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Taboo Sex Research: Thinking Outside the Box

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**Abstract:**

Foreword to a collection of essays on Censoring Sex Research, reviewing recent history of sex research censorship.

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## *Foreword*

# TABOO SEX RESEARCH: THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

DANIEL C. TSANG

The essays in this important book challenge readers to think outside the box. Instead of viewing all sex across the age of consent as abuse, the authors address this topic without prejudgment. Thinking outside the box may be a tall order, and I leave it up to you as to whether the book succeeds in challenging prevailing norms of sex research and helps change any minds.

### MYTH OF PURE SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Ideally scientific research is done objectively, without politics or politicians intervening, but in the real world, all sorts of complications arise—the more so in such a taboo area such as this. Thus “pure” scientific research is still a sometimes unachievable goal.

As I write, the US Congress has recently passed, and the president has signed, legislation banning National Science Foundation funding of political science—unless the proposed research relates to national security or is of economic interest to the United States (Nelson, 2013). Thus even mainstream disciplines—let alone sexual science—can be arbitrarily subjected to the constraints of the political process. This follows an earlier attempt, most notably in 2011, by a Republican from California, Darryl Issa, to bar funding of specific sex-related research by the National Institutes of Health. (See the anti-censorship Coalition to Promote Research website: <http://www.cossa.org/CPR/cpr.html>). Earlier Congress also moved to condemn a scholarly article by Bruce Rind and his cowriters (addressed elsewhere in this volume).

In contemporary Western societies, the drive to “protect” children has meant that any taboo sex across the age of consent means automatic criminalization of that behavior and the attendant categorization of the adults as “sexual predators” and the minors as “victims.” The adults are further assumed to be “pedophiles” (thus conflating pedophilia—sexual attraction to preadolescents—with hebephilia—attraction to adolescents), and all minors are assumed to be “children,” without any agency. Of course, if America is really interested in helping children and truly protecting them, Congress would not cut off benefits to children

or dismantle Head Start programs and would offer a single-payer health plan for everyone within the United States. Nor would drones be used to kill children abroad.

Increasing the criminal penalties on such behavior (see the Reform Sex Offender Laws website: <http://nationalrsol.org/>) has meant that the only research that is of interest to state-funded agencies is that which relates to criminal justice. Thus, the typical research looks at how to prevent pedophiles from abusing more children rather than depicting the complex realities of interactions between adult and adolescents.

According to the 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, conducted by the CDC, 47.4 percent of secondary school students have engaged in heterosexual vaginal sexual intercourse (it was 60 percent for black students), with more than 6 percent before the age of 13 (CDC, 2012, Table 63, p. 111). In addition, the National Survey of Family Growth 2006–2008 found that heterosexual oral sex was engaged in by under 45 percent of females and 48 percent of males aged 15–19 (Copen et al., 2012, p. 1). Gay teens seeking encounters with peers as well as adults are also common on gay dating sites.

Given the many instances where teenagers already engage in tabooed sexual behavior—and the prevalence of teen pregnancy—does society really mean to criminalize such behavior and turn so many teenagers into criminals? Compared with Europe for example, which has much lower ages of legal consent, the United States is arguably still stuck in the more puritanical, earlier historical period. What is different in the set of essays presented here is the attempt to challenge the prevailing notions of perpetrator versus victim and look closely at the empirical evidence about what is actually going on in these tabooed relationships, contacts, and attractions.

The reader will make up his or her own mind about how successfully this collection manages to challenge the prevailing norms.

#### LEGACY OF ALFRED KINSEY

Sex research over the years has also faced similar challenges from puritans, moralizers, and politicians willing to exploit the topic, while proclaiming their intent to “save” society, especially its children.

Alfred Kinsey released his pioneering sexual studies of the human male and female in the late 1940s and early 1950s, at a time when homosexuality was taboo and homosexual acts were illegal. Kinsey also found, as further addressed in this book, that minors frequently engage in illegal but non-abusive sex play.

It is generally forgotten that, as a result, Kinsey faced tremendous difficulties, which continue decades later. The researcher himself came under scrutiny, not just his methods. His funding was cut, his research methods criticized, and his own credibility attacked. Vern Bullough, in his study of the history of sex research, *Science in the Bedroom* (1994, 181), notes that “[o]ne result of the mounting criticism was that Kinsey



lost his financial support from the CRPS and the Rockefeller Foundation.” CRPS stands for the Committee for Research in Problems of Sex, within the National Research Council.

The attacks on Kinsey have continued. The state legislature in Indiana, where the Kinsey Institute is based, routinely lashes out at Kinsey, accusing him of being a pedophile and dismissing his earlier studies. One author, Judith Reisman, has gone on an anti-Kinsey crusade, coming out in 1990 with a coauthored book, *Kinsey, Sex and Fraud: The Indoctrination of a People: An Investigation into the Human Sexuality Research of Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, and Paul H. Gebhard*, whose title says it all (Reisman *et al.*, 1990). She has continued her attack with a series of books, among them: *Kinsey: Crimes and Consequences: The Red Queen and the Grand Scheme* (Reisman, 1998, with a third, expanded edition by 2003), and *Sexual Sabotage: How One Mad Scientist Unleashed a Plague of Corruption and Contagion on America* (Reisman, 2010).

The Indiana state legislature has also jumped into the act, given that the Kinsey Institute is based in Bloomington, Indiana, at Indiana University, a state-funded institution. In 1998, for example, the Indiana House of Representatives passed House Concurrent Resolution No. 16, which mandated “No public funds should be used to operate or support institutions that further the claims made by Alfred Kinsey’s research,” according to another Kinsey critic (Newman, 1998). The critic also asked, “Q: Should state funding of the Kinsey Institute’s sexual research end? Yes: Research that mainstreams sexual perversity does not serve the public good.” Her strident lead paragraph begins: “Deep in America’s heartland is the heart of one of history’s biggest cover-ups. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of sex crimes undoubtedly have been committed in the name of science, and yet a major state university continues to battle for the sake of protecting the name and the reputation of a callous, maniacal scientist who blithely collected data obtained as results from massive sexual experimentation on babies and children.”

The Kinsey Institute was compelled to respond on its website (“Further Response to Allegations, 2003”) to some specific allegations made by detractors, including these:

*The act of encouraging pedophiles to rape innocent babies and toddlers in the names of “science” offends. The act of protecting them from prosecution offends. The act of falsifying research findings which, in turn, open the floodgates for the sexual abuse of children, offends. (from Dr. Laura’s (Schlesinger) website)*

“This would be a cause of great concern if it were true. Kinsey was not a pedophile in any shape or form. He did not carry out experiments on children; he did not hire, collaborate, or persuade people to carry out

experiments on children. He did not falsify research findings and there is absolutely no evidence that his research ‘opened flood gates for the sexual abuse of children’. Kinsey did talk to thousands of people about their sex lives, and some of the behaviors that they disclosed, including abuse of children, were illegal. In fact, many sexual behaviors, even some between married adults, were illegal in the 1940’s and 1950’s. Without confidentiality, it would have been impossible to investigate the very private lives of Americans then, and even now.”

*Where did Kinsey’s information about children’s sexual responses come from?*

“Kinsey clearly stated in his male volume the sources of information about children’s sexual responses. The bulk of this information was obtained from adults recalling their own childhoods. Some was from parents who had observed their children, some from teachers who had observed children interacting or behaving sexually, and Kinsey stated that there were nine men who he had interviewed who had sexual experiences with children who had told him about how the children had responded and reacted.”

#### LEGACY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH’S SEX SCANDAL

The political climate that encourages such anti-sex research crusades today is not helped by the media’s obsession with the Catholic Church’s sex scandal. Routinely, news accounts on the transgressing priests confuse pedophilia with other forms of sexual attraction, and even supposedly more objective studies fall into the trap of assuming that every cross-generational sexual attraction is abusive.

One nuanced study did emerge, however. In May 2011, researchers from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York released a report, *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950–2010* (Terry et al., 2011). Although the 143-page study, submitted to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, uses the prevailing, loaded “abuse” terminology, its principal investigator, Karen Terry, found that only a small percentage of the cases involving priests could be called “pedophilia.” Only 5 percent of the priests were “pedophiles” (sex with prepubescents), with the majority of the cases relating to sex with pubescent or adolescent boys. Shortly after the report was released, I interviewed her on the KUCI *Subversity* radio program.

I also interviewed, separately, but on the same 2011 program, a critic of the way such sex research is normally conducted, Bill Andriette, who has for decades fought as an activist to challenge the “abuse” categorization for consensual relationships across the age barrier.

#### INTERVIEW WITH BILL ANDRIETTE

My interview with Bill Andriette has been transcribed online, and it is worth quoting at some length here, because the issues discussed are pertinent.



**BA:** Well, I have to say that, listening to Karen, the phrase that comes to mind is “the banality of evil,” and I mean that in a sense that most listeners wouldn’t grasp on first hearing it. You know, listening to her talk about this whole phenomenon—it’s so cold-blooded. She could be talking about, say, Jewish sex-fiends for an academic study in 1930s Germany; she could be talking about Black rapists in Georgia in the 1930s. She’s just missing the whole human dimension here, the many layers, the many dimensions of what went on here, the many different kinds of phenomena. It’s all hidden behind this thick, clouded rhetoric, these supposedly scientific terms of “offender” and “pedophile priest” and “abuse.” But we never get to the human reality.

Certainly the priests are never allowed to speak in this, and the words of the victims have been filtered through what is a massive hysteria and a massive looting of the church. We’re talking, like, two billion dollars that the U.S. church has handed out. When sums like that are involved, and when you’re hitting raw cultural nerves, as you are inevitably with (quote unquote) “deviant sex,” a term that appears in the report a lot, reality just gets warped. So there’s no recognition of that. It’s just sort of breathtaking that someone who could call herself a social scientist could be so clueless as to the context, so unaware of the broad view that you need to take when you are dealing with an issue that is very inflamed at a given time in a given society.

**DT:** I think she’s taking the legal definition and considering everything abuse. She did concede that there could be some emotional attachment between a priest and an adolescent, but then she said that was wrong.

**BA:** Right, and after damning the report, let me say that I think also that it is a fascinating document and shows in some respects wisdom and nuance compared to what we hear typically in the media. Yet the sort of voice that is just not heard here at all, that can be heard ever so slightly elsewhere, is totally missing from the report...

**DT:** I think you bring up the issue that a lot of gay men had positive sexual relationships with older guys when they were growing up, but that testimony of that voice is totally obliterated in the media when they label all this type of interaction “abuse.”

**BA:** Right. We’re dealing with a whole range of phenomena, but we do know some things. We know that the kinds of activities that went on were typically very mild: they were touching, fondling; they were, as far as anyone can tell from the lugubrious descent into the empirical data that the folks at John Jay have treated us to, that they involved activities that were very often oriented toward pleasuring the younger partner. Now, was all of this consensual? Are there issues involved when priests make approaches to youngsters? Absolutely, it’s a complex thing, but the question is: is this best handled through ordinary human smarts about what’s appropriate, about how boundaries of what’s appropriate change as people get to know each other, about overall affect? Is it best handled that way, or with a technical vocabulary which, in reading this report, I find immensely dehumanizing?

DT: But were you pleased that they did try to distinguish between the different terms, at least?

BA: Right, and they've gotten into a lot of trouble for that, or they've gotten a lot of criticism. I know that the *Boston Globe* had an editorial damning this report, the *Globe*, which has been behind a lot of the hysteria.

DT: Yeah, especially in the Boston cases.

BA: I think the John Jay report does some very interesting things. It is very nuanced. It tries to make some distinctions that are completely lost in the media. It makes a big distinction between pedophilia, attraction to pre-adolescents, and hebephilia, attraction to adolescents. One trouble with this report is that it takes all these terms that sound like they refer to absolute, clear, crystalline things, and it misses how fuzzy and hazy they are in relation to the actuality of people's erotic lives.

DT: It reminds me of studies in the 1950s or before that that looked at homosexuals as criminals. They were talking about all these deviant acts, but with the benefit of hindsight you see that they were actually human beings. So that's important to bear in mind.

BA: Right, and the other thing to bear in mind here is that the pedophilic and hebephilic interest, that is, adult male sexual attraction to children and adolescents is incredibly common. We know this from some scientific studies that have been done with community samples, that is, people not in prison, not in trouble for anything, completely normal people. In one study from 1995, 25% reported pedophilic interest or showed plethysmographic arousal—you know, that's when they strap a meter on the male's penis to judge his arousal when exposed to some sort of stimulus.

Another study, done in Czechoslovakia back in 1970, looked at 48 young Czech soldiers; all 48 showed penile response to adult females; 40 of the 48 did to adolescent females; and 28 of the 48 showed penile response to females aged 4 to 10, with penile responsivity to the last category, female children, intermediate to adolescent and adult females.

So we're dealing with feelings that are just basic to male sexuality. I mean, not every male has them, but a huge proportion of the people in the population do, and that's fodder for this sort of hysteria. It's long been known that people who crusade against homosexuals are much more likely to have some sort of homosexual feelings that they're struggling with themselves. So rather than use the tragedy of this abuse crisis as an opportunity to have a wise discussion of the fact of this desire and ask why it exists, in what forms can it be expressed, what role does this sort of desire have in ordinary adult male affection for children. You know, there's no question that young mothers have enormous erotic connections with their infants. Why can't we talk about the possible good ways in which these erotic feelings can feed, not into sexual acts, but into affection and attention?

DT: It seems that, because everything is considered abuse, there's no room for this other kind of observation or discussion.

Bill Andriette also noted in the interview: "You know, there's always been sort of an erotic dimension to adult interaction with young people.



I'm inclined to think that if something is that common, it's probably natural and we should not be so quick to condemn it. We should ask: what function does it serve? What function did it serve? How can we mobilize and contain these impulses today? Rather than demonizing the impulses, rather than demonizing people who show them."

Another recent study that provides a more nuanced and tolerant portrayal is Sarah Goode's *Understanding and Addressing Adult Sexual Attraction to Children* (2010). Her evolving position is reminiscent of the Christian ethos of hating the sin but loving the sinner. As she herself explains in her preface her message "in a nutshell" is this: "[A]dult sexual contact with children should be prevented but punishing an individual for his sexual attraction rather than his actual behavior is counterproductive; all of us adults need to behave in a much more mature and responsible way, so that all of our children can have happy childhoods, free from harm. Hating paedophiles seems easier, but doesn't keep children safe" (p. x). The irony is that Goode's book is published by Routledge, owned by Taylor & Francis, the corporate publishing giant that declined to put out a follow-up publication on inter-generational relationships after it acquired *Journal of Homosexuality* from Haworth Press. Some of those banned articles are now gathered in this very collection from Left Coast Press. The Haworth pederasty controversy (Durber, 2006) is covered as well elsewhere in this volume.

#### SEXUAL MOVEMENTS TURN MAINSTREAM

Before the recent mainstreaming of the social and sexual movements from the 1960s and beyond, there was a brief period of sexual freedom, when all sorts of sexualities were explored and celebrated (see for example, Tsang, 1981; the seminal Gayle Rubin essay, "Thinking Sex," Rubin, 1984; Brogersma, 1986 and 1990; and Sandfort, Brongersma, & van Naerssen, 1990). As the politics of accommodation took over and as gay and lesbian leaders sought respectability in marriage recognition and mainstream acceptance, this flourishing of sexual liberation was blocked and new laws were enacted to further punish sexual contacts across the age barrier. Such voluntary, noncoercive sexual transgressions became more and more legally perilous and dangerous, to be treated by society only as abuse.

#### OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

What then are the options for scientific, empirically based research of the lived experience? First off, given the political constraints facing state and federal funding agencies, it will be some time before the authorities will fund any research of the type covered in this book. The only research that the authorities will permit will continue to be couched in the "abuse" rhetoric, but may become more nuanced as researchers encounter sexual situations—the lived experience—that go counter to their preconceived notions.



More optimistically, I suspect the move toward open access in terms of scholarly communication and the deposit of research materials in digital scholarly repositories—both for published articles as well as the associated research data—offers an opening for researchers with unconventional research interests to have their findings “published” in such scholarly open-access institutional and discipline-based repositories. Given constraints on federal funding, it is likely that only small studies be funded, hopefully to produce innovative or nuanced research findings. One area missing from much sex research is more granular ethnicity data so that smaller groups of ethnic minorities will show up in the findings, such as the many Asian ethnicities as well as those of multiple ethnic backgrounds. Liberating scholarly publishing from corporate control will likely also free up researchers to tackle more unconventional areas of interest.

That adolescents seek out adults for sexual contact is well covered in literature and nonfiction (see for example, Lotringer and Moffett, 1981, about a 15-year-old boy’s quest for a man, as well as elsewhere in this volume). Additionally, films are frequently where such taboo topics are addressed, often sympathetically. The synopsis of the film, *Absent*, directed by Marco Berger, released in 2012 as a DVD from TLA Releasing (*Absent*, n.d.), begins as follows: “Knowingly, even aggressively sexual, 16-year-old Martin (newcomer Javier De Pietro) locks his seductive sights on Sebastian (Carlos Echevarria), his recently engaged, 30-something swimming instructor.” Sex researchers need to lift their blinders and conduct more nuanced research that go beyond addressing issues of teen HIV and pregnancy and look at the diversity of sexual behaviors teenagers and adults engage in.

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Transcript: Church abuse crisis John Jay report interview. URL: [http://williamapercy.com/wiki/index.php?title=Church\\_abuse\\_crisis\\_John\\_Jay\\_report\\_interview](http://williamapercy.com/wiki/index.php?title=Church_abuse_crisis_John_Jay_report_interview) (Accessed April 25, 2013).
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