

The American Scholar

Volume 17

1948

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

JACQUES BARZUN

VAN WYCK BROOKS

R. L. DUFFUS

IRWIN EDMAN

JEROME N. FRANK

WALTON HAMILTON

MARJORIE NICOLSON

REINHOLD NIEBUHR

HARLOW SHAPLEY

DONALD A. STAUFFER

IRITA VAN DOREN

GEORGE F. WHICHER

HIRAM HAYDN, *Editor*

CHRISTIAN GAUSS, *Consulting Editor*

LUCIA MOREHEAD, *Assistant Editor*

NANCY POLIZZI, *Promotion and Circulation*

New York 17, N. Y.
United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa

1948



Justification By Numbers

A Commentary on the Kinsey Report

Geoffrey Gorer

FOR THE social scientist, a best seller is always an interesting and provocative phenomenon: what is it, he asks himself, that has made this book or play so much more acceptable to the reading public in this society at this period than the other books or plays produced at the same time? If this question can be satisfactorily answered, it invariably gives insight into the hidden wishes and fantasies of the book-reading public, and so throws light on the psychological dynamics of the society which has accepted the best seller. Even though the conscious promotion of best sellers has been very highly developed in recent years in the United States (witness the case of Nancy Bruff), a best seller cannot be established unless there is some congruence between its underlying material and the underlying wishes and fantasies of the purchasing public.

This year has witnessed an unparalleled phenomenon in publishing history: a dull and turgid scientific book, full of figures and tables, and published at a relatively very high price, has been selling at a rate paralleling such simple fantasies as *Gone With The Wind* or *Forever Amber*. The miscalled *Sexual Behavior In The Human Male*, by Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin, is firmly established in the best-seller lists. It has been the subject of numerous articles and innumerable conversations; to parallel the immediate impact of a scientific book, one would probably have to go back to 1859, and the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*; and even then the sales were not comparable. Of course the social penetration of this book,

•GEOFFREY GORER, British anthropologist, is the author of *Africa Dances and Bali and Angkor*. In his most recent book, *The American People*, Mr. Gorer combines the theoretical ideas developed in his study of the Japanese and other nations with more than seven years' experience in the United States.

JUSTIFICATION BY NUMBERS

and indeed of any book, should not be exaggerated; even if it sells a million copies, and each copy is looked at by five people—a generous estimate—it will have reached only three per cent of the American population; but even this is remarkable diffusion, and calls for comment and an attempt at explanation.

The pre-publication publicity campaign, with vetted articles strategically placed, was one of the most ingenious and carefully executed in recent publishing history; and undoubtedly a certain number of purchasers bought the book in the hope of pornographic titillation. But if this had been its main drawing power, its sales would have quickly dropped, for few texts dealing with such a subject could be less stimulating. Nor, in such a case, would it have received the long and solemn digests, in lieu of reviews or criticisms, which appeared in most of the public press.

I do not intend here to criticize the book from a scientific point of view. Competent specialists have pointed out, or will point out, the unsatisfactory nature of the sample on which Dr. Kinsey bases his generalizations; the dubious practice of treating memories of sexual behavior many years ago as absolutely veridic, when no law court will accept unsupported testimony of any event in the distant past; the ignoring of the accumulated psychiatric knowledge of the last fifty years on sexual behavior, and the (surely willful) distortion of the theories and viewpoints of psychiatry. If this book had only been bought by specialists competent to criticize it, its impact as a social phenomenon would have been minute; but the vast mass of the readers, like the reviewers, accept the material uncritically, so that it is true for them. On this basis, what can one deduce about the attitudes and expectations of college-educated urban Americans (far and away the largest component in Dr. Kinsey's sample, and almost certainly also in his customers) from the contents of the book, its reception in the popular press, and its echoes in conversation?

The chief novelty in the material, and the aspect which has been most consistently stressed, is the demonstration that certain types of sexual behavior are more widely practiced than had hitherto been supposed. That is all. No moderately sophisticated person can have been unaware that such practices existed; Dr. Kinsey has provided figures of distribution.

Why then has such a pothole been made about these figures of distribution? Why have reviewers stated, in various synonyms, that the book contains "potential dynamite"? Why have there been numerous suggestions that, in the light of these "disclosures," the laws to regulate sexual behavior and the instructions and admonitions given to young people will all have to be changed?

It suggests that this springs from what is in some ways the fundamental democratic fallacy, which may be called Justification by Numbers. If a few people do or think something, it may be wrong; if a lot of people do or think it, then it is obviously right. This argument underlies a great deal of American advertising: to state that a brand you are marketing is the "most popular brand" or "sells more than double its nearest competitor" is to suggest forcibly that it is therefore better. On the political level the votes of the majority would undoubtedly be decisive on those issues on which they are called upon to vote (and these are remarkably few); but to extend this principle to moral, psychological or physiological activities is completely illogical.

A further illustration may make this clearer. A colleague of Dr. Kinsey conducted a survey in Germany entitled *Eating Behavior in the Human Male* and finds that, say, 80 per cent of the sample has a caloric "intake" of 1500 units daily, that 73 per cent only have two dietetic "units" daily, and so on and so forth; in the light of his "disclosures" it will become clear that 1500 calories daily divided into two "units" is "normal" eating behavior, and that all our views on dietetics and nourishment have to be revised.

Most people would reject this as obvious nonsense, for we have scientifically determined standards of adequate nourishment, which have nothing to do with temporary and local practices; but the arguments are as valid in the one case as the other. The scientific determination of adequate and satisfying sexual behavior is by no means so established or agreed upon (for, despite Dr. Kinsey, the implications of sex are much more complicated), but they will not be determined by a study of distribution. Dr. Kinsey's figures *can* be interpreted to mean that neurotic disturbances in sexual life in the contemporary United States are as widespread as malnutrition in contemporary Germany.

JUSTIFICATION BY NUMBERS

I do not mean to suggest by this that it would not be highly desirable to change or modify the laws of the various states which are meant to control sexual behavior; but an unjust law does not change in injustice if it potentially affects 30 per cent of the population instead of 3 per cent. At most it makes the savage punishment of those who are convicted even more arbitrary than it had appeared before.

A second important aspect of this book is what might be called the "atomization" of sex. Until Dr. Kinsey came along, sex had generally been viewed as one of the most complex of all human activities, involving not merely the genital organs, but all the psychological and emotional components of the personality, both conscious and unconscious. But with Dr. Kinsey, everything except overt genital behavior has been omitted; sex has been reduced to statistics.

This atomization is in congruence with one of the major trends in contemporary American culture. The triumphs of mass production have been produced by the calculated atomization of the manufacturing process and of the worker's movements. The atomization of knowledge into a series of discrete and equal facts can be seen from the intelligence tests administered to pre-school moppets to the check lists which in many colleges constitute the chief examination before proceeding to graduate studies; from the "quiz" shows to the crossword puzzle; from teaching temporary officers new techniques, to public opinion polls. Now sex has been added to the list.

By thus oversimplifying or atomizing sex, it is possible to indulge in this domain too in the popular and widespread American habit of rating oneself. One of the chief recurring motives throughout American life from infancy to old age is the striving for relative success with one's equals and near-equals: precocity, marks or grades at school, athletic success, relative income, popularity—the list could be indefinitely prolonged. This "self-rating" has become so emotionally important for so many Americans that the greater number of popular papers have scoring cards by which one can rate oneself for knowledge or for the possession of certain qualities (20 to 16, excellent; 15 to 11, good; 10 to 6, average; under 6, poor). Now Dr. Kinsey has supplied a great number of tables by which one can rate oneself; and, in an appendix, has thoughtfully broken them down by age, educa-

tion, marital status, etc. With a little trouble one can find out how one stacks up in frequency of "outlet," variety of "outlet," and even more intimate anatomical details, with one's peers. "Keeping up with the Joneses" acquires a new, and perhaps slightly ribald, significance.

As in all such "self-rating" tables, admiration goes to the high scores. Behind the mask of dispassionateness, one can easily discern Dr. Kinsey's astonished admiration for the people with the larger rates of "outlet," and his contemptuous pity for those making poor scores. A little anthropological knowledge might have rectified this attitude. We have enough information from enough primitive societies to suggest that there is an (apparently) direct correlation between high rates of intercourse and lack of emotional interest in sex or belief in love; the Lepchas from the borders of Tibet, whom I studied, had rates of outlet in their early adult life which would make Dr. Kinsey's high scorers look like pikers. For the Lepchas, sex was a satisfaction no more important than food; they did not believe in love, made no allowances for it, and the exclusive possession of a spouse was legally impossible. As a matter of fact, Dr. Kinsey probably already had the evidence to confirm this; among his highest scorers are his ubiquitous male prostitutes (p. 216)—a group which surely figures rather more importantly in Dr. Kinsey's sample than in the population at large. To equal the performances of such people is perhaps not wholly enviable.

It may be remarked that these "self-rating" tables are liable to produce more disquietude than satisfaction in the people who consult them. Forty-nine per cent of the population is always below the median. People so unsure of themselves as to need support from "self-rating" are not too likely to get it. On the other hand, judging by previous experience, people who are disturbed about their "deviance" will not get psychological comfort for more than a very few days from the tabular demonstration that their deviations are more widespread than they had suspected.

A probable by-product of these rating scales may well be further ammunition for the anti-intellectualism which is already widespread. In comic books and cartoons, professors are always "long-haired," and scientists are always "mad"; now Dr. Kinsey brings evidence to show that, compared with the less educated, they are less "manly,"

"make" fewer girls, and sleep less often with their wives than do the men who leave school as soon as it is legally possible. The implications are obvious.

To parody a phrase of Marxist dialectics, Dr. Kinsey's tables result in the devaluation of all values. An involuntary nocturnal emission, a little boy sliding down a rope, a murderous rape, or Romeo spending the night with Juliet, Damon with Pythias, Paolo with Francesca, are all equated as one "outlet"; physiological itch, lust and love are reduced to their lowest common denominator, and it couldn't well be lower. Just as the dollar which may save oneself or one's family from starvation is no different from the dollar added to the billionaire's bank deposit, so in Dr. Kinsey's treatment all sexual "outlets" are reduced to a dead level of physiological spasm. Like dollars, the more you have the better. Chastity, even though it be Abelard's, results in a low score; and who wants to rate low?

Inspection of the tables suggests a couple of further generalizations about the men whom Dr. Kinsey interviewed. They do not easily tolerate physiological discomfort, and will get rid of it some way or other. Just as there is in the United States very low tolerance of even mild hunger or thirst or cold—as witnessed by the corner drugstore, the numerous drinking fountains, the central heating—so relatively mild gonadal pressure will be relieved somehow, almost as a health measure.

Secondly, despite the devaluation of all values, people are seeking for a greater level of satisfaction in sex than can generally be achieved. This I think is the explanation for much of the premarital, extramarital and occasional homosexual behavior which Dr. Kinsey demonstrates. Some of these excursions may be due to the search for a "good time" under the influence of alcohol, some to adolescent experimentation; but much would seem to be due to the seeking for an unattainable ideal.

I should be unhappy if it were deduced from this article that I am opposed to the scientific investigation of sexual behavior; on the contrary, I think it is one of the most important gaps in our knowledge of contemporary society which, when filled, may do much to remedy the disquietudes and restlessness of this Age of Anxiety. But it needs a more integrated approach than that of an entomologist; an act

which can consummate love and produce children cannot be measured with the calipers that determine the variation in the wingspan of wasps. For a society which believes in love, be it sacred or profane, the physiological aspect of sex cannot be separated from its emotional and psychological concomitants without reducing it to meaninglessness. We need statistical studies of human sexual behavior, but they should be studies of the behavior of human beings, not of genital organs.

To revert to the original query of why the Kinsey report has had so widespread and ready an acceptance in the United States today, I think the answer can be found on two levels. It does not contain a single novel or disturbing idea, no new insight into human behavior, such as caused the initial rejection of such pioneers as Havelock Ellis or Sigmund Freud; and its underlying attitudes are in complete congruence with some of the predominant, though not necessarily the most valuable, attitudes and ideas of contemporary, educated, urban Americans. To the extent that Justification by Numbers is a valid concept, the phenomenal sales of Dr. Kinsey's book demonstrate that he has provided what his public wanted.

In the Autumn Number . . .

Another article on the Kinsey Report, replying to Mr. Gorer, will appear.

The Stranger on the Mountain

Dorothy Berry Hughes

He who has shoes the color of the road,
Whose flesh keeps yet the marble of high thaw,
Conveys the mountain uninterpreted,
The traveler, easily remembering rocks,
Earth and the dripping stone. He fearfully saw
The shape of wind in the bare birch and the pine,
Marveling how the peak, bitter and green,
Wearing winter and flowers together, mocks
The season with its mad spring paradox.

Also the brooks, the mountain waters splintered
And shaken out over the slope, crow's cry,
The panic of the woodchuck lately wintered
On hill silence and hill hunger—these things
Are manifest—the farm's integrity,
The clamorous barn, and any vagrant knows
Which hollow holds the village of repose,
Profound and sweet, to which the red path brings
In its course innumerable wanderings.