



# What Kinsey wrought

**T**HE UNENDING 50-YEAR WAR OVER Alfred Kinsey and his sex research is about to flare up once again, thanks to the new movie *Kinsey*. The film manages to be fairly faithful to the biographies of Kinsey while sliding by or simply omitting a lot of negative material that might interfere with a heroic view of the man.

Kinsey was a highly intelligent, fearless man and an unusually skilled interviewer whose question-and-answer techniques heavily influenced the way polls and surveys are done today. Conservatives seem quaint when they argue that Kinsey's two reports, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), should never have been done. Someone was going to do a big sexual survey pointing out the gap between what sex really was in America and what the culture thought it should be. Kinsey got there first, and he deserves credit for it. But he was a very odd, creepy fellow whose findings and methods (often slapdash and chaotic, if not intentionally deceptive) are not really separable from the enormous moral impact he had on the culture.

**Exhibitionism.** A biographical note here: Years ago, I covered the world of sex research as part of my social-science beat at *Time* magazine. I quickly figured out that a lot of people in this world seemed to have entered it because of their unusual sexual tastes, opinions, or problems. I think this was certainly true earlier of Kinsey as well. He was an exhibitionist, a voyeur, and a masochist. (This is handled in the movie by Kinsey's wife's discovering he has sliced his foreskin. But Kinsey did more grotesque things to his genitals than you want to read about here.) One biographer, James H. Jones, argues that Kinsey was gay from the beginning and riven with guilt about it, but he married and thought of himself as bisexual. The obvious question here is this: What are the odds that a researcher with this set of orientations and attitudes would be drawn to the conclusion that all sexual behavior is equal and that orgasms (and nothing else) count, certainly not how you achieve them or with whom? I would say the odds are very, very good. The movie stresses how relentlessly nonjudg-

mental Kinsey was. But as the late evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould once wrote, Kinsey's absence of judgment was itself a form of judgment. Kinsey wrote: "What is right for one individual may be wrong for the next; and what is sin and abomination to one may be a worthwhile part of the next individual's life." That certainly defined Kinsey's own sexual demons out of existence, but it left the field of sexology with a taboo-breaking, anything-goes legacy. It also left one huge open area that has stained sexology ever since: adult-child sex.

Outraged critics of Kinsey often focus on Table 34 of the male book. It lists the sexual responses of children acquired from one of Kinsey's sources, a pedophile who kept detailed records of his child rapes, including those of a baby of 5 months and a 4-year-old he sexually manipulated for 24 hours. As a non-judgmental person, Kinsey of course did not bother turning the pedophile over to the law. His critics accuse Kinsey of "Mengele medicine," meaning that he presided over Nazi-like experiments. Not so. We have no evidence that Kinsey and his team conducted or approved of any child rapes. He just used the records of pedophiles, coldly described in the first Kinsey report as males who "with their adult backgrounds are able to recognize and interpret the boys' experiences." Table 34 was a moral horror, and neither Kinsey nor his patron, the Rockefeller Foundation, seemed to think that anything was amiss.

Table 34 set the stage for what has become dogma in the sex world: All humans are sexual from birth, and since children are sexual, they should be expected to behave sexually. Does

this mean that children should be able to have sex with adults? Kinsey didn't say, but he wrote that the psychic damage to children who have sex with adults comes from the horrified reaction of adults, not from the sex itself. That opinion, a very large bone tossed to advocates of adult-child sex, has become a mantra in the sex world. Some who promote the mantra are sincere—a show of horror by parents of an abused child may indeed make matters worse. But many are advocates of adult-child sex hiding behind a pro-child argument. In my *Time* days, the air was so thick with sex-world arguments in favor of incest and adult-child sex that I threw a lot of them together in a one-page report. The list included a defense of incest by Wardell Pomeroy, a coauthor of the Kinsey reports. Now that people are once again chattering about Kinsey's legacy, I hope across-the-board non-judgmentalism and adult-child sex come up for discussion. ●

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