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BEN WATTENBERG The Washington Times 11/20/97

Kinsey's social science wasn't

The reputation of the world's most famous sex researcher is once again under intense scrutiny, leading to some larger questions about what has happened in and to America.

The remarkably mixed reviews of the newly published and massive (937-page) "Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life" by James H. Jones (Norton, 1997), have concentrated on several points, often contradictory: (1) Kinsey was kinky, masochistic, homosexual/bisexual/pansexual, pedophilia-condoning, wife-swapping and orgiastic, running his institute as a free sex zone; (2) He had a personal agenda—sexual liberation in a publicly prudish society; (3) His cause was a good one; therefore, he was a good man, even a great man; (4) His cause was a bad one, and therefore he was a bad man; and (5) He cooked his data to lend scientific credence to his personal agenda.

By my lights, data-cooking is the most currently relevant of these issues. Kinsey's first big book, "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male," published in 1948, has since been called "the most talked-about book in the 20th century." Kinsey's 1953 "Sexual Behavior in the Human Female" was also a blockbuster. These books changed the way many Americans thought about sex.

And why not? He was a professor of zoology at the University of Indiana. His conclusions were based on "scientific research." Thus, when Kinsey stated that 37 percent of men had had a homosexual experience to orgasm, 25 percent of married women were unfaithful to their husbands by age 40, and 10 percent of men were practicing homosexuals, Americans found it shocking — yet credible.

As it turns out, his social science was either flawed or dishonest — or both. For example, Kinsey didn't use a cross-section of the male populations he studied. Disproportionate numbers of his respondents were homosexuals, male prostitutes and prisoners, including sex offenders.

Biographer Jones writes that "(Kinsey's) methodology and sampling technique virtually guaranteed that he would find what he was looking for."

But this leaves a question: Was Kinsey unique in the realm of social science? We may assume that his personal idiosyncrasies were his alone. But have others in the social sciences been true believers rather than disinterested observers?

In connection with a forthcoming PBS "Think Tank" program on this topic, I recently interviewed two of America's leading social scholars, Seymour Martin Lipset and James Q. Wilson. Both were proud of their profession, while noting its shortcomings.

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Mr. Lipset recalled what Max Weber, the father of modern sociology, said: "Every scholar has a party line." Mr. Wilson noted that from its inceptions in the late 1890s, social science had a "reformist" tendency. Many practitioners believed that social science could provide the route to a good life, which they would be happy to define. Both scholars agreed that the ongoing reforming impulse in the social sciences today falls clearly on the liberal side of the spectrum. Others go further and say it's not liberal, but radical.

Consider two examples that show the lay of the land. In my generation, college students were assigned Margaret Mead's "Coming of Age in Samoa." It "proved" that men and women were really rather the same, but that society had shaped them into their sex roles. After all, Mead had investigated a tribe where conventional sex-linked roles didn't exist. Mead's work has since been re-examined. It turns out she didn't speak much Samoan, didn't spend much time there, got tricked by the girls she interviewed, and came back with just the results her mentor wanted to hear.

On the other side, there is James Coleman. Over 30 years ago, with a large government budget, he conducted a huge study to determine why students did well, or poorly, in school.

Of course, everyone knew what the answer would be: Bad schools and bad teachers made bad students. But Coleman's results were not what was expected. His results might be summarized in a single word: "parents." Students' performance was directly related to their home environment. But when social science doesn't conform to the prevailing liberal consensus, it is often ignored. And thus, more than 30 years later, the argument persists: "Just a little more money will fix things up in our schools." This is science?

And so, too often we end up with dueling politicized studies. One large army of social scientists says welfare does not cause out-of-wedlock births; a smaller army says it does. One set of social scientists says affirmative action works well; another says it doesn't. The issue of school vouchers is similarly contested. Social scientists now get the same respect we give to courtroom experts, each of whom peddles his own theory of what DNA evidence really means.

There was a time — I swear I remember it — when a professor, a social scientist, was held in special regard because what he said was based on science and hence had to be respected. Forget it.

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