refuted. At the same time many gay/lesbian figures are reluctant to speak of universal homoeroticism, whether in terms of Freud’s ‘polymorphous perversity’ or Kinsey’s sexual continuum. (I recall being interviewed on one gay radio program in the US where the interviewer told me that to argue for sexual fluidity was to play into the hands of our enemies because it also implied universal heterosexuality.) Doesn’t the current popularity of biological determination represent a repudiation of much of Kinsey’s discoveries – or do we assume a gene which can come in seven variations?

Thus if Kinsey were around today I would ask him two questions, which might reflect my own outsider’s take on the US. The first would be how he explains the deep desire of so many people to believe, along with Simon LeVay, that our sexual desires in the end are biologically wired. And the second (or is this too frivolous?) would be whether he would still want to work in a research centre located in one of the few states which voted Republican in the past two US Presidential elections.

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**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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References

Kinsey’s Unspoken Truths: On How the Kinsey Reports Were Received in West Germany

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The Kinsey reports began to attract public attention only after the second volume, on the human female, had appeared. This was soon translated into German (in 1954) and its success encouraged the publisher to bring out the report on men as well (in 1955). Far more copies of the book on female sexuality were sold, more than twice as many as on the human male.

The scientists’ reactions to the appearance of the reports were heated and contentious. Among the supporters and opponents the most important were the psychologist and psychoanalyst Wolfgang Hochheimer and the sociologist Helmut Schelsky. They highlight the way liberal and conservative thinkers in Germany responded to Kinsey’s work.

In a careful and detailed essay published in a psychoanalytic (!) journal, Hochheimer (1986b [1954]) described the design and results of both