

William Simon, Sexuality Expert, Dies at 70

By ERIC NAGOURNEY

William Simon, who influenced the study of human sexuality through his application of sociological methods and his rejection of traditional ideas of normal behavior, died on July 21 in Houston. He was 70.

The cause was cancer, his family said.

Dr. Simon, who once worked at the Kinsey Institute for Social Research and wrote numerous books and papers about sexuality, brought a post-modernist sensibility to a field long bound by historical assumptions. His view was that there are no fixed points in the geography of sexuality, merely an ever-changing terrain that has less to do with biology than with accidents of history.

"The most important truth about sexuality is that there may be no important truths about sexuality that are permanent," he wrote in his last book, "Postmodern Sexualities" (Routledge, 1996).

As a consequence, Dr. Simon, a professor of sociology at the University of Houston, was an advocate for a much broader acceptance of differing sexual behaviors. He was an early advocate of gay rights and testified against obscenity laws. He was willing to defend depictions of the most extreme forms of sexual activity, as long as they were consensual.

"It seemed so fundamental to him that the sexual was quintessentially an area of expressive, meaningful communication," said Dr. Simon's son Jonathan, a law professor at the University of Miami.

Discussing recurring scenes in romance novels popular with women in which female characters are forced to have sex, Dr. Simon once told *The Houston Chronicle* that the power of fantasy lay in the barrier between it and real life. "The kinds of things ordinary people think about while having sexual intercourse are likely to make a monkey's hair stand up straight," he said.

Among his better-known books was "Sexual Conduct," published in 1969 and written with his longtime collaborator, John H. Gagnon. It has been described as the first work to take a rigorous, procedurally sound sociological look at sex, rather than a biological or psychological one. He and Dr. Gagnon also wrote "The Sexual Scene" and "Sexual Outlaws."

Julia A. Ericksen, a sociology professor at Temple University, said the strength of Dr. Simon's work was his use of carefully weighted research into sexuality, in which he sought out random samples of people instead of relying on volunteers.

If Dr. Simon took a decidedly non-traditional approach to his field, it may have been because he arrived there by such a nontraditional route.

He was born on July 20, 1930, in New York, the son of Russian immigrants, Morris and Yetta Simon, and spent his first 10 years in the Bronx. His father, a supermarket clerk, moved the family to Detroit in 1940.



Houston Chronicle, 1986

William Simon

By the second grade, his teachers were summoning his parents to complain that the boy would not keep still, and that he persisted in questioning their authority. By age 13, according to his family, William Simon was protesting a meeting of the isolationist America First movement, catching the attention of the Independent Socialist Alliance, a Trotskyite group, for which he began organizing young workers in the automobile industry.

William dropped out of school in the eighth grade and, using false identification, took a job as an assembly-line worker. At 16, he went to West Virginia to organize mine workers, said Russell L. Curtis Jr., a colleague at the University of Houston. At 17, he married a fellow socialist, Bernice Stark; they were later divorced, and she died in 1957.

"He would simply run away," said Dr. Simon's brother Myron, an English professor at the University of

California at Irvine. "If he had five bucks, he might simply have grabbed a Greyhound and headed south." His family reacted "mostly with astonishment," Myron Simon said.

At the age of 19, while he was working as a keypunch operator, William was provisionally accepted at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor with the help of Myron, who was a student there. A year later, he ran out of money and dropped out.

He later re-entered the university, and although once again he did not graduate, he so impressed faculty members at the University of Chicago that they invited him to study sociology in the graduate program. After earning his doctorate, Dr. Simon taught at Southern Illinois University, Indiana University, at Bloomington (where he worked at the Kinsey Institute, and began his first work in sexuality) and finally, in 1975, at Houston.

In addition to Jonathan and Myron, Dr. Simon is survived by his third wife, Lynn Randolph of Houston, a painter; a son from his first marriage, Marc David Simon of El Cerrito, Calif.; a son from his second marriage (to Marlene Bragman, Jonathan's mother, from whom he was divorced), Adam Simon of Santa Monica, Calif.; two stepsons, Sean Randolph of Olympia, Wash., and Grayson Randolph of Austin, Tex.; another brother, Sidney, of Detroit; and two sisters, Barbara Hollander of Chicago and Miriam Waren of Hartford.

Friends recalled that though Dr. Simon managed to earn a doctorate without having graduated from high school or college, the omissions weighed on him a bit as he toiled on his Ph.D. thesis in Chicago. "I've got to finish this degree," Dr. Gagnon recalled his friend saying. "If I don't finish my degree, I've got no diplomas at all."