



Kinsey and Male Homosexuality in the African-American Population: A Question of Fit

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Kinsey's work seemed to have its most clear influence on our research when we sought funding in the mid-1980s for a national anonymous questionnaire study of the epidemiology of HIV in African-American gay men. Kinsey's work became our ally in convincing a review panel of the National Institute of Mental Health that there existed a population of homosexual African-American men large enough to worry about in the coming epidemic of AIDS/HIV. We received over 850 completed questionnaires.

However, even before that, Kinsey's work had its influence. One of us (Susan Cochran) came into graduate school in the mid-1970s already assisting in research on lesbian relationships, in part because Kinsey's work and that of other pioneers had given the blessing of academic legitimacy

to research on gay and lesbian topics. Before HIV/AIDS, doing research on gay and lesbian topics was nearly the equivalent of academic suicide. But Kinsey's respected standing among scholars sheltered the few hardy souls who ventured to explore the area.

When we wrote that first grant application in the 1980s, we needed a scholarly foundation for our study and found it in Kinsey. To justify our sampling plan and research design, we turned to Kinsey's work for an estimate of the number of 'homosexual men' we might be likely to find. While we used his estimate of 10 percent, we qualified it by saying that in the African-American community the manifestation and hence the number of homosexual-identified men may differ from those of whites. We elaborated a set of factors that we thought might result in fewer openly male homosexuals in the African-American community, namely the fundamentalist religious proscriptions against homosexuality, the identification of homosexuality as a white phenomenon, and the relative lack of economic entitlements that are necessary for leading an openly gay life (Mays et al., 1998). So Kinsey's work was present in our early framing of the number of male homosexuals in the African-American community nationally, but understandably it was only a very important starting point. Kinsey, at the time, was the gold standard in developing sampling plans for gay populations. Nowadays, we and others have built upon and modified the crucial foundations he laid.

In 1988 we published a paper entitled, 'Epidemiologic and Socio-cultural Factors in the Transmission of HIV Infection in Black Gay and Bisexual Men' (Cochran and Mays, 1988). In writing that paper we delved a bit further into the Kinsey data and that of other pioneers such as Bell and Weinberg (1978) who follow in the Kinsey tradition. The sense of lack of fit of Kinsey's definition of homosexuality was disquieting, if one took it as an immutable standard. In this paper we talked of three possible groups of homosexual African-Americans: the *Black* gay man for whom the commitment to and manifestation of his ethnicity was most important, the *Gay* Black man for whom his homosexuality was foremost, and finally a growing community of *Black Gay* men for whom both their ethnicity and homosexuality were equally as important in how they choose their friends and organized their lives (see also Peplau et al., 1997). In other words, we addressed the synergy of ethnicity and sexuality in forming an identity as a homosexual or gay male in the African-American community.

Kinsey's continuum did not and still does not seem to fit with the realities of what it means to be African-American and gay, or even Black and homosexually active in the US. But it is important to remember, always, that Kinsey was a pioneer; he did not lead us to all the answers, he only broke the trail. Without Kinsey's landmark study and the work of other pioneers, it is hard to imagine what starting points researchers like

ourselves would have used and how much success we all would have enjoyed in the academy.

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