



DR. ALFRED KINSEY

SEX, SCIENCE, and KINSEY

A Conversation with
Dr. John Bancroft

by **GARY POOL**

Most authentic scholars and scientists do not, as a rule, relish legal confrontations. Dr. John Bancroft, the Cambridge-educated psychiatrist who heads the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University, is no different from the majority of his colleagues in this particular regard. Though he has been at his new post as director of the world-famous interdisciplinary organization for little more than a year, Bancroft is already quite mindful of Dr. Judith A. Reisman's suit—for defamation of character and slander—filed against his predecessor, June Reinisch, the institute, and the university in 1990. The litigation, which dragged on for nearly four years, came about as a form of retaliation for Reinisch's attempts to counter the accusations of spurious research and child abuse which Dr. Reisman had alleged were carried out by the institute, its founder, Dr. Alfred Kinsey, and his staff. Even though the suit was thrown out of court in 1994 as meritless, being dismissed with prejudice (meaning that it may not be brought again in the same form), the legal expenses incurred by Indiana University in defending

itself and the institute against Reisman's vindictive litigation were monumental.

"These people might do the same thing again, if I gave them something to hang a libel case on," the engaging and altogether approachable Dr. Bancroft told me when I visited him at the institute on October 23, 1995. "I just don't want to be caught up in that sort of process. It's incredibly time-consuming. On the other hand, these attacks are going to continue—they've always been there and they aren't going to go away. And I do want to be in a position to give what I believe to be the most considered, informed, and constructive response to them. The very fact that Dr. Kinsey is being attacked now, and in this way, is an interesting comment on our social system."

Practically from the moment that Kinsey published his initial findings in 1948, the institute which bears his name has continuously been at the epicenter of an often heated and rancorous controversy. The current, ongoing polemic stems primarily from allegations made in *Kinsey, Sex, and Fraud*, which Reisman coauthored with Edward W. Eichel. (An arch-

conservative theorist and founder of the Institute for Media Education, Reisman holds a Ph.D. in communications from Case Western Reserve University.) In their book, Reisman and Eichel state:

Kinsey's research was carried out on a non-representative group of Americans—including disproportionately large numbers of sex offenders, prostitutes, prison inmates and exhibitionists—and involved illegal sex experimentation upon several hundred children, masturbated to orgasm by "trained" pederasts. It has become the "scientific" basis for the official doctrine of sex education in the United States. Shocking? Yes. True? Demonstrably.

Bancroft characterizes this statement as "quite an effective mixture of fact and nonfact, or altered fact. All those first points she made of course are generally accepted. Yes, he did have an unrepresentative sample. Yes, he did oversample—in particular, men in penal institutions. That's all been acknowledged and dealt with; that's history. Indeed, the Kinsey Institute itself has—and this is relevant to issues on the prevalence of homosexual behavior, for ex-

ample—reanalyzed data. In the 1970s, John Gagnon and Bill Simon sort of cleaned up the sample [published in *Sexual Conduct*, Aldine Press, 1973]. In fact, they did more than that: they focused down on a subsample that was reasonably representative of the population from which the subsample was drawn, which was men who attended college between 1938 and 1950. You know, this '10 percent of the population is gay' thing is often leveled at Kinsey, although Kinsey actually never said that."

What Kinsey actually reported in 1948 was that, from his nonrandom sample, 37 percent of adult white males indicated having had at least one sexual encounter with another man in their lifetimes, including adolescent experiences. Of these, 10 percent said they had had exclusively male sexual contacts for a period of at least three years between the ages of 16 and 55 (probably the source of the "10 percent" legend). But Kinsey reported further that, of this 10 percent, only 4 percent admitted to strictly exclusive homosexuality starting in adolescence and continuing throughout adulthood. When Gagnon and Simon revisited Kinsey's data in the early 1970s, their reanalysis of the college men in the study indicated that 3 percent

had had exclusively male sexual partners from age 18 onward. Perhaps of greater interest, however, was that they also found another 3 percent who indicated significant numbers of sexual encounters with both males and females.

According to Bancroft, Reisman's statements regarding the representativeness of Kinsey's sample are altogether mundane and unremarkable. What is extraordinary, however—and what he takes considerable exception to—is that she combines this with her claims that sexual experiments in which children were used as subjects were undertaken by the institute.

"She has no evidence that experiments were carried out on children," Bancroft said flatly. "All she has to go on is what actually was stated in the book [*Sexual Behavior in the Human*

Male; Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin; W. B. Saunders Company, 1948]. That doesn't say that experiments were carried out on children. It might certainly say that people made observations of children and, indeed, may have timed things. If you want to call that an experiment, you can perhaps justify in some way what she says. But those observations were not made by people in the Kinsey Institute, and Kinsey made that quite clear. He obtained them from other people. If he is to be criticized, it is because he did not make it clear that all the information he put into four tables pertaining specifically to orgasm in preadolescent boys [tables 31 through 34] came from one man.

"They ended up with nine men who had observed orgasm in preadolescent boys and (what the book actually says) some of them were 'technically trained'—meaning, in this case, 'educated' in some technical field, perhaps holding a college degree—and kept some sort of record of their experiences with these children. Now, what I think Kinsey

should have said was that from one of those men the evidence was sufficiently detailed and systematic that he was able to present it in tabular form. Those are tables 31 through 34. He had observations from the other men which he was interested in and which he used in other analyses during the course of the chapter, but he didn't incorporate them into those specific tables."

According to Bancroft, the Kinsey Institute has never carried out sexual experiments on children, either during Alfred Kinsey's time as director or since. Information concerning the sexual responses of children was obtained from older subjects recalling their own childhood, parents observing their children, and a very few adult men who had engaged in sexual activity with children. These adults were interviewed by Kinsey and his staff in the same manner that all other sexual histories were obtained; the institute did not train or pay any of these subjects. The subjects freely offered information about their experiences and observations. The one individual, alluded to by Dr. Bancroft, who provided the materials for the now rather infamous table 34, began carefully documenting his experiences with preadolescent boys in 1917. He died prior to the death

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of Dr. Kinsey. None of the identities of the children involved or of their parents has ever been known to anyone at the Kinsey Institute.

Dr. Bancroft admits without hesitation that the man who provided the data for tables 31 through 34 undoubtedly sexually exploited the children whose behavior was chronicled. "The question is," Bancroft continued, "why was Kinsey not totally open about his man being the only source for those tables? Obviously, I can't answer that. I don't think he said anything that was untrue. My hunch is he probably thought people would not take these data seriously enough. Although why it should make any great difference whether it was one pedophile or three is debatable. I suspect that, having spent a lot of time interviewing this man, and having seen the way he kept records, Kinsey actually did begin to think that the man's observations were worth paying attention to, that he was unusually disciplined and objective in the way he made his observations. To this day, of course, there remain very little additional data of this particular kind, and for obvious reasons. If you read that bit in the chapter, you will see Kinsey was clearly much more concerned about persuading the reader that this was evidence of scientific value than he was with defending himself against these attacks—which, indeed, didn't come for another 40 years, but which he might have anticipated. And, you know, everybody in the field has read that chapter and taken it entirely on face value. This is, of course, the reasonable approach."

Raising the child-abuse issue, Dr. Bancroft argues, is one way for right-wing moralists such as Judith Reisman to attract otherwise fairly reasonable people to their cause. It is easy for rational discussion on such topics as sex education to become overwhelmed by the indignation and anger that such charges provoke. "They make this extraordinary assertion," Bancroft said, "that these specific data on preadolescent boys' orgasmic capacity are the cornerstone, the basis of, modern sex education. This doesn't have any relevance to modern sex education at all. That's an absurd notion. If it had never appeared, it wouldn't have made any difference as to how sex education evolved.

"We don't need those data from that one 'dirty old man' to know some children are capable of sexual response. There's plenty of evidence from adults about their own childhoods that tells us at least some kids are capable of orgasm before they get to puberty. There's evidence from all sorts of sources for that. But even if no child were capable of sexual response until he or she reached puberty, it still wouldn't justify denying them any sort of sex education. For one thing, they're surrounded with sexual meanings they need to make some sense of. They live in a highly sexualized environment, and they're very curious and they're asking questions about it. And those questions should be answered in an appropriately honest way."

Since the original findings of Dr. Kinsey are now nearly 50 years old and based, as they are, upon data collected as far back as the mid-1930s, I was curious to know what relevance this work might still have to contemporary sex research.

"Well, you know, there are still quite a lot of details related to sexual response where the only place you can find any sort of data about them is to go back to the original Kinsey studies," Dr. Bancroft responded. "His interviews were so detailed, so systematic, that, within the limitations of the sampling problems, it's still a very interesting set of data. Within that sample you can still study the data, and people still *are* studying them, to look at associations between different variables. Therefore,

it is still a unique data set. Historically, it's of considerable interest. Methodologically, it is of considerable interest. You can see what can be learned from these early studies, even from what mistakes were made. So, with all of its strengths and weaknesses taken into consideration, it's a very important foundation for modern sex research. It is the starting point for any science of studying sexual behavior. Apart from the problems of its representativeness, the Kinsey data are an extremely

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rich source of information about the variety of human sexual behavior. People still have to keep going back to Kinsey for want of anything better."

Concerning the University of Chicago's study, *The Social Organization of Sexuality*, authored by Edward O. Laumann, John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael, and Stuart Michaels and published in 1994, Dr. Bancroft feels that the estimate of the number of homosexuals in society is probably low. (In that study, only about 2.8 percent of men and 1.4 percent of women identified themselves as homosexual.) "I think it's bound to be an underestimate," Bancroft opined. "Any survey carried out in the way that survey was carried out is going to tend to give you underestimates of behaviors of that kind, as the authors actually acknowledge, at least some of the time. It's interesting how people get into these enormous battles about whether one percent of the population is gay or 4 percent is gay and so on. Either way, it's an awful lot of people. The University of Chicago did try and do a rather more broadly based survey than several recent large-scale studies, and it should take credit for that. But it comes back again to how secure the participants feel about what's going to happen to

the information they reveal about themselves. In this computer age, it's much more difficult to give people cast-iron guarantees regarding confidentiality than it was in Kinsey's time."

John Bancroft feels that the real impact of Alfred Kinsey's findings has little to do with the precision of his figures but, rather, with the fact that he confronted people with a view of human sexuality quite different from the one to which they had been accustomed. This generated discussion and argument and brought the subject of people's sexual behavior out into the open, and did so on a reasonably scientific basis.

"In terms of working out a sensible and fruitful agenda of research, in the sense of surveys," Bancroft said, "perhaps there should be less preoccupation with trying to find the truth of exactly *how many* people do certain things and more concern with understanding *why* people do these things. To some extent, the University of Chicago survey was moving in that direction. As scientists, we have to feel our way, build on experience, and learn by mistakes. From my perspective, and obviously I'm biased, it's difficult to think of any aspect of the human condition that is more important to society than the ways people behave sexually. Two profoundly important issues relate to that: world population and sexually transmitted disease. But the fact remains that, regardless of whether or not this research is important, sex is such a taboo, such a sensitive topic, that people have great difficulty accepting any sort of objective attempt to study it. This is one of the problems Kinsey came up against, because he made a serious—and I believe sincere and genuine—attempt to be objective. In order to succeed in being objective, there was absolutely no question that he had to be non-judgmental and that he had to ensure confidentiality. When researchers do that looking at sexual behavior, they get accused of divorcing sex from morality. Well, it's not a divorce; it's a temporary separation for the purposes of objectivity. Moral judgments about sexual behavior will depend upon much more than scientific evidence, but the scientific evidence is nonetheless important.

"The prime purpose for having the Kinsey Institute still here is because human sexuality is a profoundly important subject and there is a need for at least one place that fosters a good, interdisciplinary approach to the study of sexuality. I haven't come to this job to wage a political campaign. At the same time, one cannot be totally mute—and, indeed, shouldn't be. But the message one needs to get across is not a simple one. On the one hand, in order to be scientific, we have to strive for some sort of objectivity. We can't determine our scientific agenda on the basis of our moral values. On the other hand, our priorities will be influenced by our moral position. So it is important to convey the right balance between being objectively scientific and taking a responsible view of the role of sexuality in modern society. One has to make it clear that you can talk as a scientist about data and as a human being about your own value system, but it is important not to assume that one is the same as the other. My opinion, as a responsible member of society, is that it is profoundly important to encourage people to treat sexuality responsibly. It's a form of behavior that

carries with it huge consequences, one of which is that it creates new life. It's difficult to think of anything more laden with responsibility than creating a new human being. And secondly, sex certainly is a powerful and very worrying means of transmitting disease. Now that, if you like, is my moral message."

Before leaving his sunny, comfortably cluttered office, I asked John Bancroft what he envisioned as the future of the Kinsey Institute, to which he replied: "It contains a unique and remarkable collection of materials relating to humans and their sexual behavior which, at the moment, is a long way from being adequately used or usable. We're working hard on that. This is probably the single most important reason why the institute should continue. Also, sex research is a field that quintessentially requires an interdisciplinary approach. Perhaps some of Kinsey's successors have been somewhat more focused in the area of the social sciences. My predecessor, June Reinisch, tried to widen the scope and bring in more of the biological as well as social and cultural aspects, and that's very much going to continue."

On the way back to my car, as I strolled across the beautiful, wooded campus, mulling over in my mind the past two hours of conversation, it occurred to me just how frightening the truth can be to many of us. The truth about ourselves is perhaps the most painful truth of all. But isn't insisting on not knowing—for whatever reasons—tantamount to lying? And isn't lying to ourselves a most dangerous human indulgence?

In the second great volume of his study, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, first published in 1953, Kinsey wrote:

There is an honesty in science which leads to a certain acceptance of the reality. There are some who, finding the ocean an impediment to the pursuit of their designs, try to ignore its existence. If they are unable to ignore it because of its size, they try to legislate it out of existence or try to dry it up with a sponge. They insist that the latter operation would be possible if enough sponges were available, and if enough persons would wield them.

There is no ocean of greater magnitude than the sexual function, and there are those who believe that we would do better if we ignored its existence, that we should not try to understand its material origins, and that if we sufficiently ignore it and mop at the flood of sexual activity with new laws, heavier penalties, more pronouncements, and greater intolerances, we may ultimately eliminate the reality. The scientist who observes and describes the reality is attacked as an enemy of the faith, and his acceptance of human limitations in modifying that reality is condemned as scientific materialism. But we believe that an increased understanding of the biologic and psychologic and social factors which account for each type of sexual activity may contribute to an ultimate adjustment between man's sexual nature and the needs of the total social organization. [H]

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