



## Kinsey, Alfred C. (1894-1956)

by Jeffrey Escoffier

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In the twentieth century, there was no more important sex researcher than Alfred C. Kinsey. Only Sigmund Freud surpassed Kinsey as the century's most influential thinker about sexuality.

Kinsey was the lead author of two path breaking volumes on human sexuality: *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953). Based on the most extensive empirical survey of sexual behavior ever undertaken--more than 18,000 sexual histories were collected--the "Kinsey Reports" and the public debate that resulted from their publication prefigured the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.

### Early Life and Education

Alfred Kinsey was born on June 23, 1894 in Hoboken, New Jersey. A sickly and weak boy, he grew up in an extremely religious family that practiced a very strict form of Methodism. On Sundays the family attended three services and, in addition, the children were also required to go to Sunday school, taught by Kinsey's father.

Kinsey's father was not only strict, but he was also egotistical and a moralistic bully. Growing up in this harsh family environment deeply affected Kinsey's character and marked him for his whole life. In many ways, he later came to resemble his father, though the goal of his crusade was sexual freedom. To escape the oppressive atmosphere at home Kinsey turned to music and became an avid boy scout. There he learned outdoor crafts and studied nature.

Kinsey started his college education at the Stevens Institute of Technology, where his father was a professor, but after two years, he transferred to Bowdoin College in Maine. There he pursued his interest in biology.

At Bowdoin, Kinsey developed interest in the gall wasp--a tiny insect, approximately the size of an ant. Unlike most wasps, it does not have wings, nor does it sting. It usually lays its eggs in oak trees or rose bushes; the eggs emit a poison that forces the development of a lumpy growth on the tree or bush called a "gall." The gall protects the eggs until they hatch, whereupon a new cycle of reproduction and gall formation take place.

This insect fascinated Kinsey and he went on, after his graduate education at the Bussey Institute of Harvard University, to become a world renowned expert on it. Upon completion of his graduate work, Kinsey accepted a position at Indiana University in Bloomington as an assistant professor of zoology.

### Loves



Alfred Kinsey.  
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for Research in Sex,  
Gender, and  
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Kinsey once told a colleague that he had experienced three great loves in his life. The first was Clara Bracken MacMillen, whom he had married soon after arriving at Indiana University. They were to remain together until Kinsey's death in 1956. Mac, as she was known, shared in the vicissitudes of what turned out to be her husband's very unconventional life and career.

In 1924, Kinsey fell passionately in love with one of his graduate students, Ralph Voris. Their relationship continued into the 1930s--even after Voris's marriage, and it seemed to some degree to include both their wives.

Later, in 1939, Kinsey fell in love for a third time with Clyde Martin, with whom he had a complicated relationship over the course of the 1940s. Martin also had a sexual relationship with Kinsey's wife. These important romantic and sexual relationships--and the struggles he went through in order to engage in them--both inspired and were influenced by Kinsey's sex research.

### **Sex Research**

Starting in 1938, in response to student demands for a sex education course, Kinsey began, almost casually, to teach a course at Indiana University on marriage, focusing primarily on its sexual aspects. These classes were enormously successful. Thus, at the age of 44, over the course of teaching this class on marriage, Alfred C. Kinsey, an eminent and respected entomologist, abandoned the specialty he had pursued for twenty years to devote himself completely and tirelessly to sex research.

It became apparent to Kinsey that, in fact, very little was known about people's sexual behavior. He decided at that point to rectify that problem. Very much the biologist, he began to explore the physiology of sex. He also started collecting information about the sex lives of the students taking his classes. These sex histories, refined and elaborated over the years, became the methodological foundation of Kinsey's life work.

Slowly, Kinsey assembled a research team at Indiana University that eventually became the nucleus of the Institute of Sex Research. He had started his research by collecting the sex histories of his students, then his colleagues at the university, and, finally, others through a network of personal referrals. Former students, interested physicians, and other researchers began to collect sex histories as well. These included Glenn Ramsey, a former student and Peoria high school teacher; Dr. Robert Latou Dickinson, the author of *A Thousand Marriages*, a study of marital sex life; and anthropologist Wardell Pomeroy, who was the first full-time staff member that Kinsey hired to work with him to collect sex histories.

Kinsey's research opened him up to his own repressed sexuality. He was quite surprised at the extent of homosexual experience in his Bloomington histories. That discovery encouraged him to explore further his own homosexual desires, both through interviewing homosexual networks in Chicago and New York City and through his own sexual explorations in the homosexual subcultures of those two cities.

Kinsey found that as many as a third of his heterosexual case histories also showed some evidence of homosexual experience--and that within those histories the extent of homosexual and heterosexual experience varied considerably over time and the individual's life cycle.

### **The Kinsey Scale**

These findings led Kinsey to view sexual orientation as a continuum; he devised a scale that ranged from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) through 3 (equally heterosexual/homosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual). Kinsey used this "Kinsey scale" to classify the sexual orientation of those whose sex histories he was collecting.

Kinsey's scientific methodology led him to measure sexual experience in quantitative terms by enumerating

orgasms. In this schema, heterosexual intercourse was demoted to only one of six possible forms of "sexual outlet" that also included masturbation, nocturnal emission, heterosexual petting, homosexual relations, and intercourse with animals. From this perspective the sole distinction between heterosexuals and homosexuals is that the former are sexually attracted to people of the other gender while the latter are attracted to those of the same gender.

### **The Kinsey Reports**

Kinsey and his colleagues published the results of their research in two bulky, number-filled volumes in 1948 (on male sexuality) and in 1953 (on female sexuality). Moral outrage and a great deal of professional hypocrisy greeted the reports.

Few Americans remained indifferent to the unusually large gap that Kinsey found between the publicly accepted sexual norms and many Americans' daily sexual activities. Many readers objected to Kinsey's research for its empirical, materialistic, and ostensibly value-free investigation into the subject of human sexuality. Although he never considered it as a moral position, Kinsey's fundamental ethical tenet throughout his work was tolerance; in both volumes he stressed sympathetic acceptance of people as they are and repeatedly noted the limits of a person's ability to modify his or her sexual behavior.

Kinsey was so struck by the extraordinary extent of individual variation in sexual behavior that he argued that any attempt to establish uniform standards of sexual behavior was both impracticable and unjust. He believed that the widespread deviation from accepted sexual standards showed that any attempt to regulate sexual behavior was doomed to failure and that the only proper sexual policy was no policy at all.

Kinsey's findings on homosexuality were among his most controversial and widely publicized. His volume on male sexuality concluded that 37 percent of the male population of the United States had had at least one homosexual experience to orgasm between adolescence and old age. The data also seemed to suggest that many adults were neither permanently nor exclusively homosexual or heterosexual but displayed a continuum of sexual behavior.

Kinsey measured this fluidity along "the Kinsey scale," which classified sexual behavior and fantasy--from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) through 6 (exclusively homosexual). While Kinsey's findings clearly encouraged him to reject homosexuality as a pathological syndrome, the range and fluidity of sexual behavior also led him to reject the idea of a sexual identity; he believed that there were no homosexual or heterosexual persons, only heterosexual or homosexual acts.

Kinsey found that on his scale at least 10 percent of men were either exclusively (number 6) or predominantly homosexual (number 5) for at least three years between the ages of sixteen and fifty-five. Popularizers and activists later adopted 10 percent as an estimate of the homosexual population, despite the fact that the female volume reported a much lower incidence of homosexuality among women, closer to 4 percent.

Subsequent survey research has failed to sustain Kinsey's original estimates, and many conservatives have attacked the numbers, accusing Kinsey of inflating the prevalence of homosexual activity. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that any estimates of the homosexual population are methodologically risky. When Kinsey made his estimates, the random sampling methodology in survey research was not widely applied. Even so, it is still difficult to conduct a random sample of the lesbian and gay population because homosexuality is still stigmatized. Until recently, it was illegal in many parts of the United States.

### **Women's Sexuality**

Debates about women's sexuality emerged in the wake of the 1953 Kinsey Report on female sexuality. Kinsey's report revealed that women's interest in sex extended beyond an interest in reproduction. Kinsey's

research dispelled a number of influential myths about women and sex, among them that women had difficulty achieving orgasm. Moreover, only half of the women interviewed said they had been virgins when they married, and 25 percent said that they had had extra-marital affairs. It was certainly no surprise that 90 percent of men acknowledged that they routinely masturbated while only 62 percent of the women did.

In the years after Kinsey completed the report on female sexuality, the Rockefeller Foundation, which had supported his research since its beginning, withdrew its financial support because of the intensifying public controversy over his findings.

Finally, exhausted by the fruitless search for new funding and suffering from heart disease, Kinsey died on August 25, 1956.

Kinsey's life is the subject of Bill Condon's recent film, *Kinsey* (2004), starring Liam Neeson as the scientist and Laura Linney as his wife.

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### **About the Author**

**Jeffrey Escoffier** writes on glbtq history, politics, culture, sexuality, music, and dance. One of the founders of *OUT/LOOK: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, he has published widely. Among his books are *American Homo: Community and Perversity* and a biography of John Maynard Keynes in the Chelsea House series on the Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians. He co-edited (with Matthew Lore) Mark Morris' *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato: A Celebration*. His most recent book is *Sexual Revolution*, an anthology of writing on sex from the 1960s and 1970s. He is currently working on a book on sexual politics and writing about the production of pornography.