

Bureau of Social Hygiene  
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J.B.L.

Comment on Proposals Made by Miss Katherine Bement Davis for  
Reorganization of the Bureau of Social Hygiene.

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I have examined with care the proposals made by Miss Davis for reorganization of the Bureau of Social Hygiene. Under the first proposal, which is favored by Miss Davis, activities of the Bureau would fall into two divisions: one, designated as the Division of Sex Research, would itself be charged with the task of carrying on sex research; the other, called the Division of Studies, would give its attention to the support of other agencies engaged in undertakings which fall within the general field of the Bureau's interest.

Under the alternative proposal the Committee on Sex Research of the National Research Council would be reorganized, incorporated and financed as an independent agency to pursue sex research substantially along the lines of its recent endeavors. The cardinal purpose in each case is the promotion of scientific research in sex per se. In either case it is proposed that dissemination of scientific findings should not take the form of educational activities or propaganda, these activities being reserved to the American Social Hygiene Association.

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The proposal to lift sex research from its customary setting and to study sex in vacuo, so to speak, by and through an organization having neither governmental authority nor even the authority that naturally attaches to the professions handling such matters seems to me to be unsound. Aside from the wisdom of having some independent agency make a specialty of sex research, the desirability of having the Bureau of Social Hygiene in partic-

ular carry on such a program is open to challenge. This is not to deny the importance of sex as a fundamental factor in human life. But the subject of the whole range of sex life in general, normal as well as abnormal, -- and this is the approach which Miss Davis hopes to make -- does not readily lend itself to research, ~~except in the cases of abnormally constituted persons.~~ Sex is imbedded deeply in the most protected and hidden consciousness of individuals. The disposition to conceal as one's most private concern the poorly understood feelings of sex is reinforced by moral and social taboos, group mores, religious conceptions and the like. Perhaps no other subject would present so many hazards and pitfalls for the scientific investigator.

Nor can sex be studied in an objective mass; individuals must be examined clinically one by one to determine what sex means for each. From the normal individual's point of view, there must be some better reason than the advancement of scientific knowledge before he or she will consent to serve as laboratory material. Those who will consent to serve as such are likely to represent a highly selected group. It would take a bold organization to enter upon a program of exposing for purposes of study the sex life of persons other than those who submit to examination because their own difficulties require it. The scientific study of sex -- and there is at present a considerable amount of it -- if brought to focus in a specialized organization, would demand a large staff of specialists from several fields of science, viz., medicine, psychiatry, psychology, biology and sociology. Moreover, these scientists would require literally thousands of subjects, that is <sup>2</sup> persons, for study. The scientists could be had but where the large volume of human material would be found, <sup>aside from</sup> ~~outside of~~ patients and groups of delinquents, it is <sup>difficult</sup> ~~hard~~ to say.

This brings us to consider the ways in which matters of sex are now being studied. The traditional approach to the study of sex has been and very likely must continue in the direction of inquiry into difficulties or disorders attributable to sex. Just as gains on the side of preventive medicine have come about mainly through medical research of disease, so will knowledge of what constitutes normal and proper sex life come through scientific study of sex troubles. True, medical scientists have studied normal physiology, including sex physiology, but there is no analogous normal and objective embodiment of sex life to be studied.

The clinical material for sex study or research is provided almost exclusively among persons who are suffering from sex abnormalities, conflicts or disorders. These sex difficulties fall into the following three categories:

- (1) Diseases or improper functioning of the body attributable or related to sex life
- (2) Mental disorders traceable to wrong sex thinking
- (3) Moral and social departures from normal and legitimate sex life, as prostitution, homosexuality, promiscuity and illegitimacy.

Research is now going forward in respect to each of the above classifications of sex difficulties. Medical scientists are known to be carrying on research work on the physiological side. Specialists in mental hygiene -- psychiatrists and psychologists -- are even more actively engaged upon research in which sex plays a most important part. These specialists are working in hospitals and correctional institutions and in semi-public and privately endowed organizations such as the Judge Baker Foundation, Institute for Juvenile Research, etc., etc. Social agencies, vice committees and the police are busy, the latter in widely varying degrees, in the control or amelioration of the social

disorders of sex.

It seems to me that research in sex should be left to the fields of science represented by the agencies just enumerated. Their responsibility for making scientific progress in this field is of one piece with performing well the daily tasks of their professions. Furthermore, they have the strategic advantage of contact with persons who are beset with sex problems. This is not to say that the present scope and methods of research in sex are adequate. Merely that the agencies and professions, now doing sex research in an incomplete and perhaps inadequate way, should be the ones to develop it.

There is no doubt that integration of the work of institutions, private organizations and individual scientists is greatly needed. Manifestly, the agencies mentioned above will make unequal progress in gaining knowledge of sex. A certain medical school, a certain psychiatric clinic, a certain welfare organization or crime prevention unit in a police department here and there, by reason of special opportunity, interest and natural gifts, will always be in a better position to make more progress in sex research than others in their fields. Stimulation of these favored agencies is needed. An organization like the Bureau of Social Hygiene can render splendid service in the field of sex by attempting to bring about some integration of scattered enterprises, by evaluating and making available for use the best results, and by encouraging or supporting a few selected agencies which seem to give greatest promise of fruitful results.

Another objection to having the Bureau of Social Hygiene go in for sex research on its own account remains to be considered. Sex research and the acceptance of new knowledge that may result from it presupposes a considerable brushing aside of certain prevailing taboos. The research in sex under



any scheme will proceed at an infinitely faster pace than will evolution of habits of thought on sex among people in general. Frank inquiry and the bringing of sex into the open for scientific research will invade fields that several intrenched disciplines of thought consider should be left untouched. It is ~~hard to imagine~~ <sup>not easy to envisage</sup> the Catholic Church, for example, <sup>in the role of</sup> giving even passive encouragement to scientific progress in sex research. The Fundamentalists of every persuasion and doubtless a great body of persons who fit in none of these classifications would be more likely to condemn than to support scientific sex inquiry. Now groups of this sort should not be allowed to discourage research in sex. But to set up before these oppositions a target in the form of a fountain-head organization dealing with sex would be to invite controversy and attacks which might prove very harmful to the organization and to the research as well. Dispersion of research in this particular field would seem to be desirable.

#### Research as Distinguished from Propaganda

Miss Davis makes it clear in her proposal that the emphasis is on research and not on educational or propaganda activities designed to make available the findings of research. The question arises whether the Bureau could hold to this position. The fruits of sex research may be of equal or greater importance to the human race than the fruits of medical, chemical and other physical research. But no one is ready and waiting to make general use of the fruits of sex research as in the case of the other fields. For this reason utilization of the findings will not come about automatically. The tendency would be to gravitate to some form of educational activity, if not by the Bureau itself, by another, say the American Social Hygiene Associa-

tion, with ~~which~~ relations would likely be so close as to destroy the theoretical advantage in isolating research from education propaganda. As it is, the Bureau of Social Hygiene is almost universally identified with or confused with the American Social Hygiene Association. Even those who stop to consider the exact name may think the "Bureau" of Social Hygiene is a bureau or division of the more elaborately organized American Social Hygiene Association.

Finally, a reorganization ~~of the Bureau~~, which contemplates restriction of activity to sex research, would shut off the Bureau from the wider field indicated in its charter as the purposes for which it was established, and would put aside the <sup>Bureau's</sup> accumulated experience and achievements ~~of the Bureau~~ in the field of police administration. The Bureau has before it a most inviting field of opportunity much wider than sex research. Crime commissions, legislative committees, law enforcement committees and individual alarmists have about scratched over the entire surface of the crime problem without accomplishing anything more than legislative tinkering of uncertain value. The shouting dies down and the time is ripe for someone to begin where the agitators leave off and to assume leadership in doing serious work on the fundamentals, i.e., prevention of crime and social disorder, and professionalization of the personnel engaged in prevention and control of crime. Social hygiene has a place in this larger field.

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