

Alfred C. Kinsey:

A Pioneer of Sex Research

ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL

Americans of the 20th century, Alfred Charles Kinsey conducted landmark studies of male and female sexual behavior that helped usher in the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s. He was born in Hoboken, NJ, on June 23, 1894, the son of Alfred Seguine Kinsey and Sarah Ann Charles. His father, a zealously religious and intimidating man, and a teacher at Stevens Institute of Technology, insisted that his son put aside his early interest in biology and instead enroll in Stevens to study engineering. After 2 lackluster years, Alfred rebelled and left for Bowdoin College in Maine, where he enrolled as a biology student. Father and son never reconciled; when Alfred graduated with high honors in 1916, his father refused to attend commencement.¹

Alfred became a student of applied biology at Harvard, where he came under the influence of William Morton Wheeler, an eminent field biologist, staunch Darwinian, and confidant of the irreverent H. L. Mencken. With Wheeler as his mentor, Kinsey jettisoned most of his religious ideas—although not all of his repressive upbringing—and em-

barked on a massive and meticulous Darwinian case study of the evolutionary taxonomy of the gall wasp. After identifying several new species, Kinsey received his doctor of science degree in 1919 and joined the faculty of Indiana University the following year. In 1924, he married Clara Bracken McMillen, then an outstanding chemistry student at Indiana University. Alfred and Clara had 4 children, 3 of whom survived into adulthood.

Kinsey advanced up the academic ranks, becoming full professor in 1929.² In 1936, he published *The Gall Wasp Genus Cynips: A Study of the Origin of Species* in 1930 and *The Origin of Higher Categories in Cynips*. Although both were well received by specialists, Kinsey was deeply disappointed that he was not offered a professorship at a more prestigious university.

Perhaps because of this disappointment, Kinsey made an unusual career move in 1938: he agreed to lead a team-taught course on marriage and the family instituted in response to a student petition. High points of the course were Kinsey’s illustrated lectures on the biology of sexual stimulation, the mechanics of in-

tercourse, and the techniques of contraception, as were his spirited denunciations of repressive laws and social attitudes. He also attempted to replace conventional ideas of normal sexual behavior with a new biological definition: “nearly all the so-called sexual perversions fall within the range of biological normality.”^{3(p333)} As his recent biographer James H. Jones observes, Kinsey was using the marriage course to “transform his private struggle against Victorian morality into a public crusade” and to “protest issues that had bedeviled him for decades.”^{3(p335)} The Indiana students responded enthusiastically, and his course enrollments grew to 400 by 1940.

Kinsey now shifted his research focus as well, transferring his obsessive concern with variation among gall wasps to the varieties of human sexual experience. He required students in his marriage course to have private conferences in which he took their sexual histories. On weekends and vacations, he conducted similar interviews in nearby communities, and later in such cities as Gary, Chicago, St. Louis, and Philadelphia. Kinsey received research support from the National

vided substantially the same data. Whether the histories were taken in one large city or another, whether they were taken in large cities, in small towns, or in rural areas, whether they came from one college or from another, a church school or a state university or some private institution, whether they came from one part of the country or from another, the incidence data on the homosexual have been more or less the same. . . .

THE HETEROSEXUAL-HOMOSEXUAL BALANCE

Concerning patterns of sexual behavior, a great deal of the thinking done by scientists and laymen alike stems from the assumption that there are persons who are “heterosexual” and persons who are “homosexual,” that these two types represent antitheses in the sexual world, and that there is only an insignificant class of “bisexuals” who occupy

an intermediate position between the other groups. It is implied that every individual is innately—inherently—either heterosexual or homosexual. It is further implied that from the time of birth one is fated to be one thing or the other, and that there is little chance for one to change his pattern in the course of a lifetime.

It is quite generally believed that one’s preference for a sexual partner of one or the other

sex is correlated with various physical and mental qualities, and with the total personality which makes a homosexual male or female physically, psychologically, and perhaps spiritually distinct from a heterosexual individual. It is generally thought that these qualities make a homosexual person obvious and recognizable to any one who has a sufficient understanding of such matters. Even psychiatrists discuss “the homosexual

Research Council and the Rockefeller Foundation, which allowed him to hire research assistants, expand the geographic scope of his work, and found the Institute of Sex Research at Indiana University in 1947.

In January 1948, Kinsey and his collaborators published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, the source of the excerpt reprinted here. It made the best-seller list within 3 weeks, despite its 804 pages, generally dry scientific style, and ponderous weight of statistics, tables, and graphs. By mid-March, it had sold 200 000 copies. The book, based on over 5000 sexual histories, provided a series of revelations about the prevalence of masturbation, adulterous sexual activity, and homosexuality. One religious leader attacked Kinsey for publishing “the most anti-religious book of our times.”⁴ Some criticized his methods (and conclusions) because of inadequate sampling techniques; others extravagantly praised him as another Galileo or Darwin.

Kinsey’s next major project was *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, published in 1953. Based on almost 6000 sexual histories, this book con-

tained many revelations about such matters as women’s masturbatory practices, premarital sexuality, and orgasmic experiences. As before, Kinsey documented an enormous gap between social attitudes and actual practices. Also as before, the book was a media sensation, but this time the counterattack was so ferocious—including a congressional investigation of his financial support—that the Rockefeller Foundation terminated its funding.

Kinsey’s health deteriorated under the strain of public attack and uncertainty about the future of his institute. He suffered from heart disease and, after a brief hospitalization for pneumonia, died in Bloomington on August 25, 1956. In his own mind, his principal legacy was to have brought scientific rigor to the study of human sexuality. But as his biographer James H. Jones points out, Kinsey was not only a scientist; he was a reformer who sought to rid himself of his personal sexual demons, while at the same time revolutionizing the repressive society in which he had grown up:

His formative years were spent in a home and in a nation where many middle-

class parents enshrouded sex in shame, heaping more than enough guilt on young people to mangle and twist them. This was particularly true for those like Kinsey who aspired but failed to achieve moral perfection. His great accomplishment was to take his pain and suffering and use it to transform himself into an instrument of social reform, a secular evangelist who proclaimed a new sensibility about human sexuality.^{3(p772)} ■

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personality” and many of them believe that preferences for sexual partners of a particular sex are merely secondary manifestations of something that lies much deeper in the totality of that intangible which they call the personality. . . .

The histories which have been available in the present study make it apparent that the heterosexuality or homosexuality of many individuals is not an all-or-none proposition. It is true

that there are persons in the population whose histories are exclusively heterosexual, both in regard to their overt experience and in regard to their psychic reactions. And there are individuals in the population whose histories are exclusively homosexual, both in experience and in psychic reactions. But the record also shows that there is a considerable portion of the population whose members have combined, within their individ-

ual histories, both homosexual and heterosexual experience and/or psychic responses. There are some whose heterosexual experiences predominate, there are some whose homosexual experiences predominate, there are some who have had quite equal amounts of both types of experience. . . .

Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep

and goats. Not all things are black nor all things white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeonholes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning human sexual behavior the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex. . . .