



# Kinsey & Heteronormativity

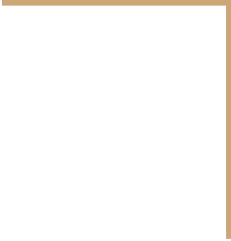


# Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956)


- Kinsey was a respected American biologist at Indiana University, most well known for his studies of wasps
- Studying sex was not common or accepted in the field of biology; it was considered the job of physicians
- When Kinsey decided to study sex, he was able to secure a research grant in part because he was already well-established in the scientific community, but also because he was seen as a morally viable researcher, given he was a white man who had a wife, children and conformed with societal norms



Image Credit: Kinsey Institute



When Kinsey decided to begin an interview-based study on adult human sexuality, he came to it from the perspective of his zoology background, looking to objectively classify and describe human sexual behavior instead of making moral judgements. How do you think this way of thinking shaped his approach? In what ways would it be valuable to the study? In what ways could it be damaging?



18,000

People interviewed by Kinsey's team

8,000

People interviewed by Kinsey himself

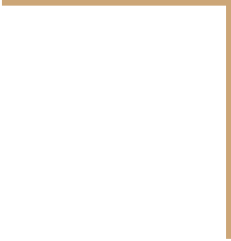
# Who They Interviewed & What They Asked

## **Kinsey's interviewees were:**


- Mostly white
- Mostly college educated
- Mostly Indiana residents
- Volunteers to the project
- Not a probability sample of today's statistics standards (using random selection so that every individual in the studied population has an equal chance of being chosen)

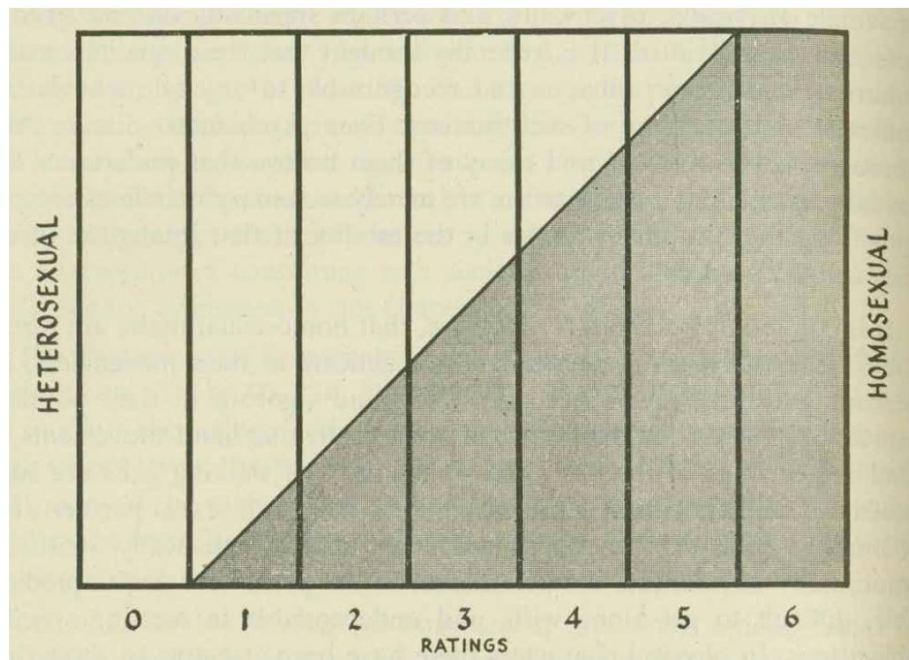
## **Kinsey and his assistants asked them:**

- Background and demographic information
- General and sexual health data
- Sexual histories and practices
- Cross-checking questions to see if they lied
- All very quantitative and specific questions that were then anonymously recorded and coded in a system only Kinsey and his assistants knew



When Kinsey published his studies in two books, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), he received criticism for his sampling and methodology. Why do you think that is? What strengths or weaknesses do you see with Kinsey's sampling and methodology?





**Rating | Description**

- 0** | Exclusively heterosexual
- 1** | Predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual
- 2** | Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual
- 3** | Equally heterosexual and homosexual
- 4** | Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual
- 5** | Predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual
- 6** | Exclusively homosexual
- X** | No socio-sexual contacts or reactions

**The Kinsey Scale** (Image Credit: The Kinsey Institute)

Kinsey didn't trust people's self-identifications of "heterosexual" or "homosexual" so he created a 7-point scale in which he sorted people based on their sexual history. What do you think of the Kinsey Scale and this practice? What are its strengths and limits?



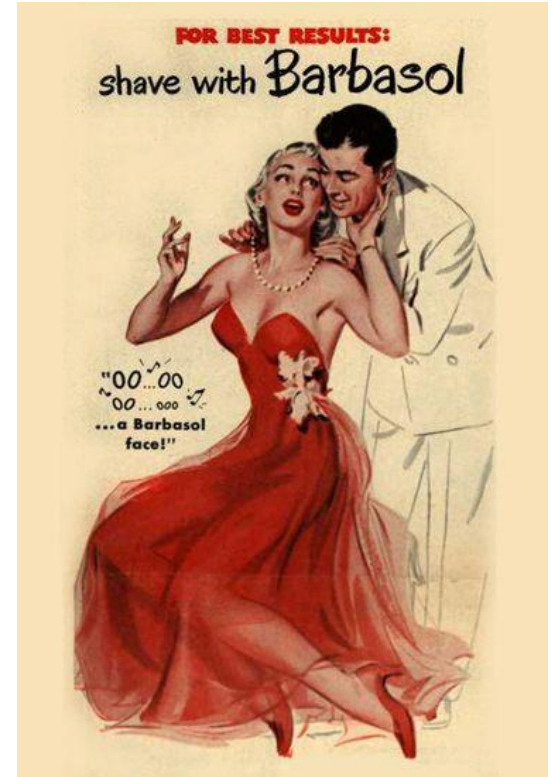
# What They Reported

- Women were not the asexual beings they were often portrayed as and had plenty of pleasurable sexual experiences and desires
- Homosexual experiences were fairly common: 37% of male interviewees and 13% of female interviewees had had one
- 4% of male interviewees and 1-3% of female interviewees had been exclusively homosexual since adolescence
- Many people had had a mix of homosexual and heterosexual experiences
  
- Considering Kinsey's sampling methods, it's unlikely that these statistics can speak for more than the interviewed population of that time period, but the impact of these reports was internationally significant.
- Fun Fact: A popular misreading of Kinsey's findings is that 10% of people are gay. This rumor originated from their report that 10% of male interviewees had had predominantly homosexual experiences " for at least three years between the ages of 16 and 55"

# The Context of Kinsey

Think about the late 1940s and early 1950s, when Kinsey published his reports. What sort of important events were occurring in the U.S. and in the world? How might they affect Kinsey's work and its public reception?

- *Examples:* Cold War tensions and McCarthyism (including the Lavender Scare- LGBTQ Americans are seen as Communists and a threat to national security)
- Cult of Domesticity- focus on nuclear family and suburban living post- WWII (often limited to white families) in the media
- Beginning of Civil Rights Movement



Shaving Cream Ad (1950)  
Image Credit: Pinterest

# How People Reacted

- Almost 1 million copies sold of the reports combined
- Translated into 13 languages
- In general, people were shocked by the reports- firstly because sex had not been studied in this way before and secondly because the findings contradicted popular understandings of sexuality
- The table on the right shows an analysis of published reactions (from 1948 to 1952) to the *Sexual Behavior of the Human Male* (1948)- Do these reactions surprise you? Who do you think supported versus opposed the reports?

TABLE 1. ATTITUDES TOWARD THE KINSEY REPORT IN THE PUBLISHED REACTIONS ANALYSED IN THIS ARTICLE

REACTION	NUMBER	PERCENT
Completely Favorable . . . . .	48	38.7
Mostly Favorable . . . . .	31	25.0
Neutral . . . . .	6	4.9
Mostly Unfavorable . . . . .	21	16.9
Completely Unfavorable . . . . .	18	14.5
<b>Total . . . . .</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table Source: Palmore (1952)

# Kinsey's Legacy

- Have you heard the term “heteronormative?”  
What does it mean?
  - Presenting heterosexuality as the only “normal” or “natural” form of sexuality
- What are examples of perceptible heteronormative practices in our society?
- What are the consequences of a heteronormative society?
- How do you think the idea of heteronormativity relates to Kinsey's work?
- What are alternative approaches to heteronormativity?



Image Credit: Tumblr

52%

of teens identified in ways other than “exclusively heterosexual” in 2016, making a presumption of young people’s heterosexuality likely inaccurate

# Sources

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