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Study of Sex Experiencing 2d Revolution

By ETHAN BRONNER

Half a century after a mild-mannered Midwestern biology professor named Alfred C. Kinsey essentially created a new academic discipline with publication of his best-selling tome "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male," the study of sexuality on American campuses is again being revolutionized.

Over the past five years, courses examining the origin and meaning of sexual identity have appeared in nearly every catalogue of American liberal arts colleges, and the area is still growing. Unlike the short health classes taught at colleges in the past, what is now available permits students to specialize in sexuality, especially as a cultural phenomenon.

The University of Chicago initiated a lesbian and gay studies project this past fall; the University of Iowa will offer a certificate program — short of a major but more than a minor — in sexuality starting next September; Brown University is in the fourth year of offering a full major called Sexuality and Society; the University of Minnesota is establishing, with a pledged half-million-dollar endowment, a Center for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies; the University of California at Riverside, the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, New York University and the University of Pennsylvania are among a growing number of institutions with graduate or undergraduate programs focused on sexuality.

Some of the sessions are surpris-

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A Half-Century After Kinsey, the Study of Sex Is Generating Keen Interest

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ingly explicit. At the University of Virginia, undergraduates in a course called Sexuality Today gather in co-educational pairs and sculpture genitals from Play-Doh. At Brown University, the owner of a female-oriented sex shop uses a latex replica of female sex organs to demonstrate new paraphernalia. And at the State University of New York at New Paltz, sadomasochists were invited to discuss their practices, drawing criticism from, among others, Gov. George E. Pataki.

What is noteworthy about nearly all these courses is that they spring from an area of the humanities, like history or English. The fascinating cross-cultural questions they raise have invigorated these fields, given birth to journals and established scholarly conferences. For example, they ask: When was the term homosexual invented? How does society define manhood? What is the difference between sex and gender?

By contrast, what they rarely involve is pure science. As sexuality has grown into a field of keen scholarly and societal interest, the frontiers of scientific knowledge around it, while more advanced than half a century ago, have not expanded correspondingly.

"There is still a lack of good, basic research into the fundamentals of human sexualities," said Dr. John Bancroft, an English medical researcher who now heads the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University.

"We don't understand why some people are likely to engage in high-risk sexual behavior while other people sensibly keep out of trouble," Dr. Bancroft said. "It is probably socio-cultural, but there may be individual differences in physiology and neurobiology. We still know very little about the orgasm physiologically, relatively little about the extent to which men and women differ in patterns of physiological sexual response. We know little about why some people abuse children."

Dr. Bancroft added: "In other important aspects of behavior, you find a much more consistent body of scientific endeavor. It is regarded as something we need to know about. Sex is not like that. There has been a longstanding fear of knowledge in that area."

Susan Tate, who teaches the three-year-old Sexuality Today course at the University of Virginia, said it was that fear that she sought to address when she had the students build genitals from Play-Doh. "If we can discuss the heart, stomach and elbow

without embarrassment," she said, "we should be able to talk about the penis, clitoris and vagina without laughing."

"I'm trying to tell the students what's good about sex," she said of her weekly, 25-student course. "All they hear is what's bad about it, how it can kill you. I want them to understand how it can be fantastic. I also want them to choose their own boundaries."

Issues Evolving From Women's Studies

Some of the material offered under sexuality today on college campuses flows from women's studies. Where at one time women's studies raised issues about equal pay, today the field is often recast as gender studies and examines societal construction of sexual identity. Whole sections of campus bookstores are taking the newly coined label lesbian, which covers lesbian, bisexual and gay topics.

Much of the scholarship is grouped under the sardonic, defiant rubric of queer theory and challenges the view that sexuality and gender are the same thing. In other words, said David Savran, an English professor at Brown and director of its sexuality courses, sexual identity and desire are socially constructed, not innate. This school of thought is known as social constructionism.

Emphasis is placed on the changed view of sex over history, on the apparent fact, for example, that men in Athens in the 5th century B.C. were not judged by whether they had sex with other men, only whether they were seen as the penetrator or penetrated. And, Professor Savran said, "Three hundred years ago, a great many women and men were having same-sex relations but they were not necessarily labeled Sodomites." Homosexuality in the animal kingdom is also brought to bear on the issue.

There is another school of thought, essentialism, which argues that one's sexual orientation is innate, biologically determined. In the academy, at least among the gay theorists, many of whom are gay, this view is typically rejected as wrong and potentially harmful. It is seen to cast homosexuality as a kind of disability that may merit sympathy but fails to challenge the faulty bases of society.

"What I really like about queer theory is that rather than looking at minority or dissident sexuality ver-
tals the mainstream, we question a lot of basic assumptions we have

about sexuality," said Marshall Miller, a 23-year-old recent graduate of Brown's program who now works in a gay health center in Boston.

The curriculum for Mr. Miller and others who major in the area include a requirement to take three of four core courses: the biology of gender, an introduction to gay and lesbian literary and cultural studies, the history of sexuality and a course that is called Queers and Culture but that appears on transcripts as Identities/Communities for fear that potential employers would be put off by the real name.

Those in this field say that learning about the fringes of sexual practice, like sadomasochism and prostitution, offers insight into issues like power and money. Tania Israel, who is studying toward a doctorate in psychology and teaching at Arizona State University, focused on strippers and found them both empowered and degraded by their work, depending on several external factors.

"It is very difficult to get at people's sexuality because the issue is so taboo," she said. "But if we want to understand sexual assault, for example, we need to understand how men and women experience their sexuality, how they internalize messages." That is not how critics see it.

Roger Kimball, managing editor of New Criterion, a conservative monthly journal, drew angry attention to a sex conference at SUNY New Paltz this fall when The Wall Street Journal published a caustic article by him under the headline, "Syllabus for Sickos."

"There is something profoundly dehumanizing about this stuff," he said in an interview. "And what a way to waste your college years. Here you have four unrepeatable years where you can spend a great deal of money to become educated. You have to make choices. Is it better to spend time learning to use dildos or reading Kant? If you look at the amazing ignorance of people in college today, it is appalling."

The 'Dark Side' Of Enlightenment

"Then there is the moral question," he continued. "Is this a good thing, to look at the sex organs as essentially a complicated piece of plumbing? Should one's sex life be treated in an objective way, turning sex into an activity like jogging? I don't think so. What worries me is the way sex studies tend to get rid of the whole element of love and affec-

A CLOSER LOOK

A Sample of Courses in Sexuality

From course catalogues at colleges and universities around the nation:

"QUEER HISTORIES," AT YALE:

Examination of a recent category of analysis for gender studies and the study of sexuality, situated within a historical framework. Readings examine different aspects of what is commonly regarded as "queer," including gender and sexual nonconformity, compare and contrast past and present notions of that nonconformity, and examine how a historical perspective can influence understanding of modern categories, as well as the reverse.

"QUEER LIVES" AT HAMPSHIRE COLLEGE IN MASSACHUSETTS:

This course is envisioned as an introduction to thinking about the lives and work of lesbians, gay men, transsexuals, and transgendered people (groups currently allied politically under the term "queer") mainly through their autobiographies and their work as artists and political activists. The course will trace the social and cultural history of queer people from the end of the 19th century, when sexologists coined the term "homosexual," to

the queer liberation movement of the present day, stressing issues of race and class as well as gender.

"SEXUALITY TODAY" AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA:

This course will provide an increased understanding and appreciation for human sexual behavior through learning concepts, principles and facts regarding sexual health. Topics will include: human sexual behavior and relationships, reproductive systems, contraception and unintended pregnancy, sex under the influence of alcohol, regretted sex, media influences on sexual behavior, sexually transmitted infections (including H.I.V.), sexual health and sexual assault.

LESBIAN, GAY AND BISEXUAL STUDIES MINOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT RIVERSIDE:

The curriculum will address such issues as: sexual identity and orientation; gay, lesbian and bisexual representation; gay, lesbian and bisexual perspectives on the arts; retheorizations of gender; sexuality and cultural diversity; intersections of sexualities and ethnic identities.

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"A person who knows that James I, Francis Bacon, Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky, George Santayana, T. E. Lawrence, Alan Turing and Ludwig Wittgenstein were homosexuals," he wrote, "and that Sophocles, Socrates, Plato, Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Richard the Lionhearted may have been, is not so likely to believe that homosexuality is merely a ghastly blight."

Changing Views Toward Homosexuality

There appears to be good reason to attribute the growing tolerance toward homosexuality in America at least partly to changes in education. George Chauncey, a historian at the University of Chicago, is writing a book arguing that increased acceptance of homosexuals is one of the most fundamental changes of the second half of the 20th century.

Professor Chauncey says that the first American academic conference on gay and lesbian studies was held at Yale University in 1987 and drew 200 participants. Two years later, some 600 people attended. By 1991, when the conference was held at Harvard University, there were 1,600 participants and the following year, at Rutgers University, 2,000 scholars participated and 200 papers were presented, making it one of the largest academic conferences in the country, Mr. Chauncey said.

Judith R. Shapiro, an anthropologist who is president of Barnard College, has watched the growth of gender studies with some concern but also with enthusiasm.

On the one hand, she worries that because it is such a personal issue, it encourages students to turn further inside themselves. But Ms. Shapiro also sees a great value in it because by comparing what may seem like one's most natural and inherent tendencies and feelings with historical and cross-cultural practices, students are obliged to turn outward.

"Through such studies, students are forced to ask the most basic questions about how society organizes itself and that is the very essence of a liberal education," Ms. Shapiro said. "Remember what Erik Erikson told us about Martin Luther's private demons. They were fundamental to his thought. People's personal obsessions can lead to great truths."

tion and intimacy in the name of emancipation. The idea is to increase pleasure by divorcing it from all those customs and rituals and social embedding in which sexuality has always been understood. This removes the decent drapery of life. Enlightenment has a dark side."

Richard A. Posner, a conservative but iconoclastic legal scholar, who is chief judge of the Federal Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in Chicago, is not, however, very impressed with these concerns. He says that ignorance of things sexual by members of the judiciary, and by society generally has produced woe-ful results.

This was brought home to him about eight years ago, Judge Posner said, when seeking to plug a gap in

his knowledge, he picked up Plato's "Symposium." He said he knew at the time only that it was about love.

"I was surprised to discover that it was a defense, and as one can imagine a highly interesting and articulate one, of homosexual love," he wrote in the book that emerged, "Sex and Reason" (Harvard University Press, 1992). "It had never occurred to me that the greatest figure in the history of philosophy, or for that matter any other respectable figure in the history of thought, had attempted such a thing."

He added that "Symposium" and a year's worth of subsequent reading made him re-evaluate much of what had been written about homosexuality into American law. His book urges decriminalization and accept-