

“AS FIRECRACKERS TO ATOM BOMBS”: KINSEY, SCIENCE, AND AUTHORITY

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The works of Alfred C. Kinsey and his colleagues at Indiana University, most notably Wardell Pomeroy, have been lightning rods for controversy since its initial publication. Yet, in the past decade it seems as though there has been perhaps more attention in the “popular” media to Kinsey, the man, and his work than in the years immediately following the publication of his two major works. In this review essay, I want to touch on what I believe has led to this “revival” fervor. I will argue that the “science” on which the work of Kinsey et al. is built on is of little importance. On the other hand, it is precisely the science that Kinsey et al. represent that is important to the current attention focused on them, especially Kinsey and Pomeroy.

Before going much further, I must admit something of an embarrassment; or, at least something I think makes me much like many who discuss Kinsey et al. freely. Prior to planning this review, I had never read Kinsey et al. (1948) from cover to cover. True, over the years I had checked the volume out of the library and consulted a particular chapter or some sections, looking for information about the issue I was researching at the time (“purposeful” reading). I had never taken the time to truly read through the entire volume following the logic chain from start to finish. No doubt there will be many who think I still have not done so, for a variety of reasons. Perhaps this essay will motivate some

bright spark to write *Kinsey for Beginners*, or *Dummies*, whichever you think will sell better. As will be seen, there is certainly a library of *Kinsey for Ideologues* out there.

The Science

Perhaps the most important item the purposeful reader of Kinsey et al. will overlook is that the work is essentially a taxonomy of sexual practices leading to orgasm in males. For Kinsey and colleagues, counting was only one step, grouping the phenomena into classes and categories of experience and practice was the goal. Once you know how things group, then explanation of the phenomena is an easier task.

Sociologists do not spend as much time on taxonomies as we probably should, but we do spend a great deal of time on survey methodology. Kinsey devotes a great deal of the first few chapters comparing his methodology to that which he used in studying insects. Shere Hite, in the review of the Kinsey et al. work on women, devotes a great deal of time to the methodology employed, but we reach somewhat different conclusions.

Hite and others would argue that Kinsey aimed for a “representative sample” by trying to ensure that it matched the larger United States population on certain key indicators. I would describe the methodology of Kinsey et al. as basically a convenience sample with snowballing. Another way is to say he started with “known groups,” and utilized their social networks afterwards to locate new respondents until the sample approximated those key indicators. The basic issue of the probability that any man in the United States could be sampled was not achievable through their approach. Throughout the book, the authors note that they were publishing without an adequate number of cases to be truly representative of the U.S. population at that point in history. On occasion, of course, they seem to downplay that shortcoming of the research. Even in the United States of the late 1930s through mid-1940s, I do not think one could argue that their respondent sample was representative of the male population. But, it can still be quite instructive.

Sexual experience leading to orgasm (for men, in this case) is another important point to be made about the work of Kinsey and colleagues. They were not cataloging sexual practice *per se*, but what sexual practices/experiences caused their respondents to orgasm. They did not catalog the situations in which these orgasms occurred; whether they were initiated by the individual or another person. The taxonomic approach did not require this. The purposeful reader will often overlook this, looking only for the Kinsey “true” proportion of the population who “are” this or that sexual being.

Hite points out that Kinsey and colleagues were among the first to note the variation in sexual experience within and across men in the United States. In a very real sense they were among the pioneers of the idea of a continuum of sexual experience, rather than a binary sexual identity. People often quibble over what percentage of the U.S. male population is “gay” according to the Kinsey work. The development of the scale approach from having achieved orgasm only via opposite sex behavior versus only through same-sex behavior was not meant to determine whether or not one’s identity was that of being gay or homosexual, but through what kinds of sexual behavior one most often achieved orgasm (where did those animals go?).

Kinsey et al. were attempting to study human sexual behavior as if it were the behavior of any other creature on the planet. If they had left the discussion only at an analysis of the frequencies of behavior and the groupings into which they fell, this might have created a stir among biologists, a few psychologists, and maybe the odd psychiatrist. They did not. Rather, intermingled with their frequency and tabular analyses, bar and line charts, are discourses on the criminalization of behaviors. These discourses almost return inevitably to a central theme, the irrationality of the religious doctrines on which they believe criminalization rest. Science was perceived by many to no longer be used to catalog behavioral “facts,” but as a tool to attack the moral fabric on which “proper” sexuality was based. They were dangerously close to being among the first societal reaction (labeling) theorists of sexual “deviance.”

Authority Switches Sides

Anthony Giddens (1984) has written of “the great transformation” in Western society represented by the Industrial Revolution. He argues that the Renaissance was the crucible of the challenging of existing authority to the Church through the Reformation and the developing sciences, the shift from aristocracy to democracy. Most important to all former sources of authority were the threats from science and industrialization. While much of Giddens’ focus is on European society, several of these changes underlay the fabric of the emerging United States. Our continuing fascination with technology and the wonders it provides for our consumption, not to mention the switch from an emphasis on production to one of consumption, have placed science and industry at the top of the authority pyramid.

It is precisely the challenge to the authority of the religious sphere over matters of “proper” sexual behavior and sexuality that the Kinsey et al. works represent. Certainly there had been suggestions that marriage was an anachronistic or repressive institution for more than a century by the time of the publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Kinsey and colleagues were the first to achieve a sort of “popular science” appeal. Their results were greeted by some as evidence that sexual behavior was much more diverse than what the religio-moral leadership of the time backed. Not only was it more diverse, but the very evidence of that diversity meant it was “natural,” and should not be subject to definitions of deviance and criminality. Science is not only amoral but, as Deborah Lupton (1995) has noted about health sciences, essentially utilitarian.

Science had triumphed over ignorance and superstition! Because things were, they should be allowed to be. Perhaps, as many accused Kinsey et al. of suggesting, things should go even further in terms of sexual exploration and expansion to all citizens of the United States. After all, the new “truth” of science said it should be so, and being thoroughly modern, science would show the way, the truth, and the light. For things sexual, Kinsey and colleagues represent perhaps the clearest moment at which the authority of

sexual science was believed to have overcome the superstition and tradition of pre—and early-modern sexual morality.

Many of those in the burgeoning intellectual class brought about by the postwar tertiary education boom in the United States saw this as a rallying point against the perceived hegemony of religion and pre-war morality. Kinsey and colleagues had showed us what was, not what certain groups thought things should be. This new intellectual class, many drawn from working class backgrounds with previously strong ties to religious authority, had a new authority upon which to build their claims to leadership and influence. Soon the “Beat Generation” and *Playboy* were on the scene. These represented a movement and products unimaginable on a large scale prior to World War II when such ideas and products were the province of only elites. Science had provided the platform from which new claims to moral authority could be launched.

Give Me That Old Time Religion

In 1954, Reverend E.J. Daniels published a small treatise titled *I Accuse Kinsey*. In addition to Dr. Daniels’ writings, he reproduced sermons by such budding evangelical notables as Reverend Billy Graham, several physicians, and women’s writers of the times. One of the first things to note about the small volume is that it is written as a reaction to the Kinsey et al. volume on women. Much of it addresses the male volume, as well. I can only assume that the authors were willing to accept the sexual debauchery of the men (well, other than that homosexual stuff); but, when it came to demeaning (“indicting” per Reverend Graham) the reputation of American women, they had to draw the line!

What is really more striking to me about this small volume is that it appears to provide the template from which future Judeo-Christian attacks on the sexual revolution have taken their format. The key points in the volume can be found in the 1980s-era critiques of pornography and other “adult” entertainments by campaigners in the United Kingdom (e.g., Mary Whitehouse and John Court) to the 1990s “wowsers” in Australia (e.g., Reverend Fred Nile and Senator Brian Harradine), and most Protestant evange-

lists in the United States. The essential elements of the Daniels' critique are:

- 1) "Kinsey's subjects were not average" men or women;
- 2) "Kinsey's statistics are unreliable";
- 3) Kinsey treats people as if they were animals, relegating "morals to the jungle";
- 4) Kinsey wants to spread wanton immorality across the land;
- 5) Kinsey's work will "create a wave of sex perversion", "degeneration of morals";
- 6) Kinsey's work removes sin from "fornication and adultery";
- 7) Kinsey's teachings will "foster false teachings on sex";
- 8) Kinsey's reports will reduce the enforcement of laws;
- 9) Kinsey's reports will wreck marriages, cause distrust between married partners;
- 10) Kinsey's reports focus only on sex, not the keys to successful marriage;
- 11) Kinsey's reports will lead to more broken homes, out of wedlock and abandoned children, higher welfare costs; but most importantly,
- 12) Kinsey's teachings are not Biblical.

Interestingly, at the beginning of his contribution to the volume, Dr. Daniels takes great pains to note that he is not attacking Dr. Kinsey *personally*, but the work of Dr. Kinsey and colleagues, as well as other scientists whose work fostered immorality. This is where reactions to Kinsey et al., and Kinsey and Pomeroy in particular, have changed in recent times.

Reverend Daniels does hint at what has become the sport of some in the "religious right" with regard to Dr. Kinsey as an individual. Early in the treatise (p. 12), Daniels notes that:

"the United States Post Office banned a book written by a fellow professor and friend of Kinsey, Ross Lockridge, Jr. 'Raintree Country' contained in novel form some of the very moral rot boldly presented in Kinsey's sex reports. '*Confidential*' magazine published an article in March, 1954, in which the author suggests that Dr. Kinsey influenced the writing of this novel. They even claim that the 'perfessor' [sic], the leading character of the novel is a rough portrayal of Dr. Kinsey. The public became furious over this rotten [sic] novel. The suggestions concerning sex were so shocking that a wave of protest arose from pulpits, press, and people."

Now there are entire websites, as well as articles and books, devoted to discrediting the science by constructing Kinsey as a monster (somehow, Mothra leaps to mind . . .).

Following the template laid-out by Reverend Dr. Daniels, “experts” are brought in from universities to attack the methodology employed in the Kinsey works, the statistics employed, and the supposed interpretations of the data made by the Kinsey team. Some of these criticisms are not, in themselves, necessarily off-base. Indeed, some of the criticisms I offered earlier are employed. The conclusions reached, however, are inevitably that Kinsey et al. were employing an agenda to destroy the moral fabric of the United States. An article reprinted on one web site lists Kinsey’s work as the fourth most dangerous book published in the previous two centuries. This places him amongst the company of Marx and Engels, August Comte, and John Dewey (as well as B.F. Skinner). Obviously, as a sociologist of my particular theoretical persuasion, I am doomed!

More direct, and especially in the light of the recent movie about Kinsey’s life and work, is the attack by Dr. Judith Reisman and colleagues (www.drjudithreisman.org). Dr. Reisman has argued that Kinsey and staff were essentially child molesters, using the cover of scientific research to engage in a variety of deviant sexual practices, including sex with children. By lumping the Kinsey work in with the most horrible abuses of medical science, the attempt is to render their value less than negligible, to make it obscene. Such obscenity cannot possibly be recognized to have authority.

Daniels used the analogy of firecrackers to atom bombs in his original treatise; Reisman continues this tradition in her writings. Working with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC; www.alec.org), Drs. Reisman and Linda Jeffrey have produced an analysis of the laws whose repeal or “weakening” they attribute to the “illegal and criminal acts masquerading as science” of the Kinsey and colleagues work. Their analysis credits Kinsey personally with changes to laws affecting homosexual behavior, pedophilia, and sex education. The ALEC report is intended to demonstrate to legislators where Kinsey’s flawed science has led

to the relaxation of criminal codes that are threatening our children and communities. No doubt we will see this line of logic creep into current debates about life-long civil commitments of those convicted of sexual offenses against children.

Does It Go ‘Round in Circles?

Giddens’ ideas about the great transformation always seemed to stop too soon. I would argue that the pace of technological change has led to a series of transformations in our social worlds, and that “great transformations” are now a matter of retrospective interpretation—see only in hindsight, sometimes surprising us. Kinsey may have been the father of the most recent sexual revolution, but it was not the first sexual revolution. And it was probably the technological innovation of the safe, effective birth control pill that loosed the reins of Kinsey’s horses.

Kinsey and colleagues brought the cache and promise of science as a progressive force to the dying days of the modernist period (well, for some). It is precisely this prestige factor that Reisman decries. She argues that Kinsey was actually reaching back to pre-Judeo-Christian pagan (her characterization) sexual behaviors and wrapping them in the patina of “science.” In essence, she may be seen to argue that Kinsey et al. were recycling an older form of authority into a new form of authority in an attempt to replace the dominant authority of Victorian times. Now, as is common in all status political movements, those who would take us back to “the good old days” before Kinsey, the pill, the repeal of sodomy laws, and, dare we say it, the Dutch, Spaniards, and Canadians legalizing same-sex marriage, have nominated Kinsey and colleagues’ work as the symbolic text to be overturned. Only when that occurs can we return the world (or at least the United States), to the glory it once occupied.

Returning to my earlier point, Kinsey and colleagues’ work has become a symbol in a moral/political contest. For those following in the footsteps of the Reverend Dr. Daniels, there can be no part of the Kinsey group’s work that is recognized as having merit. This is a zero-sum game for them. Only the complete discrediting

of the work and the man, and the dismantling of the legal changes they attribute to Kinsey's work, will suffice.

For those of us in the sex research, education, and health arenas, we recognize Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin as those who brought some populist scientific credibility to the study of sexual behavior. Like all of us, they made mistakes in their research, over-stated their results from time to time, and allowed personal interpretations to take them beyond their data. They set us on a path that still includes characters from pop-charlatans to science nerds. Somewhere on that path are researchers who do high-quality science and speak within the confines of their data.

Conclusion

Science of all sorts exists within a moral and political context. I find myself sometimes asking my more "scientific" colleagues upon which legal statute their authority rests when we discuss certain "shoulds" they would like to enforce on populations. Returning to Lupton's discussion of utilitarianism, I would argue that far too many of those who practice science and call themselves scientists have substituted their form of intellectual authority for those they knocked off the moral pedestal. To invoke two of the founders of "classical" sociology (Marx and Weber), those who have demystified/disenchanted the world of religious authority have developed enough hubris to substitute their own worldviews as "the truth." I shudder when positivist scientists attempt to utilize the legislative process to impose their views; just as when Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson does the same.

Sexual behavior remains, for many more than simply Judeo-Christian-Muslim groups (e.g., those "pagans"), a form of mystical union. That the behaviors and attitudes that comprise sexuality can be subject to the scientific method is not the same as saying that the beliefs that surround them can be judged by science. If they are, then some form of counter analysis should be expected, and perhaps welcomed. Respect for the other position is just one commodity in the contestation between science and other philosophical and religious belief systems.

Emile Durkheim theorized that moral boundaries, those behaviors that separate group members from non-group members, will expand and contract over time. We have been in a series of boundary movements since 1948, some of which currently look eerily similar to those of the 1980s. Sex, sexual behavior, and sexual identities will always be areas of contest in societies. If we believe that solid science can help us understand these phenomena, then we will continue to do the best work we can. Sometimes sex researchers will be within the boundaries; other times, outside. It just goes with the territory.

Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin were the scientific pioneers who opened the door for a more “popular” scientific study of sex. Perhaps not quite as intent on discovering riches as our European ancestors who spread out over the world, they did set the stage for the colonization of an important social space. That space is often fiercely contested. Let us hope that we can avoid the longer term negative outcomes that we now inherit with regard to other riches and resources, in the scientific colonization of sex.

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