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SIMILAR BUT DIFFERENT: GAY
RELATIONSHIP STORIES ACROSS THE
LIFE COURSE

FOREWORD

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC, CMG

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In the social sciences, and in achieving law reform, empiricism reigns.

Having theories and bright ideas is good. But having detailed facts and collecting detailed data and opinions usually affords a much sounder basis for judgement and the design of new public policy and law.

A good illustration of these propositions can be found in the life and work of Dr Alfred Kinsey. Before Kinsey there were many theoreticians who offered postulates about homosexuality and homosexuals. Of course, some of them had a small sample of specimens upon whom they based their theories and conclusions. Thus, Sigmund Freud was a practising psychiatrist. He based his enlightened opinions about sexual minorities on the small cohort of patients he had treated or observed. It was on that footing, in 1935, that he wrote his famous "Letter to an American mother". In that letter he declared : 'homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function. Many highly respectable individuals of ancient and modern times have been homosexuals, several of the greatest men amongst them (Plato, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci). ". But although this had an impact in the circle of practising psychiatrists, it cut no ice with the general public, or with the politicians who represented them as lawmakers.

This is where Alfred Kinsey made his mark. A more unlikely marksman is hard to imagine. He was a professor of zoology at Indiana University, in a conservative state of the United States, working in the rural setting of Bloomington. He was the world's

leading expert on gall wasps, a variety of bees. Yet, in his mature age, he turned to the taxonomies of human beings.

He embarked upon an empirical study of the sexual lives of his fellow Americans. He conducted a huge number of interviews. He followed a set interviewing pattern. And he came up with most remarkable data, including about the incidents of homosexuality:

*37% of the male population had at least one overt homosexual experience to orgasm between the ages of 16 and 45 *13% of the male population had had more homosexual than heterosexual experience over at least a three year period.

*10% of the male population had been more or less exclusively homosexual for at least a three year period with 8% being completely homosexual for at least that period.

*4% of the white male population was exclusively homosexual (rated on his scale 0-6) for their entire lives.

Kinsey's 1948 report on Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male landed like a bombshell in the United States, dispelling all kinds of ignorant mediaeval opinions concerning sexual conduct, and specifically homosexual conduct.

Its impact was enhanced and enlarged by Kinsey's report on Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female, published in 1953. Armed with these reports, Kinsey's flair as a public speaker and protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, it became impossible to put the genie back in the bottle. The news travelled far and wide through the modern media. Specifically, it spread to all the English-speaking countries which were in the forefront of criminalising adult private homosexual conduct. What had been thought to be the weird behaviour of a tiny and wilful minority, contrary to scriptural instruction, was revealed as widespread conduct amongst a sizeable minority that was stable and persistent. Even in the face of cruel criminalisation and vicious religious and social stigma.

It is no coincidence that a decade after the second Kinsey report was published the British Parliament moved, in 1967, and where to amend the laws in England. Australia followed in 1974 with reforms adopted first in South Australia under Don Dunstan. Gradually parliaments and courts on every continent were getting rid of the fiendish laws that punished sexual minorities. And once the criminal laws disappeared, pressure built up to provide affirmative rights: to pensions and social security; to protection against discrimination; and to legal recognition of stable relationships. This is what can happen when social science reveals the realities about human life in all of its variety.

This book by Peter Robinson is another step on the path that Alfred Kinsey chartered. It does not boast of the huge numbers of interviews conducted by Kinsey and his colleagues. To that extent the sample (being data collected from 97 gay men who lived in Auckland, Hong Kong, Los Angeles, Melbourne, London, Manchester, Mumbai, New York and Sydney) is tiny, given the world of 7 million human beings. Nevertheless, the author has added a dimension of detail that Kinsey's methodology did not permit. He has conducted detailed interviews that reveal a rich source of primary data and permit the subjects to offer information about their experiences and opinions that the statistical approach of Kinsey did not permit. Of course, it would have been preferable to have offered a larger sample for analysis. However, the author explains the difficulties, interruptions and obstacles that he encountered even limiting his enquiry to fewer than 100 interviewees.

Another difference from Kinsey is that the author has gone outside the semi-comfortable circumstances of his own country to foreign lands, including some of them (India and Hong Kong) that have significantly different cultures and social values. This has permitted disclosure of features of the lives lived by gay men that are common and some that are different, according to cultural and social norms. It may be said that the lives of gay men in Mumbai and Hong Kong are significantly different from those lived by other gay men in different towns and villages of India and China. But the same can probably be said of the lives of gay men in Sydney and Melbourne when compared to Deniliquin and Goondiwindi. Kinsey is still bitterly

criticised by his critics for the imperfections of his data that are denounced as unrepresentative, selective and misleading. The same critics would probably attack Peter Robinson's sample on the same grounds.

However, as with Kinsey, there is sufficient authenticity to make the study and its disclosures worthwhile. In Kinsey's case, the authenticity was achieved by the sheer volume and number of the interviews. In the present author's case it is achieved by the detail that he has gathered. It demonstrates at once the similarities and differences that exist amongst gay men both in the lives they live and in the opinions they hold about those lives and the current issues that affect them.

Amongst the important messages that emerge from the book and its analysis are:

*Almost half the men interviewed lived full and active single lives, with a strong capacity to build friendships and to enjoy support of a community.

*A significant number of the men formed long-term relationships resembling marriage and (except in the early blush of romance) not overly sexualised.

*14 of the men had stories to tell as fathers.

*Although more than 40% of the sample were recorded as favouring marriage equality, a significant number (20%) were opposed to the institution of marriage regarding it as patriarchal in character and imposing a regime of hetero- normativity that they wished to escape.

*Most of the men interviewed had lived through crises of various kinds connected with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. But amongst younger men in the cohort, there was some evidence of willingness to take "strategic risks"

'in sexual conduct, alien to the safe sex messages to which older interviewees had been exposed at the height of the crisis.

As with Kinsey and his statistical taxonomies, this book challenges a lot of assumptions about the sex lives of the interviewees. They do not emerge as particularly sex obsessed; nor as incapable of sustaining a long-lasting relationships or doomed to lonely lives bereft of friends. On the other hand, questions are presented as to whether different conclusions would be drawn from a larger cohort; from one that included an equal number of women interviewees; from one that included transgender and sex worker participants; and one which was able somehow to reach out to sexual minorities living their lives in nonmetropolitan areas, in the the loneliness of regional and rural communities still very hostile to homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexual and other queer minorities.

One of the questions which was raised in the recently failed attempt to secure marriage equality from the Australian Federal Parliament was whether extending legal equality to those gays who wanted to get married would inevitably lead on to other forms of marriage: the marriage of three or four people to one another; polygamous marriage for heterosexuals; marriage to children; incestuous marriage; and even (as one Australian Senator offensively put it) marriage to an animal. Whilst these questions were presented politely enough, they revealed the underlying hostility amongst opponents to contemplating the truth of Kinsey's basic discoveries and the consequential need to open our marriage to it least those gay citizens prepared to accept its obligations and assumptions. One value of Peter Robinson's text is that it reveals, amongst the sample investigated, the boring similarity between most homosexual and heterosexual lives. If there are differences they would appear to be differences that differentiate between male attitudes to sexuality and female, rather than between homosexual and heterosexual attitudes to stable relationships.

The book is easy to read. It makes the reader a kind of voyeur to the sexual lives of the subjects. But the glimpse that is afforded is dependent upon the truthfulness and completeness of the revelations of the interviewees. And upon this, Peter Robinson (like Alfred Kinsey) had no sanction to impose either upon those who exaggerated the sexual features of their lives or (more likely) those who discreetly revealed only as much as they thought was desirable for the interviewer to hear.

Because this book is anchored in the empirical principle, it is a useful addition to human knowledge. It will not have the mighty impact that the Kinsey reports did. And yet it was those reports that, ultimately, led to many others. And that made it possible for an Australian researcher such as Peter Robinson to embark upon the enquiry recorded in these pages. By securing and analysing more data about the lives of sexual minorities and by making that data available in book and digital form, Peter Robinson and his generation contribute to the unstoppable global move to end the hostility, to reform the laws and to terminate the stigma that have caused so much pain and misery to so many innocent and blameless people.

Sydney

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