

Long After Kinsey, Only the Brave Study Sex

By **BENEDICT CAREY**

In a scene from the movie "Kinsey," opening in theaters on Friday, government agents seize a box of study materials being shipped by Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey, the pioneering sex researcher, and impound the contents as obscene.

The scene portrays a time in American history, the 1940's and 1950's, when marital relations were rarely discussed and frank reporting about sex was greeted with a collective anxiety verging on horror. In 1948, when Dr. Kinsey published "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male," he was called a pervert, a menace and even a Communist.

Much has changed in the years since then. But scientists say one thing has remained constant: Americans' ambivalence about the scientific study of sexuality.

Decades after the sexual revolution, sex researchers in the United States still operate in a kind of scientific un-

To many believers, cataloging sexual behavior is like providing a field guide to sin.

derground, fearing suppression or public censure. In a culture awash in sex talk and advice in magazines and movies and on daytime TV, the researchers present their findings in coded language, knowing that at any time they, like Dr. Kinsey, could be held up as a public threat.

Social scientists say that for all its diverse tastes and freedoms, the nation that invented Viagra and "Sex in the City" is still queasy about exploring sexual desire and arousal, even when this knowledge is central to protecting the public's health.

In July 2003, for instance, Congress threatened to shut down several highly regarded sex studies, including one of emotion and arousal, and another of massage parlor workers. And last summer health officials refused to finance a widely anticipated proposal backed by three large universities to support and train students interested in studying sexuality.

As a result of this continued hostility, researchers say they still know precious little about fundamental questions, including how sexual desire affects judgment, how young people develop a sexual identity, why so many people take sexual risks, how personality and mood affect sexual health and how the explosion of sexual material on the Internet and trysts arranged online affect behavior.

Perhaps the strongest protests have arisen in response to efforts to treat — or even to study — deviant sexual behavior like pedophilia, opposition that has grown only fiercer in the wake of the scandals in the Roman Catholic Church.

"I have been in this field for 30 years, and the level of fear and intimidation is higher now than I can ever re-

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Bill Dellanback/Kinsey Institute

To Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey, shown here in 1953 with a posed subject, sex was simply a part of nature.

Attitudes on Sex: Past ...

1959 Should birth control information be available to anyone who wants it?



1970 Would you approve if sex education classes discussed birth control?



1971 Should an adult be able to follow his views on having homosexual relations with a consenting adult, or be required to conform to society's standards?

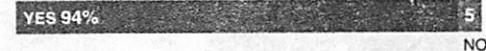


1973 Do sexual materials lead people to commit rape?

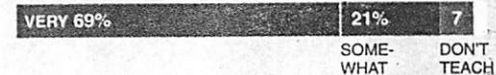


... and Present

2003 Is it morally acceptable to use birth control pills or condoms?



2003 How important is it to have sex education as part of the school curriculum in your community?



2003 Nude magazines and X-rated movies provide harmless entertainment for those who enjoy them.



2004 Do you favor allowing legal gay marriage?



Source: Numerous surveys by different organizations, compiled by the Kaiser Family Foundation

The New York Times

Science Times

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member," said Dr. Gilbert Herdt, a researcher at San Francisco State University who runs the National Sexuality Resource Center, a clearinghouse for sexual information. "With the recent election, there's concern that there will be even more intrusion of ideology into science."

He added, "But then, this country has always had a troubled relationship with sex research."

Much of the suspicion is rooted in religious belief. Many devout believers see any effort to catalog sexual behavior as akin to publishing a field guide to carnal sin, an invitation to deviancy.

"We know the formula for sexual health, which is sex within a monogamous lifelong relationship," said the Rev. Peter Sprigg, director of marriage and family studies for the Family Research Council, a conservative lobbying group based in Washington. "Studying permutations of it, we think, is an effort, like Kinsey's, to change the sexual mores of the society so that what most people consider deviant behaviors look more normal."

Although religious conservatives have always objected on principle to sex research, several things have changed since Dr. Kinsey's time, said Dr. John Gagnon, an emeritus professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and the author of "An Interpretation of Desire."

"Back then, white small-town Protestants' morality was American morality, and it spoke with one voice," he said. "Now they no longer solely define the conversation; there are competing secular voices talking about sexual health, about pleasure, feminism, the gay movement and so on."

In response, Dr. Gagnon said, the critics of sex research have become more organized and politically connected. Mr. Sprigg agreed that conservative groups like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council have coordinated their critiques of sex research to bring more public scrutiny to the projects. Late last year, the Traditional Values Coalition, an organization of 43,000 churches, publicly objected to some \$100 million worth of government-backed research, much of it on sexual behavior, and compiled a roster of more than 150 researchers who had done sex studies. That roster has circulated widely among both critics and scientists, who call it a "hit list."

"We've all learned to play the euphemism game, where we use code words to disguise the studies," to avoid showing up on such a list, said Dr. Thomas Coates, a sex researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles. Women who work in massage parlors are "high-risk women," and one recent survey of sexual behavior was titled "Social Aspects of Fertility-Related Behavior."

In 2003, a small federal grant for a study called "Mechanisms Influencing Sexual Risk Taking" put Kinsey's institute itself, now called the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, back in the fray.

The research addresses a question that public health officials say is critical: Why do some people knowingly take sexual risks that could be avoided with simple precautions, like wearing a condom?

"All of the public health messages teaching people safe sex are designed on the presumption that people behave rationally," said Dr. Erick Janssen, a psychologist at the institute, on the Indiana University campus, and the principal investigator on the study. "But many of them don't, and so the message isn't helping them. In order to understand how best to design these messages we need to understand how they are thinking."

In Dr. Janssen's continuing investigation, adults enter a small screen-

Americans and Explicit Media

Responses to different surveys in 1971 and 2002.

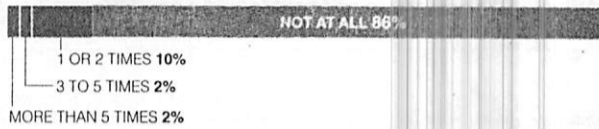
1971 Have you ever gone to an X-rated movie?



2002 Have you seen an X-rated movie in the last year?



2002 In the past 30 days, how often have you visited a Web site for sexually explicit material?



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation

The New York Times

ing room at the institute, where they sit alone and watch film clips on a computer monitor. In one experiment, the participants see a short segment from the movie "Silence of the Lambs," meant to elicit anxiety. They then watch a few minutes of a pornographic video. By measuring arousal, with genital, heart and muscle sensors, Dr. Janssen expects to learn more about how waves of emotion affect arousal, and which states prompt the most reckless sexual behavior.

The findings, he and other researchers say, will help scientists understand not only who is likely to risk his health or marriage by taking sexual risks, but when and why.

"Then we can begin to intervene more effectively," he said.

Congress, however, intervened first. In July 2003, Representative Patrick J. Toomey, Republican of Pennsylvania, introduced an amendment to withdraw financing from Dr. Janssen's study and several others. The proposal fell short on the House floor by two votes, but not before the studies were criticized in The Washington Times and ridiculed on conservative blogs and talk shows.

Mr. Sprigg said: "Using government dollars to pay for people to watch porn? I wonder how many Americans would be comfortable with that."

Another reason many Americans are uncomfortable with sex research is that surveys and genital sensors cannot capture what for many people is a deeply emotional experience.

In striving to be neutral, Dr. Kinsey, who trained as a zoologist, described and cataloged human sexual behaviors in the same way he might have with lizards or the gall wasps he studied before turning to men and women.

Yet sex for humans is far more complex. It can feel like the cement that binds a romantic relationship, or like a lonely embrace, a listless act. It may enliven a friendship, unsettle a marriage or cause a timid nature to glow with confidence.

"Studying sex through physiology, as if it were just another behavior ignores what's going on in people's minds, their own fantasies, their conflicted wishes," said Dr. Leon Hoffman, co-director of the Pacella Par-

ent Child Center in New York. "Using measuring devices, sensors, reduces it to just a physical act, when most of what's going on is mental and not always conscious."

Nor is sex always an act between equals. Some sexual acts — harassment and molestation, for example — beg for judgment, not scientific neutrality, especially when a difference in power or age is involved.

That is why almost any discussion of sexuality in minors has been politically radioactive, experts say. In a public condemnation that stunned many sex researchers, Congress in 1999 voted unanimously to denounce a research article in an arcane journal that concluded that some victims

Any discussion of sex in minors is radioactive.

of childhood sexual abuse suffered little long-term emotional damage.

The article was not an original experiment but reviewed previous surveys.

The American Psychological Association, which had published the paper, decided to have an independent panel "re-review" it — a decision that outraged some of the group's own members and led some scientists to resign from the organization. Although many experts say the paper was scientifically sound, few have dared even propose a study of sexuality involving minors since then, scientists said.

Pedophilia in particular is off-limits. Psychiatrists and psychologists have studied and tried to treat people imprisoned for sexual crimes, with limited success. But it is not clear whether these convicted felons are representative of all people who have sexual fantasies involving children.

People do not choose to become pedophiles, experts say, but usually discover as adults that they are afflicted with unusual desires, and many long resist the urge to act on them. Researchers know that boys

CASTING AGAINST TYPE

Six-foot-four and a heartthrob, Liam Neeson is an unlikely actor to play Alfred C. Kinsey. *The Arts, Page E1.*

who are sexually abused themselves may be at increased risk of developing pedophilia later on, but they still know little about how these urges develop, or in whom.

"The intensity of the emotion on this issue is so high that it is heresy to express any concern about a person with pedophilia," much less study treatment, said Dr. Fred Berlin, founder of the Johns Hopkins University sexual disorders clinic. He added, "Since the Catholic Church scandal, I don't know anyone who has even had the nerve to suggest that some in the church are ill and need help."

A concern for privacy, which some trace to the small-town morality of Kinsey's time, also has contributed to the wariness many Americans feel when asked to reveal sexual preferences they know may be perceived as quirky or strange.

Kinsey's original sex surveys revealed the diversity in Americans' sexual behavior: many heterosexual men reported having homosexual experiences. A teenage rock guitarist down the street might stick to conventional monogamy, while her neighbor, an accountant, might prefer role-playing games with multiple partners.

Often people themselves are not entirely aware of what most arouses them sexually, studies suggest. In one recent experiment, psychologists found that women could be as aroused by images of homosexual sex as by films of heterosexual sex. This is a provocative finding and may offer important clues to improve sexual health, but it is often not something the woman next door wants to talk about with a researcher, even anonymously.

Sexual taste is a wild card, in short, and one that many people would prefer be kept face down.

"A lot of high level people in government and politics are very sensitive to the kind of sexual surveys we do, not so much for religious reasons, but because they just say, 'Look, I would never answer those questions,'" said Dr. Edward Laumann, a sociologist at the University of Chicago.

In 1994, Dr. Laumann and a team of researchers published "The Social Organization of Sexuality," a comprehensive survey of Americans' sexual behavior, which won praise from people on each side of the sex research debate for its integrity, and updated Dr. Kinsey's original work.

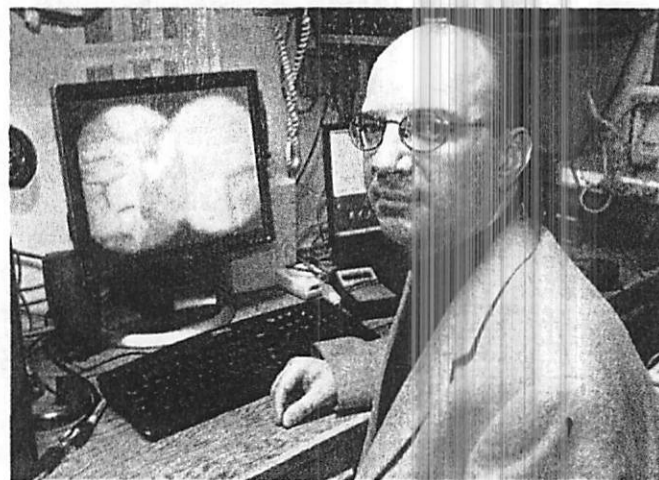
They found that about 75 percent of the people they surveyed did agree to answer detailed questions about sex, but many did so only after being convinced that their answers were absolutely anonymous and critical to science. It was only last-minute financing from private foundations that allowed the study to be completed at all, Dr. Laumann said, after the government reversed a decision to support the survey.

Scientists who have spent their lives studying sexual behavior say that the political climate tends to be cyclical, with periods of cold hostility followed by thaws that are often driven by bursts of public concern, like increased worry about sex among young people in the 1960's and teenage pregnancy in the 1970's.

"When the AIDS epidemic hit in the 1980's," said Dr. Anke A. Ehrhardt, a Columbia University professor and director of the H.I.V. Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, "the government had to do research because sexual behavior is at the core of the problem."

Since then, the climate for doing sex research may have become even more hostile, she and other researchers said, particularly outside the context of H.I.V.

Dr. Laumann, for example, finally managed to find financing for a recent study of sexual behavior and the risk of sexually transmitted disease that should help public health officials contain the spread of chlamydia, a common infection. Where did he conduct the study? In China



Tom Stratton for The New York Times

Dr. Erick Janssen, a psychologist at the Kinsey Institute in Bloomington, Ind., studies the effect of emotion on sexual arousal.

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