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Biography makes Kinsey's private life public

By JEROME WEEKS
The Dallas Morning News

Imagine a world in which you were never taught much of what you know about sex — not just the ordinary mechanics of procreation but whole areas such as disease, masturbation and homosexuality.

Imagine being clueless about all of this — and not knowing whether anyone could help. But you know this for certain: Just asking about any of it will get you into trouble.

Imagine much of America before Dr. Alfred Kinsey.

"It's a different world," says James H. Jones, whose biography, "Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life," has just been released by W.W. Norton.

Mazy people under 30 probably have never heard of Kinsey. Sbare Hire, maybe; Kinsey, no. But when "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male" (1948) and "Sexual Behavior in the Human Female" (1953) — collectively known as "The Kinsey Report" — were issued and became best sellers, they set off a firestorm of controversy. These controversies have continued to flare in debates over Kinsey's statistical methods, his use of interviews with sex

Revolutionary researcher changed thinking, public debate about issues surrounding sex

offenders and his interpretations of his data about repression, class status, religion, race and sexual orientation.

Some of this beat has greeted Jones' book — particularly concerning Kinsey's private life. In a startling excerpt that appeared in *The New Yorker*, Jones detailed Kinsey's risk-taking sexual activities — homosexual, extramarital, pornographic, multi-partner — activities that at the time could have gotten him fired from Indiana University and would have ruined the reputation of his research.

Clinical approach

His research — and the blaze of publicity he both courted and shunned — "shattered the old conspiracy of silence," says Jones, a professor of history at the University of Houston and the author of "Bad Blood," a study of the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment. "Kinsey gave people permission in the name of science to talk about sex, and that has made an enormous difference. We live in

a world where parents talk about masturbation and teen-agers talk about premarital sex."

In addition, "Kinsey demonstrated the gap between prescribed and actual behavior" — between what ministers, doctors, teachers and lawmakers say people should do as opposed to what they actually do. "Kinsey convinced people that sex could be studied by scientists and that our social policies should be informed by such knowledge."

Kinsey succeeded in all of this by presenting himself as the objective researcher — the complete man of science. His great expertise was originally in gall wasp taxonomy, collecting and classifying the world's largest archive of the tiny, winged insects. To most people, such a biologist could not be drier or further removed from the swamps of human sexuality.

But, according to Jones, Kinsey set off a sexual revolution precisely because he was an ardent revolutionary — in his work and his sex life. Although Kinsey married and had children, Jones argues

that his fundamental erotic interests were gay: He had a number of intense love affairs with young men. He filmed his assistants having sex with willing partners. He also encouraged his wife, Clara, to have an affair with an assistant — with whom he already was involved.

And, as his secret life became increasingly pressured under the glare of public scrutiny and his own ambitions, Kinsey became damagingly masochistic.

He circumcised himself — without anesthesia.

Unconventional methods

So what relationship does any of this have with his research?

A complicated one, Jones believes. In his studies, Kinsey was determined to gather as wide and various a sampling of sexual activity as possible — the better to evaluate human behavior. Previous sex theorists, including Sigmund Freud, had made sweeping conclusions about what was "abnormal" based on a few hundred people at most. A hard-facts scientist, Kinsey was determined to trump the theorists with mountains of data. He did not have the benefit of current sampling techniques that would have permitted smaller databases.

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Instead, he collected the near superhuman number of 18,000 interviews. He wanted 100,000.

For this huge effort, Kinsey humped mostly gay or bisexual assistants. And he often tested their sensibilities by exposing himself to them, talking provocatively about sex, even having sex with them. All of which could have been a breach of professional ethics and possibly was a way of "steering the deck" against what was then considered "acceptable" behavior. (Kinsey also never hired a woman as a researcher — which, to many, seriously weakened his report on female sexuality.)

Yet as a researcher, Kinsey's pressing need in the 1940s was to find field associates who, in face-to-face interviews with people, would be nonjudgmental, would be familiar with the more unusual sexual turns and practices. Interviewees couldn't be shocked, couldn't be confused about what was being discussed — otherwise, they'd scare their subjects away.

Paul Gebhard, for example, the Harvard-trained anthropologist who succeeded Kinsey as director of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, was asked during his preliminary job interview in 1946 about gay men. Gebhard claimed they were rare. The two were in New York City, so Kinsey took him to the men's room in Grand Central Station, which Gebhard had used before. Kinsey asked him to time the men visiting it. Gebhard — for the period, an educated, knowledgeable straight man — was astonished at the number of men clearly cruising the restroom for sexual assignments.

In similar fashion, the Kinsey report would astonish America at large with its findings that almost all men masturbated, that half had cheated on their wives, that nearly 30 percent of women had had premarital sex, that 17 percent of farm boys had had sex with animals.

In choosing his associates and having sex with a number of them, Kinsey created his own sexual utopia, says Jones, where people were free to express themselves. Kinsey would not be bound by bourgeois morality, and wasn't it nice to have this kind of emotional support structure? At the same time, he could justify it all in the name of science. He managed to meld the professional and the private.

Revealing good and bad

When released, the Kinsey report came under immediate fire, sometimes justifiably, from psychologists (who was this biologist intruding on their turf?), anthropologists (how could the vast cultural complexities of sex be crudely reduced to counting orgasms?) and a host of conservative defenders of law, religion and the family.

Some of the latter have continued their fight against Kinsey's studies. The conservative group Concerned Women of America recently picketed the Institute in Bloomington, Ind., and the Family Research Council, which has pushed to end government funding of sex education, has attacked Kinsey as a child abuser. In 1995, former Rep. Steve Stockman called for a special panel to investigate Kinsey's influence on sex education.

In revealing Kinsey as a sexual obsessive and in painting what some reviewers have felt is a dark, derogatory portrait of the pioneer researcher, Jones' biography itself has been accused of taking sides with Kinsey's conservative enemies.

"I knew the book would give some comfort to people whose gutters I abhor," Jones says. "I don't like giving ammunition to a right-wing, ideological point of view that wishes to diminish and destroy Kinsey. But I can't change the facts."

At the same time, he insists that book reviewers have misread his biography as an assault. He intended the book to be "critical and analytic but with an underlying thread of sympathy."

Yet Jones does agree with some of the conservatives' wider argument. Kinsey did want to make attitudes and legal restrictions on sex more tolerant, Jones says.

Kinsey did mix science with polemic. And, according to Jones, Kinsey did come to see organized Christianity as an often pernicious influence on a person's sexual expression.

Through a domineering father in New Jersey at the turn of the century, Kinsey was indoctrinated with "evangelical

Interviews draw kudos for scientist

By JEROME WEEKS

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Perhaps the most common source for skepticism about Alfred Kinsey's sexual studies concerns his basic methodology: face-to-face interviews about people's most private desires. Didn't they lie? Didn't people exaggerate?

And how could Kinsey tell repeatedly in the biography "Alfred C. Kinsey: A Passionate Life," the Indiana researcher is described as a brilliant interviewer, even a genius. He painstakingly developed his questions with a shorthand code that allowed him to note down a vast amount of data — yet hide people's identities behind. At the same time, he had learned the manners and expressions of widely varying subcultures. To the surprise of his Midwestern colleagues, Kinsey could easily converse like a hardened street pimp.

He asked rapid-fire questions, says Kinsey biographer James H. Jones, preventing his subjects from considering their answers. And his questions overlapped; the interview often circled back repeatedly to touch on the same points from different angles.

"You'd have to keep your methodology clear, your story straight," says Jones. "And you'd have to do it through several hours of intense but sympathetic scrutiny."

What's more, Kinsey's questions often contained "trap words."

"He'd ask, 'Do you cruise the streets?' and judging from the response, he'd know if someone knew that it was gay slang for cruising restrooms. Or he'd ask a woman, 'How long have you been in the life?' — meaning 'How long have you been a prostitute?'"

University presidents, foundation board members, fellow scientists, influential doubters often were asked to be interviewed themselves, to judge Kinsey's methods firsthand. Most came away in awe.

But these sessions had another, interesting byproduct, Jones notes. Kinsey now knew their most intimate details. It was actually a psychological advantage. To Kinsey, knowledge was power. Knowledge was everything. Revealingly, he was never taped. Conducting his interviews, he never wrote down his own sexual history.

Protestantism in its most concentrated form," Jones says. "That includes all the fires of hell and damnation and guilt. But it also includes the idea of redemption through faith and good works."

As a result, to many, the young Kinsey would have been a model citizen: an ambitious Eagle Scout, Sunday school teacher, avid naturalist. It was the embarrassing discovery of his own sexual ignorance — he and Clara had painful intercourse — as first until minor surgery corrected the problem — that transformed Kinsey. That and the discovery of his own sexuality. For a scientist, for Kinsey, not to know and to see others in the same ignorance was intolerable.

"You have to give him full credit," Jones says. "He took his own pain and transformed himself into an instrument of reform."

Kinsey may have become a sexual evangelist, but at heart, he was not a hedonist or voluptuary so much as the same workaholic idealist. He may well have killed himself in 1956 at age 62 through sheer overwork. He was a sexual revolutionary who regularly voted Republican.

In all of this, Jones notes, "Kinsey resembles no one so much as the great Victorian discoverers and reformers" — people such as Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, George Bernard Shaw, Margaret Sanger. Through the Victorian era's highest ideals of hard work and enlightened social progress, they dismantled Victorianism itself.