Jones 40). Since his work so conveniently overlapped with his personality traits, the pursuit of his research served to develop these traits more distinctly in the adult Kinsey. In this way, Kinsey's work is somewhat responsible for the honing of personality traits Gathorne-Hardy described.

### Early Research

Kinsey's research interests when he arrived at IU were focused on the gall wasps he had been studying at Harvard. At every opportunity Kinsey traveled the country collecting gall wasps. He also encouraged people he met in his travels to send galls to him in Bloomington.

Everywhere he went Kinsey recruited amateurs to help collect galls for him. As his work progressed he corresponded with gall experts abroad and got them to help as well. He gradually drew together a network of over a hundred people sending him galls from all over America and from various places round the world. (Gathorne-Hardy 78)

Kinsey ended up collecting well over a million of the tiny insects. Just collecting them, however, was not very good science as Gathorne-Hardy explains. "But of course it was what he did with his thousands upon thousands of galls that mattered; Kinsey's real quality as a scientist didn't truly emerge till he returned home" (Gathorne-Hardy 78). In fact, when Kinsey returned to Bloomington he began putting all those wasps underneath a microscope.

Kinsey was, as always, systematic in his approach to the gall wasps. Gathorne-Hardy explains his technique:

Every single specimen was examined by Kinsey under a dissecting microscope; twenty-eight difference measurements were taken, recorded and correlated, and from these the species deduced, variations, order of descent, relationships... To speed the note-taking he developed a shorthand/positional code whereby a few simple symbols took on a separate meaning from their position on a small page. (Gathorne-Hardy 80)

Not only did this system allow Kinsey to collect data, characterize an entire species, and write two books on the subject, but it gave Kinsey a good idea of how to record large quantities of information quickly. This procedure foreshadows the more complicated sex history documentation system that Kinsey developed later in life.

For all the joy that studying and classifying gall wasps brought to Kinsey, his contribution to the world of science was not on par with his idol, Charles Darwin. It was a very select group of individuals who had any interest in Kinsey's publications or first book. The publication of Kinsey's second book on gall wasps found him at the end of the gall wasp project. In 1938, Kinsey's focus shifted to sex.

Sex was, coincidentally, a hot topic on the IU campus at the time. In response to rising rates of venereal disease, students at colleges across the country were calling for accurate information on sex. While IU offered a hygiene course, the information offered was representative of the available research; most of it was morality disguised as scientific fact. When the administration began searching for someone to coordinate the new marriage course, Kinsey's name was mentioned. At that point, he was a middle aged, happily-married father and a biologist who had been studying gall wasps for the last two decades. As Robert T. Francoeur explains:

All this right-wing respectability made Alfred Kinsey the perfect candidate in 1936, when Indiana University officials were looking for a professor to chair a faculty committee that would be entrusted to design the first interdisciplinary course on sexuality and marriage to be offered at any American university... (Francoeur Part III 50)

Once he got the job, Kinsey started researching data on human sexual behavior in part to teach the course with the most accurate information, and in part to satisfy his own curiosity. He was completely dissatisfied with all the published

studies so he began to perform his own research. He began by taking the sex histories of students who came to seek advice from him after class. Thus began an avenue of inquiry that Kinsey would follow until his death. According to T. C. Boyle:

His career as a sexologist began in 1938, when he was in his 40s and had accomplished about all he could with his gall wasps and was looking for some other outlet for his uncontainable energy. In those days, sex was little discussed or studied in the university, aside from the bland, euphemistic “Marriage and Family” courses that did more to obfuscate the subject than cast light on it. (Boyle 182)

Kinsey’s course was designed to cast as much light as possible on the sexual components of marriage. In his typical matter-of-fact, scientific manner, Kinsey presented everything he knew and could discover about human sexuality.

Kinsey electrified the assembled students by announcing at the outset that there were only three types of sexual abnormality—abstinence, celibacy and delayed marriage—and he absolutely stunned them by showing slides of sexual intercourse...all while lecturing on about vasoconstriction and clitoral stimulation in the driest, unmodulated scientist’s voice. The course was a sensation. (Boyle 182)

Kinsey continued to seek the answer to the question of what people do sexually. When students came to him for advice, he answered their questions as best he could, but more often than not, he did not have answers to their concerns regarding “normal” sexual behavior.

Kinsey had stumbled upon a completely new field of study and found that the tools he had developed to study gall wasps were exactly what was needed to study human sexual behavior. First, he needed to start collecting data. Regina Markell Morantz explains his rationale, “[b]efore men could think scientifically about human sexuality, they needed facts about actual behavior. The link between behavior and the ‘biologic and social aspects’ of people’s sex lives demanded exploration” (Morantz 149). Kinsey’s strategy followed that he used in collecting galls and was to gather enough histories that any statistical analyses would be significant. This goal of statistical analysis set him apart from previous sex researchers.

Turn-of-the-century sexology pioneers like Sigmund Freud, Richard Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis and T.H. van de Velde knew nothing about statistics. Practically all their conclusions about what was normal or typical sexual behavior came from

their experiences in treating sexually dysfunctional and emotionally disturbed patients. (Francoeur Part II 52)

Kinsey designed his own research with a correction to the methodology of his predecessors in mind. Another way in which Kinsey’s approach to acquiring sexual histories was innovative his straightforwardness. Kinsey believed that he was more apt to get honest responses if he was up front with interview participants.

Most of the questions that were posed in these early surveys were worded so discreetly the respondents could easily miss their meaning, or else detect the “right” answer the questioner expected and wanted. In some cases the questions were blatantly loaded. One example: “Has anyone ever tried to give you the mistaken idea that sex intercourse is necessary for the health of the young man?” (Francoeur Part II 52)

Kinsey refused to couch potentially uncomfortable questions in overtly biased or moral terms. This openness and willingness to talk about sexual issues was incredibly unusual at that time. In fact, Gathorne-Hardy points out a rather frightening occurrence not long before the development of IU’s marriage course. “In 1934, the Columbia Broadcasting Company refused to allow New York State health commissioner Thomas Parran to give a talk on VD because he wished to use the words syphilis and gonorrhoea” (Gathorne-Hardy 95). Kinsey began developing a questionnaire that would encompass all possible areas of human sexual variation. He wanted to know what people were doing, so he was going to ask. While he adjusted the content of the questionnaire for several years, “[f]ully 400 of the 521 items covered in the final version of the sex history were already in his mid-1939 questionnaire” (Francoeur Part III 51). He also adopted his system of using symbols in specific locations for gall wasp data recording for sex history data recording. This enabled him to record massive quantities of data very quickly and without interrupting a conversation or losing eye contact with an interview subject for extensive lengths of time.

It did not take long for word of Kinsey’s sexual investigation to spread, helped in no small part by Thurman Rice, the professor of the hygiene course that had been the only previous marriage course offered to students. Rice attended one of Kinsey’s lectures and was mortified when Kinsey showed slides of sexual intercourse. Rice took the matter up with Herman Wells, the then President of IU, who was a strong advocate of freedom of research. Rice was disappointed when Wells failed to disband Kinsey’s course. “Wells proposed to do nothing, so Thurman Rice set out to rouse opposition wherever he could. By 1940, he was publicly attacking Kinsey in lectures in Indianapolis” (Gathorne-

Hardy 132). Eventually, more complaints surfaced, and in 1940, Wells gave Kinsey the option of continuing to teach the marriage course or continuing to gather sex histories. Kinsey was not pleased to be forced into choosing one project over another, but he decided to continue his research.

### Sex Research and The Kinsey Reports

Before long Kinsey began looking beyond the IU campus for sex histories. Kinsey developed a habit of encouraging his interview subjects to send their friends and other contacts to him. He also sent out thank you cards encouraging participants to recommend others. Through this network of students and other contacts, he branched out to different social groups. Eventually, this practice led him to Chicago where he found an entire subculture already in existence. "Kinsey's entrée into the underworld of Chicago male homosexuals was a young homosexual in Bloomington who was friendly with a group of young gay men who lived in a boarding house in Rush Street" (Gathorne-Hardy 133). Once Kinsey gained access to the homosexual community in Chicago, he was able to branch out even further to groups of sexual minorities in other cities. Over time, Kinsey developed a "sexual map of America" (Gathorne Hardy 301) from the histories he travelled the country to collect.

Kinsey's initial sample of histories came from college-educated, middle-to upper-class individuals since people from these groups were the easiest for Kinsey to find and interview. In order to ensure a sufficiently diverse and representative sample, however, Kinsey needed to find individuals from the lower class. To this end, Kinsey started collecting histories in prisons. One of the most difficult tasks in interviewing prisoners, as might be expected, was earning their trust. Through his unwavering commitment to confidentiality, frankness, and earnest interest in their stories, Kinsey was able to obtain sex histories from inmates in the Indiana State Penal Farm to prisoners in San Quentin.

He always got on well with prisoners. Perhaps something in him responded to anyone who came up against authority. But his solemn promise of absolute secrecy carried particular weight in the context of patrolling warders and strict administrators. (Gathorne-Hardy 165)

Kinsey had always been a bit of an outsider and the experience of rebelling against his strict, authoritarian father probably made it much easier for him to identify with the inmates. Another factor that influenced Kinsey's affinity for prisoners was the injustice he identified in many of their circumstances. As his data was beginning to show, many of the sex offenders he encountered had been convicted of crimes based upon sexual acts that a majority of the

population had done. Kinsey listened with a sympathetic ear to the tales of these prisoners and he did whatever it took to get accurate and complete sex histories from them. His dogged determination served him well with both prisoners and the general public:

Between 1937 and 1947, Kinsey averaged two histories a day and fourteen a week. Recording a single sex history could take several hours. Research was Kinsey's life blood. Even today, with our sophisticated computers and polling techniques, Kinsey's massive effort in gathering sex histories remains unmatched. (Francoeur Part II 53)

Clearly, Kinsey's technique was successful, but what, exactly, was he doing that worked so well?

Kinsey was not impressed with the research that preceded his. He was determined to collect the most accurate and representative data possible. Kinsey had been talking to people about their sexual behaviors for years by the time this project took shape. He had developed interview habits and techniques that he felt confident resulted in clarity, accuracy, and honesty. Continuing to collect data through interviews offered other benefits besides Kinsey's personal comfort. Paul Gebhard notes, “[i]f a question, no matter how carefully written, can be misconstrued, it will be” (Gebhard 46). Using written surveys places the decision-making power in the hands of the respondents. Any question found to be distasteful or confusing can be ignored and is open to misinterpretation. While there are definite benefits to data collection via questionnaires, for Kinsey, the complications far outweighed any potential gains. He would stick to interviews. And there were other benefits to this decision. While the social environment of the time may not have been as repressive as the environment of Kinsey's childhood, there were still things that just were not discussed. What Kinsey offered his research subjects was an opportunity to confess their behaviors without fear of reproach. Gathorne-Hardy highlights the difference between unbiased scientific inquiry and the other available options.

The Church, however, was unable to reassure its supplicants that what they confessed to were not indeed sins. Psychiatrists and analysts often called them neuroses. Only Kinsey could completely fulfill the need to be accepted-to be loved in fact. No wonder he made... this extraordinarily powerful, dynamic, tested over centuries, the very base of his entire structure. (Gathorne-Hardy 179)

While Kinsey's interviews were not designed as therapy, it is easy to imagine how comfort could be drawn from placing one's own sexual behaviors in the context of what other people did.

Kinsey's early success collecting gall wasps informed his decisions regarding the collection of data on sexual behavior. He took a sort of shotgun approach here and attempted to create a questionnaire that would cover every possible avenue of human sexual expression. Kinsey's next procedural decision would spark strong reactions in both critics and supporters.

Because this wasn't even psychiatry, you see. It wasn't, that is, passive. Kinsey came on like a prosecuting attorney. Not did you, but when did you: not have you, but how often have you—all the D.A.'s bad cop/bad cop ploys and insinuations. That he got these people to talk at all—this was 1938, this was 1939, this was 1940 and all the 1940s: this was when men wore hats and women looked like telephone operators, their flower styles and print arrangements like those dumb sexual displays in nature, the bandings and colorful clutter on birds, say, who do not even know that what they are wearing is instinct and evolution...was largely a matter of flourishing his seventy-six-trombone science like the metallic glint of a flashed badge, using science, always Science, capitalized and italicized too, like a cop pounced from a speed trap, pulling them over to the side, badgering, hectoring, demanding... (Stanley Elkin 50)

The flair of Elkin's colorful description aside, Kinsey's method changed the way sex research was conceptualized. Intent on avoiding biasing his data by asking leading questions, he placed the burden of denial on the respondent. Kinsey's critics often note that his fervor pushed him to the other extreme. Instead of feeling pressure to deny a behavior because of the interviewer's transparent bias, participants would have felt the pressure to admit to behaviors they had not participated in to appear normal. Ultimately, a choice had to be made and Kinsey's decision set him apart from those who had come before him.

Even the most basic assessment of scientific rigor demands some verification that investigative techniques used are, in fact, reliable. Given that Kinsey was breaking new ground in sex research, he carefully analyzed his methodology.

Kinsey used several different checks to try to test the reliability of his data, a summary of which is as follows: 1. Retakes to see if the interviews are consistent over time; 2. Comparison of spouses to see if they agree; 3. Comparison of other sex partners, such as homosexuals, prostitutes, etc. to see if they agree; 4. Comparison of results of one interviewer against those of another interviewer; and 5.

Hidden cross-check questions in the interview. As a result of these checks for validity, Kinsey found that some of his data seemed highly accurate and other aspects of his data were not so accurate. The following types of data declined in accuracy in the following order: 1. Incidence figures (apparently highly accurate) 2. Vital statistics (age, occupation, etc.) 3. Frequency figures (rate of outlet, etc.) 4. First knowledge of sex phenomenon (least accurate). (Palmore 68)

Another potential problem in trying to determine the sexual practices of an entire nation is obtaining a representative sample. Since his study relied on volunteers, who are, by definition, self-selected, and an individual's sexual behavior was considered a private matter that many are uncomfortable discussing, obtaining a randomized sample of individuals and ensuring adequate rates of participation would be unlikely, if not impossible. In order to address the issue of volunteer bias in his study, Kinsey sought groups of people that were drawn together by factors unrelated to sex. He would approach the leader of a group, obtain their sex history, and convince the leader to bring the rest of the members of the group in to give their histories. In the end, a quarter of his total sample came from these so-called 100% groups. Kinsey analyzed the data provided from these groups separately from the rest of his data and did not find significant differences in the behavioral patterns. This practice, like many others, is not without its drawbacks. Paul Robinson places some of those disadvantages in perspective:

Moreover, the groups from which Kinsey actually obtained hundred percent samples did not, by his own admission, constitute a cross section of the total population. Nonetheless, I think one must agree that the hundred percent principle was an ingenious solution to the problem of selectivity in a voluntary sample. (Robinson 49)

All of these measures would be thoroughly investigated by Kinsey's critics, but it is important to note that Kinsey did consider and address these issues from the beginning of his research. While he was breaking new ground in research content and technique, he was not completely flying by the seat of his pants. Kinsey had a solid background in scientific inquiry and applied that background to this project.

As time went on and Kinsey's network of contacts expanded, he began taking histories at an impressive, but brutal rate. If he was to continue gathering data from all the available subjects, Kinsey needed help. The selection of other researchers to perform interviews was tricky. Kinsey had been discussing sex with a diverse group of people for years, and he developed ways to make those discussions easier for people. “Equally as important as the

comprehensive nature of Kinsey's questionnaire was his skill in getting people to talk about their most intimate experiences" (Francoeur Part III 51). Kinsey knew exactly what he was doing in interviews, and any member of his team that was to interview subjects had to have the same competence. In effect, "Kinsey wanted all interviewers to be replicas of himself" (Gathorne-Hardy 238). There was also a very specific image Kinsey wanted his staff to convey. The members of his team must be accepting and approachable to individuals from any social class. They would also have to be able to adapt their interview to the specific educational and cultural customs of the subject.

It was claimed that a few highly trained interviewers can use a flexible interview utilizing whatever method of approach suited the case best, at the same time being able to recognize invalid answers on the basis of his experience in the field and thus obtain more valid results than the public-opinion type surveyor with his fixed set of questions and approaches. (Palmore 67)

Thus, his interviewers had to be comfortable interacting with people from a range of social classes and cultural groups. These are not easy traits to learn, or teach. Kinsey had to find people who already possessed most of these abilities and portrayed the desired image. Both Gathorne-Hardy and Judith A. Allen comment on his strict requirements:

He felt all interviewers should be happily married (a lot of people suspected someone not married) yet still be able to leave home for half the year, something Mac regarded as really "a contradiction in terms." Also, people would feel that a woman with the intense interest in sex that interviewing implied would be better (safer) constrained in the home. In fact, a later Kinsey staff member, Cornelia Christenson, was trained and did some interviewing...but in the context of the 1940s Kinsey was probably right. (Gathorne-Hardy 238)

Demanding that interviewers be happily married parents, he was acutely aware that exclusive homosexuality was a minority experience. He believed that homosexual staff could not achieve rapport with diverse social groups, here anticipating the impact of cultural norms on research outcomes despite personally rejecting those norms." (Allen 12)

Both homosexuality and bachelorhood were disqualifiers for any potential team members. Kinsey wanted to present a conservative, trustworthy image and married men most effectively accomplished that end. Kinsey's refusal

to use women as interviewers has been particularly criticized. Masters and Johnson, whose work on sexual physiology followed directly from Kinsey's work advocated using two-member teams, with each gender represented. “Material of sexual connotation has been elicited from study subjects more effectively and accurately by interview teams with both sexes represented than by single-sexed interrogation” (Masters and Johnson 22). It may seem more effective to attempt to use staff members who had traits in common with the subjects. A homosexual staff member, then, would have a particular advantage in interviewing homosexual subjects and women would be better interviewers of other women. Kinsey rejected this idea on the grounds that there was no way to find an interviewer that each subject could identify with based on one particular trait.

Kinsey was also very concerned with the attitude of his interviewers. They had to be just as open-minded and accepting as Kinsey himself could be. Any overt adverse response to the information revealed in an interview could taint all the data collected. Kinsey did everything in his power to encourage acceptance in his team. He suggested and enabled homosexual and extra-marital sexual behaviors so that his interviewers could empathize with respondents. Eventually, the already close-knit team became “a group of interacting open marriages...” (Gathorne-Hardy 168). The sexual practices of Kinsey's team members were no more publicized than Kinsey's own, but they undoubtedly contributed to the tolerance and understanding required to perform comprehensive sex histories. Indeed, Gathorne-Hardy remarks, “[b]ut the real point is, they were a completely dedicated band locked by a charismatic and administratively gifted leader into an enormous and dramatic task” (Gathorne-Hardy 219). This intimate group of highly trained and highly skilled researchers, led by Kinsey, would complete such a large and complex study of human sexual behavior that it has not been replicated in sixty years.

## The Reports

A decade after he began asking questions about people's sexual practice for his marriage course, Kinsey released the first of two volumes that would present Americans with an unexpected view of their own sexuality. Both Kinsey's male and female volumes were written with an audience of scholars in mind. Stanley Elkin explains:

And the reports themselves as aseptic, as bland, the hot stuff cooled down into charts, graphs, the point something decimals of neutrality. Masters and Johnson undreamed of yet, all their wired protocols of flesh, the special lenses uninvented, the down-and-dirty genitalia like locations, sets, special effects, the body's steamy skirmishes and star wars (sic). (Elkin 53)

It took over 16,000 pages for Kinsey to present and analyze his data from the interviews. He did not want to follow in the footsteps of his predecessors that had previously conducted research to reinforce moral or religious standards. "He claimed repeatedly that his function was not to make moral judgments but to record behavior. And that was what he did, obsessively, always hot on the trail of one more history, one more sheet of data to add to his ever-accumulating files" (Boyle 185). By the time the male volume was published, Kinsey and his team had collected 12,000 histories. In fact, the dedication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* reads, "To the twelve thousand persons who have contributed to these data and to the eighty-eight thousand more whom, someday, will help complete this study" (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin Male iv). Kinsey had set a goal of collecting 100,000 histories to complete his study of sexual behavior. The goal was far too grand to be attained in his lifetime, but Kinsey continued taking histories until his death.

When he died, in 1956, there were eighteen thousand such histories in his files, eight thousand of which he had personally taken. Which makes him a kind of intellectual Casanova, a scientific Don Juan, whatever the boozy, set-up-Joe, torch song and torch singsong equivalencies are for the ear's voyeurism, all the scandals of the heart and head, all the gossip of the imagination. (Elkin 50)

Despite the lengths of the reports, Kinsey did not include all of the data he had in either volume. In fact, Kinsey had planned to publish seven more books, each of them addressing one specific aspect of sexual behavior.

The male and female reports emphasized the trends Kinsey and his team observed in sexual behavior; one of which was class-dependent. "And his argument, generalized and oversimplified, goes, approximately, like this: The lower levels screw, the upper levels sublimate" (Elkin 55). Kinsey's data showed that upper class individuals (defined by educational level) delayed intercourse longer than their lower class counterparts. Instead, they participated in more masturbation and petting for sexual gratification. The other major trend presented in the Kinsey Reports was the extent of variety in sexual behaviors. Just like the individual variation in gall wasp characteristics, people all had unique sexual histories. "Consistent with Kinsey's earlier writings, both volumes emphasized the behavioral range of sex activity. This prompted Kinsey to question formerly accepted norms" (Morantz 151). With one eye on the conclusions, he drew from the data, Kinsey took a critical look at society and the laws regulating it. What he found was a striking disparity in what people did sexually and what people thought they did sexually.

Kinsey's conclusions were presented through the lens of his own pluralistic perspective. Every scientist approaches research with bias just as every critic approaches published findings from their own perspective, informed by bias. Bias is an unavoidable fact of reality and humanity. This does not discredit the institution of science or research, but bias is one aspect of the institution that must be evaluated. Kinsey's claims to be completely objective indicate a noble goal, but one that was ultimately, inherently, unattainable.

Despite his innovative methods and controversial findings, he ostensibly refrained from policy pronouncements, depicting himself as a neutral, objective, and disinterested scientist. Yet, his responsiveness to pleas for help, especially from those fighting drastic and draconian legislation or seeking decriminalization of practices related to sexuality which Kinsey regarded as victimless belied his objectivist self-representation. (Allen 2)

Kinsey's analyses and subsequent proclamations regarding society's unrealistic perception of sexual behavior did not go unnoticed by his critics both in academia and in the popular culture his works were quick to suffuse.

### Initial Responses

The Kinsey Reports, despite their length and density, quickly grabbed the attention of the American public. While there had been some press coverage of the male volume before its publication, once the book was released, discourse spread like wildfire. Kinsey became a household name, and suddenly people everywhere were talking about sex.

Thanks to Kinsey and his associates, sex was out of the closet, to be discussed at dinner tables and debated at symposia. The report's dry presentation of facts about the way men lived (or at least, the way some men lived) went a long way toward eroding the prevailing hypocrisy, and the tremors reverberated for years. (Edwards 34)

Since Kinsey's work came from such a seemingly straight-laced scholar, the topic of sex was given legitimacy. The general public did not approach the reports with the scientific rigor of academics. Some academics were concerned, then, that the ideas presented to the public would corrupt a vulnerable population.

Though many critics shared the Progressive faith that the truth would make men free, they resisted applying this conviction

to sex research. In this instance the truth was dangerous and might help destroy the American value system. Reinhold Niebuhr passionately argued this point of view when he declared that Kinsey's assumptions represented 'a therapy which implies a disease in our culture as grievous or more grievous than the sickness it pretends to cure.' (Morantz 155).

Other intellectuals saw the reports as a perpetuation of a traditional, historical perspective that was now supported by specific data.

The Report will surprise one part of the population with some facts and another part with other facts, but really all that it says to society as a whole is that there is an almost universal involvement in the sexual life and therefore much variety of conduct. This was taken for granted in any comedy that Aristophanes put on the stage. (Trilling 72)

One way or another, scientists were being called upon to respond to Kinsey's findings and the implications he drew from them. The information in the reports was quickly becoming part of a cultural phenomenon. Kinsey and his findings were being discussed in homes, grocery stores, break rooms, and on the radio. Sex was a private matter and suddenly a scientific researcher gave sex enough legitimacy to be discussed in public.

The first book reporting Kinsey's findings, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, was published on January 6, 1948. "The report was a runaway sensation, selling two hundred thousand copies in two months and staying on best-seller lists for more than a year. Yet *The New York Times* would not advertise it" (Francoeur Part III 52). It included a lot of information that was surprising to the general public. Kinsey's report on the exact percentages of American males who had paid for sex, cheated on their wives, and masturbated was surprising enough, but the most shocking information was Kinsey's data on homosexual activity. Gathorne-Hardy explains, "Kinsey is famous for three statistics: 37%, 10%, and 4%" (Gathorne-Hardy 259). Of Kinsey's male sample, 37% had some homosexual experience to orgasm, 10% had been more or less exclusively homosexual in their experiences for at least three years at some point in their lives, and 4% had been exclusively homosexual for their entire lives. In addition to this data, Kinsey created a broader conceptualization of sexuality classification.

The Male Report introduced a heterosexual-homosexual rating scale which measured and individual along a continuum from complete homosexuality to complete heterosexuality by considering both overt behavior and

psychic response. This scale represented Kinsey’s discomfort with dichotomous classifications and his determination to investigate behavior independent of a preconceived notion of normality. (Morantz 151)

Using the Kinsey scale, as it would come to be known, allowed for people to identify their own mix of sexual experiences on a continuum that was then divided into seven points. A zero on the Kinsey scale was completely heterosexual and did not have homosexual desires or experiences. A six on the Kinsey scale was completely homosexual and did not have heterosexual desires or experiences. A three was someone who experienced homosexuality and heterosexuality equally, in short, a bisexual. Kinsey’s classification system was not as rigid as the dichotomous heterosexual or homosexual system. In fact, one’s number, based on the Kinsey scale, could change over time if one’s sexual desires or expressions changed. According to Martin Duberman in the PBS documentary of Kinsey’s life, “We’re talking about a body of theory that stresses the fluidity of human sexual desire” (Kinsey). Kinsey accepted then presented to the world the idea that sexual desire is not fixed and can change. This concept has influenced both the push for a greater understanding of desire and its relationship to sexual orientation in our society as well the movement supporting compulsory heterosexuality.

The second book, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, was released August 20, 1953. There were notable differences in the perception of female sexuality between the male and female volumes. In the male volume, “[t] here is a distinct, not quite anti-female feeling, but certainly impatience with women for not being as enthusiastic or responsive as men would like them to be” (Gathorne-Hardy 258). Once the female volume was released, Kinsey had come to some conclusions regarding the differences of expression in male and female sexuality. Kinsey began to understand how women functioned differently than men. “They became aware of physical need only when actually locked in their lover’s arms. This explained female passivity, female abstinence, female resistance to variety” (Gathorne-Hardy 348). The notion that women and men are different is not new, but having the histories of how thousands of women responded to sexual desires and situations finally began to explain those differences. One of Kinsey’s other tasks in writing the female volume was to evaluate and incorporate any possible improvements to his methods. Jones explains the steps Kinsey took to accomplish this.

Taking aim at some of the most serious criticisms that had plagued the male volume, Kinsey worked hard to refine his numbers. To improve the sample, he removed prisoners and many lower-class subjects, and he cleaned up most of the minor statistical errors that had annoyed reviewers the first time. While these changes helped, it would be wrong to

conclude that they constituted any sort of drastic revision.  
(Jones 683)

Kinsey, then, was not going to undermine the validity of the interview and overall process in order to satisfy some of his critics. He would not make overwhelming changes to the program, just minor ones that did not involve significant or damaged groups: "The Female volume was subjected to relentless criticism. Kinsey's second report was a direct indictment of the double standard, demonstrating that women, indeed white American women, were almost as sexually active before and outside of marriage as men were" (Allyn 422). Initially, Kinsey's honesty and helped him assert his dominance within the field. Indeed, the response to the female volume was swift and deliberate. "Shortly after it was published, the female volume inspired political reaction and efforts to support it" (Allyn 423). The initial support of the female volume would soon give way to vicious criticisms, some of which are still echoed by reviewers today.

### Hitting the Wall

While Kinsey's research was officially funded by the Committee for Research in Problems of Sex under the National Research Council, the money actually came from the Rockefeller Foundation. Kinsey never missed an opportunity to emphasize his connection to the very powerful and respected Rockefeller Foundation.

Kinsey had not made matters easier for himself or his cause. He had, for example, insisted on crediting the Rockefeller Foundation as a source of funding, a policy discouraged by the foundation and for that reason had not been done in the earlier Rockefeller-supported studies. This deliberate decision of Kinsey to do so gave his opponents a larger and extremely wealthy target to attack, and attack they did.  
(Bullough 182)

In the end, this move cost him dearly. Kinsey's books had started such a huge wave of open sexual discourse and garnered him so much publicity that he became an obvious target for conservative politicians. This, in turn, made the Rockefeller Foundation a very large, very public target.

The Rockefeller Foundation faced political pressure from conservatives in Congress to terminate Kinsey's funding. Representative B. Carroll Reece ordered an investigation of the Foundation's finances. In 1954, the Foundation cut off virtually all money for the Kinsey Institute's research. (Allyn 423)

In the post-World War II, atmosphere of suspicion and fear aroused by the cold war, any aberrant behavior or independent thought became grounds for accusations of communist ideation. Within the realm of sexuality, the “communist threat” label was even more readily assigned.

McCarthyites made unmistakable analogies between Communism and all non-procreative or non-marital sexual expressions, smudging together those targeted for their alleged Communist sympathies and those persecuted for sexual ‘perversions.’ By criticizing the scapegoating of homosexuals, Kinsey became vulnerable to charges of being a communist. Kinsey’s research agenda and reform advocacies thereby became effectively ‘Communist’ within the slippery delineations of Cold War domestic politics. (Allen 13)

The report from the Reece committee was ultimately revealed to be largely staged, but this did nothing to save Kinsey from his funding predicament. Kinsey had so thoroughly bound himself to the Rockefeller Foundation that it was nearly impossible for him to procure other sources of funding to continue his research.

Gradually a consensus emerged that the Reece committee had been little more than an annoyance. But this was not entirely accurate. There was one clear-cut casualty, and his name was Alfred Charles Kinsey. The withdrawal of the Rockefeller Foundation’s support under fire threw him into a tailspin from which he never recovered. (Jones 737)

It did not help that asking for money was not something easy for Kinsey to do. Jones argues that this stems from his childhood responsibility of procuring store credit for his mother. Whatever the reason, his repeated and failed attempts to secure alternate funding completely demoralized Kinsey. He put the royalties from the male and female volumes back into the project, but that income would not sustain the project long enough to reach his ultimate goal of one hundred thousand sex histories.

Kinsey’s approach to statistics was very simple; get a large enough sample size and the patterns observed will be representative of the entire population. In large part, this stems from his training and experience working with gall wasps. Unfortunately, Kinsey’s sample was neither large enough to overcome statistical challenges nor was it representative of its own accord. Many of his critics initially focused on statistical problems and his unique methodology.

As we shall see, to dismiss methodology as a side issue in dealing with Kinsey is to miss the point. This is strange, for

when the reports appeared they encountered strong criticism not only from religious groups and conservatives but from scientists and liberal social observers like Lionel Trilling and Dorothy Dunbar Bromley. (Levine 428)

Since Kinsey was not a statistician and did not consult a statistical expert regarding his study, the Committee for Research in Problems of Sex sent a group of American Statistical Association statisticians to review and report on Kinsey's study. Kinsey was not pleased and referred to the team as "totally cerebral, totally unrealistic academics..." (Gathorne-Hardy 375). Such criticism coming from someone who was, himself, an academic and a scientist was particularly harsh. In the end, the group of statisticians led by William Cochran produced a 331-page analysis of the statistics employed in the male volume. According to Jones, the findings of the group were decidedly in Kinsey's favor. They admitted that there was no way Kinsey could have avoided the use of a non-random sample. Indeed, in their judgment, the peculiar problems associated with sex research made statistical analysis extremely difficult" (Jones 659). Kinsey was not the first researcher to study sex, but the scope and approach of his project was definitely unique. Since Kinsey's research was so groundbreaking, many of the statisticians' criticisms focused more on how to improve that methodology in future studies.

In addressing areas for improvement in future studies, the statisticians validated Kinsey's techniques, then suggested potential changes and evaluated those proposed by critics. "The interviewing methods used by KPM may not be ideal, but no substitute has been suggested with evidence that it is an improvement. KPM's checks were good, but they can afford to supply more" (Cochran, Mosteller, Tukey 37). This diplomatic analysis did not extend to all the issues addressed in the report. In fact, the statisticians were particularly critical of Kinsey's delivery and commentary on the data he presented.

Many of their most interesting statements are not based on the tables or any specified evidence, but are nevertheless presented as well-established conclusions. Statements based on data presented, including the most important findings, are made much too boldly and confidently. In numerous instances their words go substantially beyond the data presented and thereby fall below our standard for good scientific writing. (Cochran et al. 38)

Since it took until 1954 for the statisticians' report to be published, many other critics offered analyses of the works. Kinsey's sampling technique repeatedly came under fire.

It was often pointed out that the sampling was not a proportional representation of the total population. ... In rebuttal to this criticism, it was pointed out that Kinsey used an ‘experimental sample’ rather than a ‘representative sample.’ An ‘experimental sample’ was said to have the advantages of being able to be weighted to give an over-all average which is all a ‘representative sample’ can do, plus being able to give a finer description and distinction of the smaller groups on which it is based. (Palmore 66)

In the end, critics of the time identified areas of weakness in the reports but did not undermine the validity of the findings.

Kinsey’s 95 percent may only be 91 percent. He may not have equally good samples by all the groups to deal with. He may be criticized on this point or that. But all such criticism together, even if they were all justified, would still leave his major conclusions –unchallenged. (Palmore 68)

Even after decades of visiting and revisiting Kinsey’s methods, his conclusions have not been undermined.

For some forty years, scientists of all persuasions have scrutinized and analyzed the two Kinsey reports. Some conclusions are close to unanimous. According to Edward Brecher, author of *The Sex Researchers*, ‘Whatever their shortcomings, the Kinsey data remain today the fullest and most reliable sampling of human sexual behavior in a large population...’ (Francoeur Part III 52)

Whether through some unique combination of funding and situational factors or sheer grit and determination on Kinsey’s part, his work stands alone. While many of his findings have been, to greater or lesser degrees, verified, no one has been able to conduct a survey of size and scope that equals Kinsey. Even so, the criticisms of his groundbreaking research and its statistical methodology are many.

The statistical realm of the reports was not the only avenue of criticism. Critics with a more social or psychological background inquired about the absence of the emotional component of sexual expression. Kinsey did not locate the biological functions of sexual activity within the context of love. Critics were outraged. “Many of Kinsey’s contemporary reviewers criticized Kinsey for omitting various aspects of human sexuality from his study. They indicted him for ignoring love, emotion, and the qualitative analysis of sexual activity” (David Allyn 414). To his critics, Kinsey’s biologic approach to

sexuality was dangerous. Without the social, moral, and even religious context a culture maps onto sexual behavior, it is condensed to base physical drives. Kinsey's use of orgasm as the measure of sexual expression and satisfaction does, indeed, focus on the strictly physical response. "Kinsey's detractors feared that his premises implied an animalistic philosophy of sex devoid of emotional and social content. They accused him of a crude behaviorism that failed to place sexual activity within the larger context of human values" (Morantz 157). But Kinsey's refusal to address sexual behaviors from the perspective of and in the terms of love was not the most controversial of his choices.

Psychoanalysts were particularly critical of Kinsey's approach to the investigation of sexual behavior and the complete lack of psychoanalysis. Gathorne-Hardy finds that their criticism is warranted. "One of the most noticeable things in both the *Male* and *Female* volumes is Kinsey's unconcealed hostility to and contempt for, psychoanalysis and in particular, Freudian psychoanalysis" (Gathorne-Hardy 252). This oppositional attitude towards Freudian ideas is made even more problematic by Lionel Trilling's assertions about the theoretical debt Kinsey owed to Freud. "The way for the Report was prepared by Freud, but Freud, in all the years of his activity, never had the currency or authority with the public that the report has achieved in a matter of weeks" (Trilling 72). It is not clear if Trilling is indicating that Freud should have had more influence with the public or that Kinsey should have had less. In either case, Kinsey's work was viewed by most psychoanalysts as incomplete. For them, the failure to address the role of the unconscious in influencing sexual reporting was a major lapse in judgment.

Kinsey's greatest critics were psychoanalysts who felt that Kinsey and his associates lacked a basic understanding of the unconscious. Psychoanalysts demanded to know how researchers could trust at face value statements made by subjects about their sexual histories when Freud had shown how the unconscious repressed and distorted memory. (Allyn 419)

Kinsey had training in psychology, however, and had studied Freud's work before beginning his own studies. In the end, he determined that the psychoanalytic assertions regarding the unconscious were irrelevant to his own work. Robinson explains:

Kinsey, on the other hand, took an entirely matter-of-fact view of human sexual experience. It might, he allowed, be the source of considerable grief, but it utterly lacked the demonic potential attributed it by Freud. Consequently, he refused to entertain the notion that repression might compromise the reliability of his data. (Robinson 45)

In refusing to consider the psychoanalytic perspective to his research, Kinsey again limited the focus of his project. The additional result of that decision was that his analyses were left open to strong critiques by psychologists.

By eliminating social, psychological, and emotional aspects of sexual behavior from the scope of his research and isolating physical expression, Kinsey was able to focus an already massive project. It is unreasonable to expect one study to investigate every aspect of sexuality and find all the answers. That said, it is equally important that critics identified the areas of weakness in Kinsey's reports. The weak areas in Kinsey's study provided excellent starting points for future research which reinforces the scientific process on a large scale. Data is collected and analyzed, conclusions are drawn from it, and its deficiencies are investigated by projects that follow. Those projects are then subjected to the same criticism. Without this system of verification and improvement, Kinsey's work would have been left to the realm of moralistic social commentary. As it stands, Kinsey's research has spawned countless avenues of inquiry in a wide variety of fields. It has also drawn criticism from authorities in various fields.

#### More Recent Critiques

The response to Kinsey's work by religious groups was initially very positive. For one reason or another, discussions of the implications of Kinsey's work and sexuality in general were permitted, and sometimes even encouraged, by religious leaders. This was not always the case as Jones notes: “Most religious leaders praised Kinsey's research and welcomed his data, arguing that it was better to have the facts than to remain ignorant, even if that meant society would have to reevaluate its sexual mores” (Jones 575). As the years have passed, however, the response of the religious and socially conservative to the Kinsey books has become decidedly more negative. Francoeur cites examples of this attitude in the government:

Religious right-wingers and ultra-conservative politicians may charge that Kinsey was a fake and a pervert determined to turn America into a nation that endorsed bisexuality and sex with children. Reagan-Bush pawns may try to ignore the challenge of Kinsey's unique and invaluable surveys by refusing to follow them up with new surveys. But Kinsey and his surveys have with stood the test of time to remain landmarks in our understanding of human sexuality.  
(Francoeur Part III 52)

One of the leading right-wing critics of Kinsey's work is Judith Reisman. She has criticized the Kinsey findings as fraudulent and insists that any social or

legal change that has considered Kinsey's work supporting evidence must be undone:

In sum, the American Law Institute should revisit all uses of Kinsey's skewed data and the data from his disciples, and their disciples, etc., in the ALI-MPC. Moreover, a neutral task force should initiate a full and open public investigation of the impact of Kinsey's false data on our nation's laws, the military, our schools, churches, the news and entertainment media, academia, our families—all of our cultural, political, and religious institutions. Once the facts are gathered, the task force should draft the needed corrections to our current legal system (Reisman 259).

Reisman views the Kinsey reports as flawed in every regard. Any work of science or law that has evaluated Kinsey's findings as relevant is tainted by Kinsey's erroneous assumptions and results and is, therefore, also suspect. There are multiple problems with this perspective, the first of which is a lack of support by other scholars that Reisman's claims are founded. Francoeur's commentary is particularly insightful:

It defies logic and common sense to think that the officials at Indiana University, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the National Research Council, who supported and funded his research, and the thousands of scholars around the world who have scrutinized the Kinsey reports for the past forty years, have all missed the shocking evidence of fraud, perversion and homosexual/ pedophile conspiracy Reisman and Eichel charge Kinsey with. Respectable scholars and scientists would prefer to ignore these absurd charges. (Francoeur 119)

Reisman also cries foul in Kinsey's research and data presentation techniques. She does not acknowledge the validity or reliability of Kinsey's interview technique; she argues that Kinsey is operating under false pretenses and his true purpose is to achieve his own sexual agenda. There is, Reisman claims, substantial evidence of this in the two books. Unfortunately, the methods Reisman uses in order to criticize Kinsey are highly suspect themselves. Francoeur points out:

In his review of the Reisman/ Eichel book in the SIECUS Report, sexologist and educator Vern L. Bullough points out that the writers 'attempt a smear job based on inadequate

evidence and invented data.’ He goes on to point out that the authors change the meaning of their source material by merging sentences together so that they appear to support their theories... ‘This quotation required the merging of sentences from pages fifty-four, sixty-four, and seventy-one, and creates a total distortion of the actual meaning of the text.’ (Francoeur Part I 118)

There is a fine line in academia between editing someone else’s work for space constraints or relevance and manipulating the meaning of what was actually said. In criticizing Kinsey for sloppy reporting and inaccurate data gathering, the critic must use only the most rigorous methods. An effective argument against Kinsey will not contain the same errors the author claims Kinsey committed.

Another substantial problem with Reisman’s view and her arguments that every social change influenced by Kinsey should be undone is the nature of social change. One cannot simply flip a switch and undo shifts in societal perceptions overnight. In fact, undoing Kinsey’s influence may not ever be possible. Reisman argues that if we merely undid everything that Kinsey’s reports did, we would find ourselves back in a utopia in which nuclear families reigned supreme, homosexuality did not exist, and bad things never happened to good people. Stephanie Coontz’ work on the ways in which the image of the “traditional” family structure and sexual morality of the 1950s, idealized by Reisman, was not so traditional after all: “The 1960s generation did not invent premarital and out-of-wedlock sex. Indeed, the straitlaced sexual morality of nineteenth century Anglo-American societies, partly revived in the 1950s, seems to have been a historical and cultural aberration” (Coontz 184). Coontz further argues:

Today’s diversity of family forms, rates of premarital pregnancy, productive labor of wives, and prevalence of blended families, for example, would all look much more familiar to colonial Americans than would 1950s patterns. The age of marriage today is no higher than it was in the 1870s, and the proportion of never-married people is lower than it was at the turn of the century. Although fertility has decreased overall, the actual rate of childlessness is lower today than it was at the turn of the century, a growing proportion of women have at least one child during their lifetime. Many statistics purporting to show the eclipse of traditional families in recent years fail to take into account our longer life spans and lower mortality rates. (Coontz 183)

Coontz analysis of the social changes regarding families, sexual behaviors, and the complicated interaction of the two undermines Reisman's idealized vision of the past. Even if the inaccurate conservative society Reisman put forth as a social ideal had existed, the idea that we can somehow undo the influence of sexual pluralism engendered by Kinsey's work is impossible. Striking any reference to Kinsey and his work from the laws and social understanding will not transport our society back in time to a better day. Coontz argues that societies grow and change and learn and that process of development cannot be undone:

We will not solve any of the problems associated with the new family terrain by fantasizing that we can return to some 'land before time' where these demographic, cultural, and technological configurations do not exist. Women will never again spend the bulk of their lives at home. Sex and reproduction are no longer part of the same land mass, and no amount of pushing and shoving can force them into a single continent again. This is not to say that we should simply ignore the problems raised by shifting realities. Many problems, however, are not inherent in the changes themselves, but in the choices that have been made about where to draw new boundaries or how to respond to the transformations. (Coontz 204)

While the accusations Reisman makes are largely unfounded and her call to overhaul and restructure modern society in the idealized image of 1950s morality is impossible, her criticisms of Kinsey are important. Without such extreme and unsettling claims about the nature of Kinsey's work and potentially unethical research methods, Kinsey's work would stand as fact without verification. While Reisman's work is largely manipulative and incendiary, it motivates people to think critically and evaluate what they are being told in the Kinsey reports. Unfortunately

for Reisman, these reevaluations do not lead researchers to the same conclusions she has reached. Francoeur highlights the differences:

Sexologists today do reinterpret the Kinsey data in a more refined and sophisticated way. But they never suggest that Kinsey was a fraud who inflated his statistics of homosexuals in order to make American [sic] a homosexual nation of child molesters! (Francoeur 119)

Kinsey's work, and all sexuality research, will continue to be evaluated for

validity and reliability as new statistical approaches are attempted. Because the works were so influential to modern sex research, scientists will return to them and analyze the successes and shortcomings of Kinsey’s techniques in order to develop and use the most accurate and reliable methods available to study sex. The critiques of Reisman and those like her have encouraged the continual reexamination of Kinsey’s work, but they fail to undermine the integrity and accuracy of his findings.

In addition to the attacks on Kinsey’s research, recent scholars have called into question Kinsey, the man, as well. Jones, one of Kinsey’s most recent biographers, actually studied The Institute for Sex Research while pursuing a Ph.D. at Indiana University. Jones was at the epicenter of Kinsey’s groundbreaking work, yet Jones inexplicably presents an account of Kinsey utterly at odds with previous biographers and those who knew him. Gathorne-Hardy, was writing his biography of Kinsey, at the same time as Jones, came to fundamentally different conclusions about this powerful historical figure. Gathorne-Hardy comments on Jones’ work from the outset of his own book: “Jones belongs to what one might call the Kenneth Starr school of biography. That is, he decided to mount his attack since that is what his book in the end amounted to, from Kinsey’s private sexual behavior” (Gathorne-Hardy viii). It is impossible to place Kinsey’s sex life in a vacuum, and Gathorne-Hardy acknowledges that Kinsey’s sexual practices did influence his work, though not to the degree that Jones asserts: “With Kinsey, sex is central. Wherever we know something of his sexuality it is at once apparent that while it hardly ever, if ever, impaired his integrity as a scientist, it had a decisive effect on his work” (Gathorne-Hardy 19). The disconnect between his other biographers and Jones is startling and bears evaluation.

Jones has a masterful grasp of language, and his book *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life* is full of evidence to that fact. When it comes to criticizing Kinsey, Jones uses the most charged language possible. He creates suspicion and scandal in every aspect of his discussion and every characterization of Kinsey. For Jones, bias is not something to acknowledge, but a tool to furtively wield on the unsuspecting reader. If the account of Kinsey provided by Jones is the only one received, a hypercritical and largely unsupported perception of Kinsey will develop. Gathorne-Hardy, rather verbosely, but with excellent insight, explains the problems in Jones’ technique:

It is difficult to characterise the atmosphere of a book without lengthy quotations, but early on, the language of Jones’ biography indicates that something more than mere distaste for its subject is operating. You may remember that, in connection with Voris, I said it seemed likely, given Kinsey’s idealistic attitude to nudity, that the Kinseys had been to nudist camps - an innocent enough activity. Faced

with the same evidence, Jones came to the same conclusion, but he puts it like this: 'Suspicion lingers that he was speaking from experience,' and Jones goes on to imagine, on no evidence at all, that Kinsey is suggesting group sex. On the marriage course Kinsey's poor, duped students 'thought he truly cared about their problems.' (Kinsey's real concerns, according to Jones, again, on no evidence at all, were prurience and to see if other people shared his sexual 'demons.') Kinsey is not allowed to lecture to them without 'sneering,' if he pays a bill he's a 'check grabber'; he is not allowed to express pleasure at good reviews but is 'unable to resist tooting his own horn' or 'boasting' about them; good reviews, which in any case he 'rigs,' thereby 'corrupting peer review'; if Kinsey is pleasant at some point he as a 'congenial façade' concealing the domineering, driven man 'lurking' within; he 'postures' as objective, but actually the Female volume only has 'the trappings of heavy-duty science,' while in fact Kinsey's 'private demons came dangerously close to howling in public.' These 'demons,' which weave in and out continually, howling and pursuing the reader as they are supposed to have pursued poor Kinsey from about the age of fifteen, are 'masochis[tic]' and 'homosexual [sic].' We saw, from Jones' own evidence, that Kinsey was neither a masochist [n] or a homosexual in the sense Jones' book uses the terms. These are not the only instances where Jones stretches to breaking point the meaning of words in a way not compatible with scrupulous scholarship. (Gathorne-Hardy 364)

Jones' presentation of Kinsey's life and influence is full of such charged commentary. Seemingly indiscriminately, Jones attacks every aspect of Kinsey's life to support the image of Kinsey as a man driven by twisted desires to change social perceptions and reaffirm his own sexuality. While there are, of course, valid points raised in Jones' work, it must be read with a critical eye and with caution.

Reisman also criticizes Kinsey on the allegation that he was a pedophile. A documentary produced by the Family Research Council also makes these accusations, referring to Kinsey's research as, "criminal experimentation on children funded by the taxpayer" (The Children of Table 34). Data from the male volume is analyzed and questions are raised about the validity of Kinsey's findings. The documentary asks, regarding the children represented by this data, "Did their parents know they were being used in sessions with avowed pedophiles?" (The Children of Table 34). The question seems a valid one, but it assigns a level of responsibility to Kinsey that he simply did not have.

Most of the information Kinsey published about childhood sexuality comes from the detailed journals of one man's sexual experiences. That one man is Kenneth S. Green also referred to as Rex King. Gathorne-Hardy explains, “In fact, he lifted large chunks of Green's pre-adolescent material, and it furnished a considerable proportion of Chapter 5, ‘Early Sexual Growth and Activity,’ in the Male volume. The question arises—should he have done this?” (Gathorne-Hardy 222). The obvious answer now, of course, is no. At the time, however, the lure of otherwise unattainable data was difficult to resist. One of Kinsey's staff members firmly believed that Green's data should not be included in the report: “he [Nowlis] thought it was scientifically disreputable. Kinsey totally and flatly disagreed with him. Dickinson and Legman, working with Green on the penis monograph, vouched for his scientific accuracy. The material was unique and was impossible to replicate” (Gathorne-Hardy 222). Kinsey collected data from sex offenders of all varieties since the laws regarding sexual behavior were so strict. The illicit nature of the activities Green reported was not sufficient to override Kinsey's belief in their scientific relevance. Reisman denies any validity in child sexuality research. “Kinsey often expressed elitist right to unlimited, uncontrolled ‘scientific research’ into everyone's sexuality, including that of children from birth” (Reisman 36). Reisman even goes so far as to claim that children have no sexuality. “Would God so mock His people so as to, or nature, the animal world, make little children ‘sexual’ when an early libido could cripple the child's development?” (Reisman 149). While contesting an argument worded thusly would result in an unavoidable questioning of God, the evidence that children masturbate themselves with no ill effect would suggest that the issue of childhood sexuality is not as dire as Reisman suggests.

As for the ethical issues surrounding pedophilia, Kinsey's views left him open to criticism by the religious right. Gathorne-Hardy addresses these views:

This also raises the further question of Kinsey's attitude to child-adult sex in general. At its most basic, Kinsey saw sex as simply a matter of physiological reactions and sensations which were fundamentally pleasant. It followed that anything else, or anything adverse (guilt, fear, dislike, inhibition), had to be learnt and were human and social additions which had nothing inherently to do with any sexual act itself. Theoretically, therefore, as far as Kinsey was concerned, there was nothing automatically wrong with child-adult sex. (Gathorne-Hardy 223)

This does not mean that Kinsey supported a free-for-all attitude towards sexual behavior, or any sort of sexual abuse. In fact, Gathorne-Hardy provides information about Kinsey's perspective that would have mitigated Reisman's critique if considered: “It should go without saying, but should nevertheless

perhaps be said, that Kinsey was fiercely against any use of force or compulsion in sex" (Gathorne-Hardy 223). If Kinsey was not so emphatically against the use of force in sexual behavior, Reisman's claims would be damning, indeed. As it stands, with Kinsey's incredible opposition to violating consent, he would never support behaviors that were determined to be harmful to children.

Both Reisman and Jones are outspoken critics of Kinsey as a human being and as a scientist. Their negative evaluations of the man have fueled each other and resulted in two strongly divided schools of thought. Reisman and Jones question the techniques and methodology of Kinsey's research and they condemn the man himself. While there are occasional concessions to validity, they remain suspicious and blatantly adversarial to the notion that Kinsey's work was at all valid. Other researchers and historians acknowledge that Kinsey's alternative sexuality undoubtedly influenced his decision to pursue sex research and may have informed his conclusions, but they do not undermine the validity of his life or his research on these grounds. It is a struggle indeed to evaluate the extent one's bias influences one's work and at what point the influence is so powerful that the work is no longer meaningful.

As sexuality is understood today, aspects of a person's very identity are determined by their sexual desires and behaviors. It is very important to note, however, that people are not defined solely by their sexuality. Sexuality is merely one of the many characteristics that make up a personality. From this perspective, Kinsey's sexuality, the heterosexual, homosexual, masochistic, and the arguably debauches aspects of that sexuality influenced who he was and how he viewed the world, but they did not define the man, and they did not define his work.

### Kinsey as Reformer

While Kinsey's initial investigation of sexual behavior may have been driven by a desire to know and understand the diversity of a particular human behavior, the subsequent reforms and advocacy Kinsey supported were much more personally driven. "And the social-sexual reforms derived not just from the humane side of his character but from his highly sexed (highly bisexually sexed) nature and its grievous frustration till he was twenty-seven" (emphasis original) (Gathorne-Hardy 409). It was also important for Kinsey to maintain the intellectual legitimacy of studying sex. Allyn explains the conflict between Kinsey's objective scientific perspective and his personal one:

Kinsey was well aware that scholars who study sex faced two problems: sex did not seem to be worthy of serious investigation, yet paradoxically various forms of sexual behavior were often denounced as evidence of serious psychological, social or moral decay. Kinsey wished to defend

the study of sexual behavior, but he also wished to present himself as an objective scientist. (Allyn 411)

Kinsey's determination to find and present the reality of sexual behavior led to gross changes in societal perspectives, whether he intended it to or not. It is difficult to determine the extent to which Kinsey intended to change social and legal perceptions of what is normal with the publication of the male and female volume. With that said, Kinsey definitely advocated reevaluating our preconceptions of sexual norms in light of his data. Boyle discusses Kinsey's perspective on so-called normal sexual behavior:

By demonstrating the variety of human sexual activity, Kinsey was able to assert that there is no 'normal' behavior, and this did open society up to a less prejudicial view of certain sexual practices. To Kinsey, all sex acts between consenting parties were equal and equally valid, and though he presented himself as a disinterested scientist, he was in fact a reformer out of the Progressive Era and an advocate for sex. (Boyle 184)

Both Jones and Gathorne-Hardy note that Kinsey often lectured to students, academic organizations, and even social groups about his findings and their practical application. In these venues, Kinsey was able to present his data and emphasize the variety in the sexual behaviors people reported. This assessment of behaviors without regard to legal or moral proscriptions enabled Kinsey to identify what people were doing sexually whether or not it was legal. When he found that many common sexual behaviors were illegal, he sought to align the laws with the social morality already in place. To this end, “Kinsey offered testimony, reports, answers, and briefing materials to legislatures considering sex offenders and offenses in New Jersey, New York, Illinois, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and California” (Allen 4). Allen also explains that Kinsey turned a critical eye towards the criminal justice system and became an advocate for legal reform:

By failing to reflect reality, the law was substantially unenforceable, creating 'all kinds of injustice, conniving, police graft, and other such things.' By attacking the selective and inconsistent enforcement of criminal law, Kinsey effectively accused police, prosecutors, district attorneys and the press of unethical conduct. (Allen 24)

Striving to imbue sex research with academic and social legitimacy and ensuring that people were treated equally under the law despite their sexual practices were not, however, Kinsey's only lasting contributions.

Kinsey's research greatly influenced the field of sexology. While sexology as a discipline had been around long before Kinsey started taking sex histories, it had not gained the notoriety and social support that Kinsey's work brought it. While subsequent researchers still had to address issues of stigma surrounding their work, the topic had been broached by a legitimate scientist in this country with great success. Elkin explains, "Dr. Masters himself the first to admit that if it weren't for Kinsey and Indiana University, Washington University would never have permitted Virginia Johnson and himself to have begun their astonishing investigations and observations of the physiology of sex..." (Elkin 53). The research to which Elkin referred was presented in the 1966 book *Human Sexual Response*. Other academics note that Kinsey's success enabled the pursuit of sexual studies in other fields: "Kinsey paved the way for modern approaches to sex therapy" (Morantz 162). Additionally, Boyle notes Kinsey's research and popular appeal business: "Indeed, Hugh Hefner has cited Kinsey as one of his chief inspirations in launching *Playboy*" (Boyle 184). Kinsey's influence has been pervasive. His research was so well-known and respected that future work involving sexuality did not have to work as hard to establish legitimacy.

### The Sexual Revolution and Beyond

The sexual revolution of the 1960s has been attributed to a number of social and political factors, one of which is Alfred Kinsey. Some researchers attribute the success and popularity of Kinsey's books on human sexual behavior as the straw that broke the camel of sexual repression's back. Indeed, it would make sense to conclude that Kinsey's work, published less than two decades before the revolution began had something to do with the whole process. The problem arises when there is an assumed causative relationship between the publication of Kinsey's data and perceived large-scale changes in sexual practices. Owen Edwards notes, "But to suggest that the book launched what came to be known as the sexual revolution would not be accurate. Just because everybody began talking about sex did not mean they did very much more about it, and sexual behavior changed little in the 50's" (sic) (Edwards 34). While it may not seem a significant difference to say that Kinsey opened the door to let the sexual revolution take place, instead of saying that Kinsey launched it, there is a distinct difference in the agency ascribed to him. It would be a mistake to say that one man caused the entire cultural shift in beliefs about sexual expression, but he certainly played an important part. David Allyn explains:

Scholars have noted that Kinsey's efforts paved the way for the work of Masters and Johnson and contributed to a post-war climate of 'openness' about sexual behavior. In effect, Kinsey's studies signaled the final triumph of scientific candor over the nineteenth century 'conspiracy of silence.'

Furthermore, Kinsey’s quantitative approach advanced what Paul Robinson has called the ‘modernization of sex,’ and Kinsey’s discussion of homosexuality inspired both the homophile movement of the 1950’s and the anti-homosexual moral panic of the same decade (Allyn 405).

Other researchers have argued that Kinsey’s influence did not end with the sexual revolution. Indeed, the importance of discourse to the current social attitudes and issues of sexuality is undeniable. Coontz places the sexual climate of today in the context of discourse in the past:

Even more disconcerting for many has been the unprecedented openness, even exhibitionism, about sexuality. This has gone far beyond the ‘coming out’ of gays and lesbians during the 1970s or the refusal of young heterosexual couples to keep their sexual activity secret from their parents. Today, talk-show guests parade the most intimate details of their sex lives before audiences; neighbors videotape a couple having sex in an apartment where the blinds have been left open; and reporters research the minutia of public figures’ sexual behavior and preferences. (Coontz 198)

Today we talk about sex just as much as Americans did when the Kinsey reports were first published, though the content of our discussion has evolved. Now, it takes the form of which sexual practices are strange enough to be portrayed on popular television shows such as CSI, and an obsession with the sexual exploits of celebrities and politicians from the latest Hollywood star’s sex tape scandal to the recent confirmation of John Edwards’ extramarital affair. From the controversial issues of gay marriage, sex education in schools, and how, exactly, our laws define abortion; sex continues to be discussed and researched.

There are numerous avenues for research on sex, but there are a few dedicated strongholds of sex research. The Kinsey Institute for Research on Sex, Gender, and Reproduction was originally founded by Kinsey as the Institute for Sex Research. Still located on the beautiful Indiana University, Bloomington campus, the Institute is home to some of the foremost experts on human sexuality. The Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality (IASHS) is located in San Francisco and offers advanced degrees in several areas of human sexuality. Janice Irvine says of the IASHS: “the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality...was formally incorporated as a graduate program in 1976. Since its inception, it has provided academic training in sexology and serves as a clearing house for sexual information” (Irvine 84). The success and rigor of Kinsey’s original study, despite its flaws,

set the stage for the continued pursuit of sexual knowledge by these and other such institutions. There are even academic organizations such as the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, which publishes journals of sex research and hosts conferences to foster discussion on recent research findings.

Not long ago, Hollywood produced a movie about Kinsey's life. The tagline for the award-winning 2004 movie was surprisingly apt. As the promotional movie posters boldly encouraged: "Let's talk about sex." That is precisely what Alfred Kinsey accomplished. In his interviews with individual Americans, his lengthy books explaining his findings, and the publicity surrounding the whole project, Kinsey got America talking about sex. He presented a new view of sexual behavior that was not based in moralization, but in an unwavering acceptance of individual variation. Though Kinsey did not live to see it, his work encouraged the openness necessary for and characteristic of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the gay rights movement of the 1970s, and the general social acceptance and awareness of sexual variation today. By approaching an investigation of sexual practices from a taxonomist's perspective, Kinsey also opened the door for other scientists to study this integral part of the human existence. Today sex is presented everywhere in our culture and science does its best to keep up with changing understandings of sexual behaviors, attitudes, physiology, and orientation.

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