

Sex Surveyed, 1949–1994

From Mass-Observation's
'Little Kinsey' to the National
Survey and the Hite Reports

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Theorizing While Appearing Not To? Ideas and the British Sex Survey

In looking at the research context of which 'Little Kinsey' was a part, I have concentrated on discussing the British tradition of large-scale random sample-based surveys of sexual attitudes and sexual behaviours conducted in the period after 'Little Kinsey' was carried out. However, these surveys were by no means the only public pronouncements of 'the facts' about sex through this period.¹ From the 1940s on, Royal Commissions, popular textbooks, newspaper, magazine and radio discussions, have dealt with sex education, the birth-rate, venereal disease, promiscuity, adultery, teenage sexuality, women's sexual 'problems', and more.² In addition, a wide range of other kinds of research-based investigations of sexual conduct have been carried out, smaller-scale studies including ethnographic research on sex and social structure, laboratory investigations of physiological 'sexual response', and, latterly, interview studies of sexual beliefs and practices. Also, a very large number of 'popular' surveys have been sponsored and published by newspapers and magazines and a smaller number of academic surveys of particular sub-sections of the population have been carried out. Thus, the random sample survey tradition discussed here represents only one, albeit important, strand within a wider, immensely complex and often contradictory public discourse about 'the sexual' in all its aspects.

Like Kinsey, and also like Mass-Observation's 'Little Kinsey', the British sex surveys that I have discussed are apparently entirely empirical and descriptive in approach, but they actually articulate a coherent set of ideas about sexuality and its relationship to other aspects of social life. It is these ideas, which link together to provide a framework of understanding, that I now discuss. There are, as I have already noted, differences of approach and emphasis between these surveys. Nonetheless, their ideas content shares a number of distinctive features, and these bring them considerably closer to the views and understandings of the people who were the objects of these researches than the authors would have been eager to recognize. In particular, and with the apparent exception of the National Survey, such surveys operate in a context characterized by the taken-for-grantedness of what 'sex'

is: everyone is assumed to know and agree about the 'what', 'when' and 'who' of sex, to the extent that the basic behaviours with which these surveys are concerned are not looked at in any detail. The gloss of 'sex' as 'intercourse' is more often than not used as though there can be no variant behaviour involved beneath this visible and easily investigated tip. This is linked to the additional assumption that 'what people do' is governed, indeed determined, by 'the natural', by some kind of innate biological urge or imperative that is universally experienced and enacted. However, it is clear from the various 'problems' discussed by these studies that what was considered to be 'natural' underwent some fairly wide-reaching changes over the half-century between the 1940s and the 1990s, and also that such changes impinged considerably on the research carried out.

Thus, Slater and Woodside note that younger women compared with older women not only expected more of marriage but tended to relate marital problems to difficult material circumstances; and they also note that the women interviewed frequently had no idea of what was meant by 'an orgasm', and were perhaps equally uncomprehending of some of the other terms used. Similarly, while Eustace Chesser fails to look in any detail at what 'intercourse' and 'petting' consist of, his research does pinpoint the changes that had occurred regarding women's increased sexual experience both before and outside marriage. Michael Schofield's investigation of young people's sexual behaviour begins to deconstruct the monolith of 'sex', looking at a range of constituent behaviours, but many of which are then relegated to the glossing term 'petting' and thereby treated as different from 'real' sex. Here, of course, Schofield adopts a commonsensical viewpoint, although his purpose was neither to analyse commonsensical constructions of what 'sex' is, nor to discuss the different constructions of it held by men and women that Slater and Woodside's research hints at and on which Geoffrey Gorer's work centres. For Gorer, the existence of a 'sexual double standard' constitutes the major way of understanding sexual behaviour, with women seen as having different understandings and different behavioural practices from men. There are similarities here with Chesser's research, which at a number of points implies both that women's orgasmic functioning and sexual desire is different from men's, and also that it thereby constitutes a 'difficulty' that needs to be 'overcome'. The National Survey certainly asked people about a wide variety of behaviours, the vaginal, oral and anal and 'other genital forms of sex', but it still fails to enquire in detail about people's sexual behaviour. For instance, it contains no information on how such genital sexual behaviour interlinks with other erotic and sexual but non-genital behaviour, nor does it investigate whether and in what ways these 'patterns' might differ with a change of partners, or on different occasions. Even at the level of describing the behavioural this research is highly limited, while, as I have already noted, it excludes meaning altogether and eschews analysis except at the most basic of levels.

Behind this general shared taken-for-grantedness about what 'sex' is and how its constituent behaviours articulate, lies the even more fundamental assumption of heterosexuality as axiomatically 'the norm', as 'what is natural' in sexual terms because seen as entirely innate. In Slater and Woodside's and Chesser's research there is no mention of any homosexual behaviour or partners at all, and while Schofield notes that a significant proportion of both boys and girls knew others involved in homosexual sexual experiences, with a smaller group being so involved themselves, this is not explored in his research, which focuses instead on 'sex' – that is, heterosex. Gorer's *Exploring English Character* notes that most of those people who were 'not interested in sex' were actually homosexually involved (and thus were 'interested in sex', although not of a heterosexual kind), although the later *Sex and Marriage* completely ignores the existence of homosexual behaviour and the overlapping of homosexual and heterosexual experiences and feelings in a large number of people's lives. Only the National Survey does not proceed from the assumption that the 'sex' that is being inquired about is necessarily heterosexual. However, it too ends by relegating everything else to an implicit 'and also' status through its concern with fixing people to 'lifestyles' that are conceived as heterosexual or, for a tiny minority, gay male, with lesbian 'lifestyles' being too numerically insignificant even to be discussed.³

The taken-for-grantedness of (heterosexual) sex links to a further related assumption, that of the synonymy of heterosexuality and specifically penetrational forms of sex. Thus Slater and Woodside are concerned almost exclusively with 'intercourse', looking at modes of its 'performance' on a weekly basis and people's assumption of a norm in its performance and their own claimed adherence to such a norm. Similarly, Chesser discusses mainly intercourse within marriage; and although women's perception of the absence or insufficiency of 'petting' behaviours – that is, non-penetrational forms of love-making – provides one of the key reasons they give for sexual dissatisfaction, this is ignored by him. In some contrast and perhaps because he was concerned particularly with teenagers, Schofield does note the different behaviours and stages of 'petting' activities, but then still conceptualizes these as falling short of 'sex', that is, penetration. Gorer construes the point at which people first 'had sex' as synonymous with first having intercourse, while his discussion of 'rates in intercourse' is precisely that, not rates of sexual behaviour as such but instead rates of penetration.⁴ Again, the National Survey asks about a wider range of activities – vaginal, oral and anal sex and other genital contact – although as noted above it still remains concerned with what is 'high risk', the specifically genital rather than 'sexual experience' or 'sexual contact' defined more widely.

These ideas and assumptions collectively add up to variations on a 'drive reduction' approach,⁵ one in which 'sex' (that is, that unspecified behaviour that is actually implicitly heterosexual and penetrational) constitutes a basic need or drive that requires a regular outlet of the right kind. Slater and Woodside, for example, postulate sexual attraction in terms of a kind of low-key fetishism and associate it with repressed emotions within the

unconscious, while Chesser proposes that women's lack of orgasm and the refusal of sex leads to emotional and other stresses. Schofield's research is concerned with people younger than the age at which long-term partnerships have been formed, and is more concerned with the deleterious effects of regular sexual *activity* than of abstinence, and it also sees teenage sexual activity – the 'early starters' – as somehow odd or deviant. Gorer's work explores evidence for the commonly-held view that neuroticism is the outcome of withdrawal as a form of contraception, but with palpable reluctance has to conclude that correlations of neuroticism against different forms of birth control lend no support for this view. Only the National Survey avoids a 'drive reduction' approach, although this seems due as much to the absence of a discernible interpretational stance as to any principled rejection of such ideas, for its claimed social constructionism is barely noticeable within the text of its books and articles.

Conventional understandings of sexual behaviour within heterosexual relationships are typically predicated upon the assumption of a 'natural' sexual division of labour that assigns different 'roles' in sexual encounters between men and women, a division that can be summarized in stereotypical ideas about male sexual 'activity' and female 'passivity'. Related to this is the accompanying supposition that the different sexual responses of men and women to penetrational sex are the product of constitutional differences.⁶ In this regard, Slater and Woodside propose that women are less successful in their adaptation to 'sex' than men, evidenced in their lower rates of orgasm and their generally greater levels of dissatisfaction with sex in marriage; and here Slater and Woodside apparently discern some common unchanging 'it' that both men and women experience (or ought to), which is somehow independent of the particular relationship and the particular ways that each couple do 'it' together. Chesser proposes something very similar, seeing any orgasmic failure in women as the product of changing physiological capacity rather than of the specificities of their experience of love-making or of their partners' sexual in/abilities and concerns. Similarly, Schofield's research notes a number of differences between the sexes: that the sexually active girls most often are so within the context of a sustained relationship, while the sexually active boys are more likely to be involved in a variety of casual relationships; and that more girls than boys do not enjoy their first or even repeated sexual experiences. Gorer's research centres a 'sexual double standard', seeing women as different in sexual behaviour and even more so in attitude from men, and thereby of course treating them as different from an assumed norm that is actually set by *male* behaviour and *male* attitude. Again, the National Survey takes a different approach to sexual divisions of labour, in the sense of asking respondents both 'what they did' and also 'what partners did to them'. But by failing to situate genital and penetrative behaviours in a more general context of sexual conduct, the actually fully reciprocal nature of many heterosexual sexual practices is glossed over by behavioural terms that, by definition, are associated with a division of labour that conventionally

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assigns 'passivity' to women and 'activity' to men, and this is particularly so regarding penetrational activities.

These different surveys refer to changes in expectations concerning sexual behaviour and sexual pleasure occurring over time. The most obvious example is Chesser's discussion of changes across different age cohorts, although Schofield's research is premised on exploring the apparently different behaviour of young people in the 1960s as compared with earlier generations, while Gorer's work notes the increase in the numbers of women thinking that sex is important when evaluating their marital happiness. However, and with the partial exception of Chesser's work, all of these surveys – including, astonishingly, the National Survey, with its central concern with sexual change, transmission and control – *assume* rather than investigate change over time. The surveys see sexual change starting from relatively repressed and anti-pleasure ideas about sex in a relatively 'safe' context, and moving in the direction of more liberated and pleasure-based views, but in a relatively 'unsafe' context either morally or with regard to health or both. However, in spite of their 'eye on the times' stance, the major change that occurred in sexual attitudes and sexual behaviour over the time-period of these surveys is hardly recognized by them.

This is the change that 'Little Kinsey' and also Mass-Observation's earlier work on the birth-rate had both centred: the changes to women's sexual expectations and women's sexual behaviours. The earlier surveys all contain either ignored or under-theorized findings in this regard, while the National Survey excludes such information altogether. Thus, Slater and Woodside comment on women's unfamiliarity with the word 'orgasm', but do not seriously consider the possibility that beyond the unfamiliarity with the word might be an unfamiliarity with the experience nor relate this to women's lesser satisfaction with their marriages than men. Chesser notes the general problem of researchers using terms and words to investigate sexual behaviour that people may not understand or be alienated by, but does not link this with women's incomprehension or in/experience of orgasm. Schofield's research is aware that more girls than boys express disappointment and lack of pleasure regarding their initial and indeed subsequent sexual encounters, but neither discusses this nor relates it to other research (e.g. by Kinsey or by Masters and Johnson), which had already problematized the penetrational model of heterosexual stereotype. Gorer's work brings together many of these themes, noting women's 'difference' from men in their sexual behaviour and even more their sexual attitudes, their lesser emphasis on the importance of sexual enjoyment, and their considerably lesser experience of orgasm in sexual relationships. However, Gorer assumes a norm constituted by male experiences and practices to which women had not yet attained, and ignores any consideration of the behavioural and interactional dynamics involved, the meanings and feelings that people bring to and invest in the sexual behaviours they do and do not do.

These related ideas and themes provide the implicit theory of the British sex surveys and it almost exactly replicates publicly articulated assumptions and stereotypes. What is surprising is the extent of this overlap between the 'scientific' and the 'commonsense', the almost complete failure in these researches to subject to detailed investigation precisely what 'sex' consists of. It is this failure to research what people were/are doing and not doing and the meanings that this had/have for them that prevents these surveys from coming to grips with social and sexual change. This concern with change and how best, methodologically and substantively, to explore, describe and explain it, is a topic to which I return in Section Three in the context of my discussion of Shere Hite's research. 'Little Kinsey' too fails to problematise 'sex'; nonetheless it does highlight in interesting ways Mass-Observation's more general, and by 1949 long-standing, perception of a change in women's attitudes and behaviours, a change that encompassed the expectations that women had about their lives, their marriages and children, and of the part to be played by sex and sexual pleasure within this. In this sense 'Little Kinsey' centres social change and the part played by women's changing ideas about sex. The full text of 'Little Kinsey' follows in Section Two. Like the other sex surveys discussed here, it provides its readers with a framework of ideas concerning sexual conduct, and, by locating its findings within this framework, it provides an implicit but still highly theorised account of sexual behaviour and attitude. In Section Three I discuss its theorization of the sexual in the context of its distinctive methodological approach, for 'Little Kinsey's' use of 'the survey' form is very different from the sex surveys which followed it. As Section Three argues, the closest comparison is not in fact between 'Little Kinsey' and these mainstream sex surveys, but rather between 'Little Kinsey' and the feminist sex surveys carried out by Shere Hite from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Notes

- 1 For feminist work offering rather different overviews of a wide range of popular pronouncements, see Lesley Hall (1991) *Hidden Anxieties* and Margaret Jackson (1994) *The Real Facts of Life*.
- 2 Useful although very different overviews of this wider discourse are to be found in Frank Mort (1987) *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England Since 1830*; and Sheila Jeffreys (1985) *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880–1930*, and (1990) *Anticlimax: A feminist perspective on the sexual revolution*. See also Jeffrey Weeks (1981/1989) *Sex, Politics and Society* and Lesley Hall (1991) *Hidden Anxieties*. The right to name 'what was going on' with regard to sex and sexuality has become hotly contested and highly politicized territory within contemporary academic writing, as witnessed by the enormous interpretational, and sometimes 'factual', differences between these accounts, and particularly between those of Jeffreys and Weeks.
- 3 In the two books, the text continually slides from 'homosexuality' to 'gay men', with the authors apparently not even noting that they do this.

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- 4 Although it is at least likely that the respondents themselves were replying in terms of a more complex sexual repertoire than the researchers were inquiring about.
- 5 The classic critique of 'drive reductionist' ways of thinking and presentation of an interactionist alternative is John Gagnon and William Simon's (1973) highly-influential *Sexual Conduct*.
- 6 As I have noted, it is a version of this that leads the National Survey researchers to define the vagina as women's 'sexual organs'.