

Kinsey tips the scales



THE KINSEY INSTITUTE
Photo by sean McLennan

By Sean McLennan

A beautiful, unassuming, turn-of-the-century building surrounded by blossoming trees on the Indiana University campus houses the world's largest collection of porn. Well, not *just* porn—it's the largest collection of sex-related academic and, *ahem*, recreational materials: The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Founded in 1947 by Alfred Kinsey, the Kinsey Institute remains the leading centre for the study of human

sexual behaviour and it has always been an extremely strong supporter and validator of the GLBT community.

Alfred Kinsey, himself, was a zoologist researching insect reproduction. But, in 1937, he was asked by the university to conduct a course for students who were married or contemplating getting married. In preparing for this course, he was unable to find much information about human sexuality, and what he did find was heavily value-laden and unscientific. In response to his

students' curiosity (as well as his own—Kinsey was apparently bisexual) he began his research. Eventually, he and his associates acquired more than 18,000 personal sexual histories, all obtained through anonymous, rigorous, face-to-face interviews.

Establishing the institute in the Bible Belt in the '40s was risky business, and it wouldn't have occurred at all if it was not for the support of Herman B. Wells. Wells was Indiana University's Chancellor and refused to bow to public opinion, which deemed the goals of the Institute immoral.

As it was, the Kinsey Institute had to be incorporated as a private organization in order to protect Indiana University, the individuals involved in the institute and the confidentiality of their research. A well-respected mid-western hero, Wells died just last year at the age of ninety-seven. In hindsight, it also seems probable that he was gay.


In 1948, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* was published, accompanied five years later by its companion, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Despite the controversy that erupted around these two volumes, they remain seminal works in human sexuality and brought the Kinsey Institute the respect, fame, infamy and revulsion that it still "enjoys" today. (Even now, the Kinsey Institute must fight yearly against conservative, right-wing movements that are trying to cut off its public funding and shut it down.)

Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male/Female have had a profound and lasting effect on the GLBT community, for they represent the first unbiased documentation of homosexuality in a prominent academic venue. Over the years, the Kinsey Institute has done much

to validate homosexuality in the eyes of the primarily straight public through its devotion to scientific inquiry. For example, Kinsey always maintained that human sexuality is not black and white, either in the population as a whole or in individuals. Thus, he developed the now-famous 7-point scale (0 = exclusively heterosexual; 6 = exclusively homosexual) to gauge sexual attraction, sexual experience and romantic attraction. Moreover, he always emphasized that you could not classify an individual as "heterosexual" or "homosexual"; only their behavior at a given time could be gauged, since ratings on the scale often change over the course of a lifetime.

The Kinsey Institute is also the source of many useful bits of gay trivia: one study validated the widely held belief that those with the most violently homophobic attitudes are those that show strong homosexual tendencies; another showed that, on average, gay males have larger penises than straight males (woo-hoo!). By far the most widely known Kinsey statistic however is "ten percent"—the supposed

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proportion of the male population that is gay. Of course, the actual context in which these statistics are presented is rarely repeated by word-of-mouth. So, for the record, this is what Kinsey says:

Instances of at least one same-sex experience to orgasm: 37% of males, 13% of females, (p. 650, Male; p. 475, Female)

Males:

10% of males in the sample were predominantly homosexual between the ages of sixteen and fifty-five

8% of males were exclusively homosexual for at least three years between the ages of sixteen and fifty-five. (p. 651, Male)

4% of white males had been exclusively homosexual after the onset of adolescence up to the time of their interviews, (p. 651, Male).

Females:

2 to 6% of females, aged twenty to thirty-five, were more or less exclusively homosexual in experience/response, (p. 488, Female)

1 to 3% of unmarried females aged twenty to thirty-five were exclusively homosexual in experience/response, (Table 142, p. 499, and p. 474, Female).

This context is of utmost importance. The "ten percent" statistic has come under fire in the media, particularly by the Religious Right (surprise, surprise) who cite a number of studies that claim the proportion is much, *much* lower. They also complain that Kinsey's statistics are biased by a huge proportion of criminals and sex offenders in his study.

These criticisms are laughable on a number of grounds. For instance, the percentages cited are not measuring the same phenomenon; they usually measure *exclusive* homosexuality, which, as is noted above, is far rarer than *predominant* homosexuality. And although it is true that Kinsey's histories include a very large number of convicts from a local prison (since he found it easy to gain their cooperation), critics fail to realize that those histories can, and have been, excluded from analysis. They were ultimately included because there was not a significant difference in the populations—nor within any other represented demographic group, for that matter.

Kinsey's subject group has also been criticized for not being a random, representative sample of the population, which to some degree is a valid complaint; other studies are more rigorous in their sampling procedure. However, size helps compensate for this—Kinsey's sample is still on the order of three times as large as any subsequent studies. Also, these other

cited reports, being nation-wide, are not personally conducted interviews. Obtaining truthful reports of sexual activity in such studies is not only of the utmost importance, but extremely difficult given the social stigmas attached to sexuality. Kinsey's self-developed interview procedure was designed specifically with this in mind and has been remarkably successful. It includes an absolute guarantee of anonymity—the questionnaire had to be completely memorized by the interviewer, and responses were recorded only as patterns of filled-in squares on an otherwise unmarked piece of paper. That way, even if the paper was seen by data entry staff or an illicit onlooker, it would be completely meaningless. Questions were short-answer, unpredictable and rapid-fire, and the interviewer was always able to maintain eye-contact. This approach dramatically increases the likelihood of receiving frank, honest answers. Other data collection methods are much more susceptible to fabrication and, consequently, inaccuracy. So, despite the criticisms, Kinsey's statistics remain the most conclusive available.

The "ten percent" has received so much attention largely because of its significance. In biology and psychology, there are heuristics by which traits are deemed to have a biological basis, the most important of which are: "Is the trait exhibited early developmentally?" and "Is the trait universal?". Certainly, it is clear that homosexuality *can be* exhibited early—it seems that around half of us know we were "different" from young adolescence. And although homosexuality isn't universal—not everyone is gay (tragically!)—it is universally exhibited

across demographic groups. That is, no matter the culture, no matter the time period, ethnic background, profession or social standing, homosexuality has been reported. Moreover, within at least the demographic groups represented in Kinsey's study, the proportions don't vary significantly. All this suggests a biological origin of homosexuality (as opposed to culture, upbringing or a "lifestyle choice"). Even the *Bible* supports this. Most people, concerned with the interpretation of the Bible completely miss that the fact that homosexuality even being mentioned indicates it's been around at least as long.

As a scientist, I find this discussion of "ten percent" and the biology of homosexuality interesting. As a gay man, all it does for me is give me an idea of what the odds are that the cute waiter who served me last night *might* call, had I left him my number. Maybe not even that, since my estimations are usually severely biased by wishful thinking! My gut feeling as a gay man, is *who cares?* (It's straight people, usually.) Demonstrating that homosexuality is biological—or not biological—or finding the exact proportion of fags in the population seems a concern of the portion of the straight community who aren't willing to accept us, or worse, want to "help" us. So, while I have the utmost respect for the pursuit of scientific knowledge, I don't feel that this line of research has much to offer us internally as a community. Does our sense of pride stem from knowing that we represent ten percent of the population? No. Are we more cohesive because we know that one in ten people we see on the street is like us? No. Does "ten percent" mean that we are more or less deserving of respect and the rights


that are afforded every other citizen of our country? *No!*

Whether we constitute 100, ten or point-zero-one percent of the population, we are who we are and the fact that we have come to grips with our identity in a society that persists in ridiculing and discriminating against us should be an enormous source of individual and community pride. Statistics be damned—happy Pride!

Sean McLennan has a degree in Linguistics from the University of Calgary and he's currently working towards a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science at Indiana University. In between research, classes and teaching, he does web-design, writes for a Japanese English-learning magazine, and is active in a local GLBT education group.

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