

Kinsey, truth and the rhetoric of research

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The recent film about the work of sex researcher, Alfred Kinsey, has thrown a spotlight on the ethical dimensions of such research, especially on the practice of observing sexual behaviour. It has also highlighted the rhetoric by which the research is presented. In this article, we consider the claims of the movie and what is known about Kinsey and his methods, within a broader framework of Christian responsibility to be truthful.

The debates about Alfred Kinsey have generated more heat than light. On the one hand, fringe sexual groups have hijacked Kinsey's research to advance their own agenda. On the other hand, responses from certain parts of Christianity have been reactionary to the point of hysteria.

Christians have a deep and enduring concern for truthfulness. Part of telling the truth is to represent what actually happened: a proposition is true to the extent that it coincides with reality. Another element of telling the truth is fair representation. When arguments are presented, the presenter should be honest and admit the relative strengths and weaknesses of the position. We submit that this is a subset of truth as a personal characteristic of integrity, loyalty and genuineness.

An authentically Christian apologetic should, therefore, be true in both these senses. It should state what the facts actually are, and do so in a fair, balanced manner.

The purpose of this article is to try to speak the truth about Kinsey. It will attempt to present a balanced assessment of who Kinsey really was and what he really tried to do. In the process, it will interact with emotive arguments from both sides of the debate, and explain

why it is inappropriate for Christians, who claim to worship he who is the incarnation of Truth, to engage in such emotion-laden rhetoric.

Kinsey's research method

The recent Kinsey movie was an instance of Kinsey's persona and research being used as propaganda. The movie uses narrative devices to represent Kinsey's research as being broad, detailed and representative, and Christianity to be narrow, irrational and prejudiced¹.

This is a misrepresentation of what Kinsey really did. His research method was faulty and would not be acceptable under today's standards of research and ethics. His questionnaire may have coloured the responses, his sample was not random but was always skewed in favour of the extremes, and his fundamental definition of how people understand their sexuality was flawed.

Kinsey was, fundamentally, a taxonomist. He loved collecting, analyzing and categorizing data, be it about Gall wasps or human sexuality. He had no faith in experimentation – taking a creature out of its natural habitat, and observing it in a controlled environment. Instead, Kinsey based his methodology on one premise: the direct observation of a creature in its natural habitat (Gebhard and Johnson, 1998, p.205). He was convinced that this was the one way to obtain true, reliable data.

For Kinsey, interviewing people about their sexual histories was simply another form of collecting data about creatures in their “natural habitat”. His sexual history questionnaires set out “to obtain an objectively determined body of fact about sex” with no “social or moral interpretation” (Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin, 1948, p.5). He used the questionnaire results to classify, segregate, and analyse individuals, much the same as he did with his physical measurements of Gall wasps.

The questionnaire had a set form of questions, which the interviewers had to memorise and ask the interviewees verbally in rapid sequence. Kinsey called this “rapid-fire questioning”, and submitted that it led to more truthful answers (Jones, 1997, pp.361-366). For his research team, he selected interviewers who had the same liberal sexual views as himself and were as accepting of sexual variation as he was. The team collected an impressive quantity of

¹ For further details, see our review of the movie at <http://www.sydneyanglicans.net/culture/watching/kinsey>, and Kamal Weerakoon, “More on Kinsey, the Movie” *Briefing* #318 (March 2005), p7.

data—some 18,000 interviews, 8,000 each by Kinsey and Pomeroy, and 2,000 by Clyde Martin and Paul Gebhard collectively.

Despite Kinsey's confident assertions, his methodology did not simply result in the collection of untainted data. The nature of the questionnaire itself may have skewed the results, and contributed to the furore that accompanied the publication of his research. The questionnaires asked people whether they had engaged in all manner of esoteric sexual practices, many of which the interviewee may have been unaware. They portrayed a world in which everything was acceptable, and all 'normal' individuals had a range of sexual experiences. To be fair, this was probably necessary to encourage people who had experienced these sexual behaviours to speak up. However, research is itself a form of social interaction. By presenting these sexual behaviours in the way that he did, he may have led the interviewees to answer more positively than if he had framed the questions differently. Also, he may have been seen as sanctioning them, and permitting them as acceptable behaviour.

Furthermore, there were problems with Kinsey's method of seeking out subjects to be interviewed. As a taxonomist he wanted to build a "reservoir" of data that could be used to analyse people's sexual patterns. He believed that a sufficiently large amount of data would cover all the variations possible. He therefore pursued uncommon sexualities without recognizing the distortion they bring to the data. If he wanted more information about pedophiles, he interviewed more pedophiles. If he wanted more information about homosexuals, he interviewed more homosexuals. Therefore, his results were always skewed in favour of the extremes.

Finally, Kinsey had a flawed fundamental construction of sexuality. He viewed the individual organism as a unit of analysis, each with an individual history. Sex researchers today recognise that sexuality is not an individual act but part of a relational dyad set in a cultural, social and religious framework. But Kinsey's prior commitment to the uniqueness of individuals, and his belief in the wide range of variations in any population characteristic, coloured his research methods and therefore his results.

Kinsey's results, therefore, must be treated with caution. They cannot be used to 'prove' that extreme sexual behaviour is common or 'normal'. To use Kinsey's results in this manner is to illegitimately use science as a rhetorical device to persuade people of a prior agenda. That is to say, it is not true.

Kinsey's results

Not surprisingly, more recent research, carried out under better-controlled research methods, has shown that variant sexual behaviour is much less common than Kinsey's data would make us think.

Take for example the famous (or infamous) 10% figure for homosexuals in the population. Kinsey's actual results are as follows (Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin, 1948, p.650):

- 37% of the population had some overt homosexual experience to orgasm between adolescence and old age;
- 10% of the population are more or less exclusively homosexual (5-6) for at least 3 years between ages 16-55;
- 4% are exclusively homosexual for all of their adult life.

As can be seen, the 10% figure was only one of a range of statistics, and was relevant for one particular group: people who engaged in same-sex behaviour for at least three years during their adult life. Only 4% of responses were homosexual for their entire adult life. Therefore, it is illegitimate to use the 10% figure as if Kinsey had 'proven' that 10% of the population were 'naturally' homosexual. That is simply not what Kinsey's data revealed.

Furthermore, as was noted above, Kinsey did not use a probability sampling methodology for his sampling. While these figures accurately represent his results, it is totally fallacious to generalize to the larger population. Kinsey's results are not representative. He never intended them to be.

So how much of the population really is homosexual? A survey of Pro-Gay and Anti-Gay websites (Pruitt, 2002) give percentages varying from 1-3% to 10%, the latter usually quoting Kinsey. What is not revealed is that the 10% was only one of the statistics on homosexual behaviour in Kinsey's research, as noted above. Further, in a recent computer-assisted telephone interview study completed by a representative sample of 10,173 men and 9,134 women aged 16-59 years from all States and Territories (Grulich et al, 2003), 8.6% of women and 5.9% of men reported some homosexual sexual experience in their lives ($p < 0.001$); these figures fell to 5.7% and 5.0% respectively ($p = 0.106$) when non-genital sexual experience was excluded. 1.9% of men and 1.5% of women reported homosexual experience in the past year.

As can be seen, a significant number of people report some homosexual experience sometime in their life. Recent research has shown that same-sex activity is, occasionally, part of the normal sexual experimentation that adolescents perform as they discover their

sexuality. This adolescent sexual experimental behaviour has no correlation whatsoever with continuing homosexual orientation.

Therefore, the proportion of the population who have a true, lifelong sexual orientation to the same sex is somewhere between 1% and, at the absolute maximum, 6%. Kinsey's 4% lifelong homosexual orientation sits nicely in the middle of this, but his methodology favoured extreme sexual behaviour. 1-2% seems a reasonable estimate, given current data.

Kinsey's personal sexuality

Who was Alfred Kinsey? What drove him to undertake the research that he did? Kinsey's biographer, James H. Jones, has provided us with an insight into Kinsey. What emerges is a man who himself indulged in extreme sexual behaviour.

Kinsey grew up in a time when masturbation was considered a sickness and boys were advised to have a cold shower every morning to improve their health and control their sexual urges. Kinsey continued this habit all his life (Jones, 1997, p.75). Furthermore, homosexuality was all but invisible at this time in the United States. Polite society avoided it like the plague. Despite the official silence, the public image of homosexuality was filled with opprobrium.

Masturbation did not set Kinsey apart from the boys of his generation, most of whom masturbated. What was different was the strength of his self-condemnation. Kinsey prayed, asking God to forgive him and give him the strength not to sin again. Obviously, this did not work for Kinsey and he was consumed by guilt, which affected his self worth and self esteem. The burden of guilt was probably increased by his homoerotic fantasies. Later (1950) he would write: "It is most unfortunate and one of the worst sexual crimes ever committed that this fear of masturbation should have caused so much trouble for so many people" (cited in Jones, 1997, p.75).

As he grew into adolescence his behaviour became more extreme, and by late adolescence his masochism was well advanced—inserting a toothbrush into his urethra while he masturbated. This would have been accompanied by even greater guilt (Jones, 1997, p.82). These behaviours grew more bizarre with the passing of time. Later in life he and his research team would be involved in wife swapping and homosexual activity. These activities were sometimes filmed in the attic of the Kinsey residence.

Kinsey's evangelistic zeal

Kinsey didn't only practice extreme sexual behaviour. As he became more and more popular, he used his popularity to advance his message. He didn't just collect his data, he spread his message with the evangelistic zeal of a preacher rather than a scientist (Money, 2002). He was a secular evangelist, who had weighed how society managed sexuality and found the results not just wrong, but harmful.

His message was simple—human beings are animals, therefore biology had to be reckoned with when people set sexual mores and codes of conduct. Granted, society could tell people what to do—but people paid a high price when social restrictions violated human nature. Kinsey thought it tragic that people should be condemned by social convention for engaging in behaviour that was part of their biological inheritance. To resolve this tension between social prescription and human nature, he favoured social codes that recognized biological realities. Science rather than religion should be the arbiter of sexual conduct (Jones, 1997, p.308).

Kinsey was the son of a lay preacher, but he renounced religion for science. He now saw himself as a secular priest, whose knowledge and training qualified him to offer advice, explain mysteries and grant absolution in the name of science (Jones, 1997, p.354).

Kinsey's contributions

Despite the problems with Kinsey's results, his research, and the research that followed him, has been useful in genuinely discovering how humans behave as sexual beings. His impact on the way we view sex and sex research today is far more important than any specific finding he made (Bullough, 2004).

One important area of is that of gender research. At the time of Kinsey, the dominant 'medical' view of homosexuality was based on a disease model. Under this model homosexuals were a class of people with specific characteristics. This created negative stereotypes of homosexuals. The media represented homosexuals as violent criminals, child molesters and social misfits. The public image was influenced by male prostitutes who cross-dressed and mimicked female speech and mannerisms, resulting in all homosexuals being labelled as 'effeminate'.

Kinsey was instrumental in bringing homosexuality out into the open, and provided the underpinnings for the public acceptance of its existence (Bullough, 2004). By stressing that homosexuals were (otherwise) normal human beings, he gave rise to other research that has been useful in, for example, the diagnosis and treatment of HIV and AIDS.

Similarly, at a time when women were considered asexual and second-class citizens, Kinsey encouraged more awareness and research into female sexuality. Today we are reaping the benefits of this. Research into female sexuality has opened up gender specific study in the fields of disease prevention and sexual dysfunction, as well as an awareness of female sexual and reproductive issues and rights (e.g., female genital mutilation, female infanticide, rape, abortion).

All of this insight into sexual health began because of Kinsey's research. As mentioned above, recent research has been far better controlled than Kinsey's, and has therefore generated results that are much more reliable. But Kinsey was the pioneer; he opened the field to those who have come after him.

Unfortunately, some homosexual and feminist lobbies have hijacked Kinsey's persona and research to advance their own agendas. Indeed, they have been so successful that we now have the situation where rhetoric has won out over research and it is difficult to express certain views concerning sexual behaviour and its consequences. In this difficult and unfair intellectual climate, Christians should continue calmly to assert their confidence in the biblical teaching that active homosexuality is incompatible with profession of Jesus Christ as Lord. But this ought not to downplay or dismiss the benefits of sexual research and education in helping people to live more whole, contented, healthy lives.

An extreme Christian response

From the other end of the debate, some Christian apologists have engaged in argumentative methodologies that are equally inappropriate and, quite frankly, untrue. In her books and writings, Judith Reisman (Reisman and Eichel, 1990), gives the impression that all the sexual concerns of today are entirely the creation of Kinsey. Rather than state facts, these articles are full of "what if" questions such as:

- What if the work were fraudulent or worse?
- What if it reflects unscientific experimentation?
- What if Kinsey's team participated in experimenting on children?
- If Nazis could have performed unethical experiments with children, what could Kinsey have done?

As part of her campaign against Kinsey, Reisman launched a major lawsuit against the Kinsey Institute (which she lost) and still denounces many of the major sex researchers of today. She

also denounces all sex education, stating that, “The control of sexuality education has for too long been in the hands of the Kinsey unethical scientists, men without conscience or honour, who have fathered a bastard sexual revolution” (Reisman, website).

One of the most controversial aspects of Kinsey’s work is the data on child-adult sexual contact (often quoted as “table 34”), where he argues that very young children are capable of orgasms (Kinsey, Pomoroy and Martin, 1948, p. 180). In the female volume, he argues that the child-adult contact is not nearly as harmful as the shame induced in the girls when the event is found out (Ericksen, 2000).

There is no evidence that Kinsey encouraged pedophilia. He collected the responses from pedophiles, most of whom were already in prison for their crimes. There were nine men who gave data on child sexual arousal (Pool, 1996). Nowhere in Kinsey’s book, or in any other available evidence, is there any record of the Kinsey institute being involved in training observers or direct involvement in child sex experimentation. Table 34 was probably based on information from one prison inmate (Pool, 1996).

Furthermore, the Kinsey Institute, with Kinsey as its founder and director, had a large staff, and was visited daily by people from all over America and overseas. No one has ever mentioned anything about any laboratories or any form of training or experimentation.

The limitations of Kinsey’s research have been noted above. To go beyond these limitations, and use emotive arguments is, we submit, untrue in two senses. It is untrue in that there is no evidence that the accusations correspond with reality. Secondly, it is untrue in that it is an illegitimate, inappropriately emotive, argumentative technique.

Conclusion: an authentically Christian response

An authentic Christian apologetic is neither a sycophantic pandering to prevailing fads, nor a hysterical reassertion of conservative opinions. Nor is it a middle road between the two—that would be hysterical sycophantry! An authentic Christian apologetic is true—true in its content, and true in its argumentative methodology.

This article has attempted to set out briefly the truth about Kinsey and his research. We have canvassed his research method, his results and his known personal motivations. The truth is we do not have to invent accusations of pedophilia to tar Kinsey’s name. He was himself into extreme sexual behaviour, he advocated the acceptance of extreme sexual behaviour under the term ‘individual variations’, and actively sought subjects for research into extreme sexual behaviour. Truth spoken in love will produce its own convictions.

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