

APR 4 1946

24 January 1946.

Memorandum by George W. Corner

The first question asked about the work of Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey and his colleagues, by scientists and critical laymen alike, is whether people can really be induced to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about their sex conduct. The validity of Dr. Kinsey's investigations depends entirely upon the reliability of the personal interview as conducted by experts as a means of getting such information. How can a man, however skilled, in conversation with another person overcome the barriers of shyness, modesty, or fear of exposure on the one hand, of mendacity or lubricity on the other?

I have made myself directly familiar with Dr. Kinsey's methods by giving him an interview. As a member of the Committee for Research in Problems of Sex, and therefore as one who shares to a certain degree the responsibility for the work, I thought it a scientific duty to do this. Dr. Kinsey arranged also to have me present, with Dr. Robert M. Yerkes, at an interview with another person (a Negro prisoner) who was willing to talk before us. I have thus been able to observe not only the procedure in general, but its application to the very different personalities of a professional scientist and an uneducated man respectively.

These experiences made me quite confident that Dr. Kinsey is able by his methods of questioning, to elicit frank, full and complete histories of sex conduct. The expertness of the questioning becomes even more apparent on thinking it over afterward. In the first place, the subject is made to feel that Dr. Kinsey is disinterested and sympathetic at the same time. It is disarming to be asked innocuous questions first -

what work, for example, one's father did, and where did one live in childhood. The intimate questions slip in sideways and by degrees. When at last the subject realizes that he is speaking of things he perhaps never put into words before, he is relieved to find that his questioner evinces neither surprise, amusement, nor condemnation. The scientific attitude of the interviewer, his human sympathy, his evident depth of experience, combine to set up an atmosphere hardly more difficult than that of a discussion with one's legal adviser. I can testify personally that in my own case the hieroglyphic marks Dr. Kinsey made on his record blanks, in his private code, present an honest and unreserved statement, as reliable as any deposition I might make on a non-tabooed subject.

During the subsequent interview with the Negro prisoner, it was interesting to note the differences in vocabulary, order of questions, and style of questioning used by Dr. Kinsey with the subject whose experience and education were so different from my own. Being able to observe the technique with more detachment when it was applied to someone else than myself, I now had time to notice the examiner's artfulness in securing corroboration by indirect return to a previous topic, or by rewording of a special question. Again, the questioner avoided all semblance of criticism and the Negro man, I believe, was made to feel that he was contributing to a scientific investigation, not confessing as to a priest nor defending himself as before a justice of the peace.

It is obvious that reliable information on such a subject could not be obtained by inexperienced interviewing. Every doctor and lawyer knows how a medical history or an examination in court can be useless through faulty technique. I am, however, convinced that in research on sex behavior, personal interviews conducted with great skill and with all the

precautions Dr. Kinsey has learned by experience will elicit information that is correct and comprehensive to a degree impossible by any other means. The interviewer can explain and reemphasize his questions if they are not clear (something a printed blank cannot do): he can retrace his steps, introduce traps against possible error or fraud, and above all he can (if he has the character and talent) invest the interview with scientific detachment and dignity that secure honest and indeed interested cooperation of the informer.