
IT IS HARD TO STUDY SOMETHING PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO TALK OR HEAR ABOUT

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Vern L. Bullough (1928) is a medical historian who specializes in the history of sex, sexual practices and taboos, and the diverse groups of “sex workers.” His expertise also encompasses community health and public policy, contraception and population issues, and sexual attitudes – especially attitudes towards homosexuality, transvestitism and transsexuality in Western culture. He is a past president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex. For many years he was dean of natural and social sciences at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Currently he is a Visiting Professor at the University of Southern California.

His first book, *History of Prostitution*, was published in 1964. Since then, he has been an author of over fifty books, most of them with his wife Bonnie (1926–1996) as co-author. His works include: *Sexual Attitudes: Myths & Realities* (1995), *Human Sexuality: An Encyclopedia* (1994), and *Women and Prostitution: A Social History* (1987).

When does the history of sexology begin?

Many of the historical medical writers included sexuality in their discussion. There were also erotic collections (or pornography if you will) and a lot of negative writing on masturbation beginning in the 18th century. Little of this could be called research but there are many advice manuals et al. This picked up in the nineteenth century as the reading public expanded.

The history of sexology really began toward the end of the nineteenth century in Germany. A number of physicians, primarily centered in Berlin, began to feel the need for more content about sexuality in the curriculum. Serious studies into sexuality began with Richard von Krafft Ebing in the 1880's and it was soon realized that history (and anthropology) were valuable sources of information. Iwan Bloch proposed a science

of Sexualwissenschaft at the beginning of the twentieth century and held that history was the key. His major historical study was on prostitution but he never finished it. In England Havelock Ellis began publishing his multi-volume studies of the *Psychology of Sex* and he relied heavily on historical data. In Germany, again even before Krafft-Ebing, some homosexuals had begun to survey history for examples of same-sex relationships and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs published some twelve short books on the topic, tying it with his theory of homosexuality. Magnus Hirschfeld, who started out trying to change the German laws on homosexuality, eventually, influenced by Bloch, turned to history and literature as sources, and collected data about sexual behavior in his books and accepted articles on the topic in his various journals. Several historical books were written about sex in ancient Greece, in ancient Rome, in Hinduism, and the like. Some on Islamic sexuality as well. Much of this came to an end with the Nazis, who destroyed Hirschfeld's library. In the post-war world, Americans entered the scene in increasing numbers following Kinsey, but history was more or less neglected. I wrote a key article on it in the 1960's, emphasizing the importance of historical data, which was widely publicized and I did a major work on it, *SEXUAL VARIANCE IN SOCIETY AND HISTORY* in 1976. Others wrote more specifically on homosexuality such as John Boswell. Foucault also began to write on it in the 1980's and he made it fashionable, although I disagree with his interpretations. Foucault was basically a philosopher and not a historian. He also was a social constructionist.

He also believed that each particular period in history had a particular "episteme" or style of thinking, unique and different from others. In a sense, he represented a reaction to both Freud and Marx, and in a sense argued that each age created its own definitions. He was going to develop this in a series of volumes, but only one was published, and the last two volumes he did on sex more or less ignored what he had said in the introductory volume and looked more upon sex as a matter of power. My argument with him is that I do not believe in the notion of episteme but that each time period builds upon what has existed before. We cannot understand the ideas of our current generation about sex unless we know where these ideas come from, and we in the West are still basically heavily influenced by Christianity and particularly by the writings of St. Augustine and the early Church Fathers, whether Eastern or Western. We do not start *de novo*, but are heavily dependent upon the baggage of accumulated history with which we have to contend. Foucault believed that homosexuality itself was an artifact of the age in which we live. How it became this or why was of no interest to him (it is to me); he simply stated it. His later two volumes are quite different and I think if he could have written these earlier, he would have had quite a different viewpoint.

Today there are a lot of grand theories of sex, there are a lot of special theories about homosexuality, about bisexuality, about gender, et al. There have been individuals who have posited more or less grand theories such as Sigmund Freud and in a sense Michel Foucault whom I mentioned before. Much of Freudian

theory is not now accepted. Freud in a sense is similar to Foucault in that he was a theoretician clothed in more scientific clothing because of his reliance on his case studies. Like Foucault, he had a lot of important insights, and he regarded himself as a therapist, and his theories could help people come to terms with themselves and a cure might result. He was a marvelous storyteller, and historically he is influential because he brought sex out into the open. I do not think his explanations of sexual conduct, however, are very valid. Like Foucault, he was a megatheorist, and there are some remarkable insights, but few accept his megatheory today.

I think with the interdisciplinary nature of sexology, it is difficult to encompass the biological sciences and the social sciences along with humanities and physical sciences within the framework of one grand theory.

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You wrote a book about the history of sex research "Science in the Bedroom", and it seems that sex research has always gone parallel with something else, something that is more important. What do you think, can sex surveys show the real situation?

There are sex surveys and sex surveys. Some are poorly designed and do not give much information, others are better designed and give more information. The problem is that a lot of people lie or do not tell the full truth in their replies and this causes difficulty. All sorts of precautions have to be taken. The best is a face to face interview as Kinsey developed it, but that is time-consuming and costly and many individuals since then have tried to find shortcuts. So far they have not been very good. A good sex survey also depends on a wide sample, and even the

most recent one in the United States which cost several million was much too limited in its sample to give anything other than generalizations.

Are generalizations harmful?

Generalizations. The difficulty about sexuality is that it is difficult to generalize. We can establish norms but everyone is on a different part of the curve and if you draw two bell-shaped curves for males and females, significant portions overlap. The problem is that people usually make statements without qualifications. If sexology teaches us anything it is that there is a wide variety of behaviors out there and we do not yet understand all the variables leading to such behaviors. Some of them are genetic, some of them take place during pregnancy due to hormonal and other variables or developmental variables, and some are a result of childhood conditioning. Some simply appeal to some over others. Culture is also important. Study makes one aware of the wide variety of human condition.

Did the duality between the official sex morality and everyday sex life exist in earlier times?

The duality in sex feelings is derived in part from Plato, given emphasis by the Neo Platonists who emphasized the difference between the soul and the body using simple language. This dualism was picked up in some religions such as Manicheism and carried over into Christianity by St. Augustine, who had originally been a Manichean. I deal with this in my SEXUAL VARIANCE.

In dualism as it developed in the Western world, there was a distinction between the nous, described as the soul or in some cases

the mind, and the material body. The ideal was to follow the nous and not to seek material pleasures. Sex was one of the most material pleasures. St. Augustine, if he could have done so, would have done away with sex, but practically this would have had the effect of ending the existence of human beings. Theologically, he also recognized that the Bible had a lot of begets or sex in it, i.e. Abraham begat Isaac, and so on, and so he must have recognized sex as part of the human condition. Augustine therefore compromised by saying that sex was for reproduction and for reproduction only. He stipulated that it could only take place between two persons of the opposite sex, using the instrument, i.e. the penis, and the orifice, i.e. the vagina, in the proper position, man on top, woman at the bottom. There was to be no use of fingers, tongue, mouth et al. The ideal life, he said was a celibate one, the life of the mind or the soul. In effect, we still have some of this same dualism within the Western tradition.

Did you get an impression that sexuality was always somehow controlled (and if you did, why is that)?

There probably has always been some control of sexuality through prohibitions concerning the time (in the Bible, a woman was not to have sex during her menses), who the partners could be, even, in some cultures, where it should take place, but some cultures were more open than others. Islam, for example, taught that sex was one of the great joys of being human. Christianity was probably the most hostile. Some of the Buddhist movements also emphasized it, but some of them also attempted to downplay it. Many sects in Hinduism emphasized its joys.

In your opinion, has human sexual behavior changed enormously through history?

I think the most important development in human history as far as sex is concerned has been the ability of women to control whether or not they get pregnant, and if all else fails, to have an abortion.

Women have also been sexual persons but the sequela of heterosexual relations was pregnancy. This meant that women were far more cautious in participating in sexual activity, but they in a sense delighted in arousing males, i.e. teasing them if you will. They knew the game and the consequences. When a woman could express her sexuality openly and engage in it with little fear of becoming pregnant, the whole nature of male-female relationships changed. I think, for the better. It also made women better able to participate in society at large, having careers and full time jobs, and it became an essential part of women's liberation. The result has been a redefinition of women's role in society, a redefinition still taking place, but which women are taking the lead in defining. I think the end result will be a greater equality between the sexes.

What about countries where political changes have occurred but pressures for traditional roles, the role of woman being that of a mother, still exist?

Change in any society is difficult. Partly because change creates instability, i.e. challenges the status quo. This in a sense is why change seems to be slow, although when you look back sometimes, it seems rapid. In the United States, for example, some states still regard homosexuality as a crime, although most states have abol-

ished such laws, and some have even gone so far as to accept consensual unions of same-sex couples with the same status as marriage. I recently completed a book entitled *Before Stonewall* about activists for gay and lesbian rights, and the change from what they were doing in the 1950's and 1960's and what exists now is almost unbelievable. The trend even among many of the more conservative ones is to accept some of these changes, while probably mumbling to themselves, but there are also periodic reactions. In the United States, President Bush represents a reaction, and especially his attorney general, but the long-term effect will be, I predict, an acceptance of the changes that have taken place. The new generation tends to accept them more easily than the old one and the old objectors tend to die off. So do the more extreme reformers, and a new generation seeks a new kind of reform. In the United States right now, the issue of pedophilic priests is forcing a major change in Catholic response to the changes. The Church has not yet come out into the open and recognized that at least 40% of its clergy are homophilic, i.e. if they had sex they would have sex with the same sex, and in fact many do, just as many heterophilic priests have sex with the opposite sex. Discussion of this had been repressed. Now pedophilia has brought it out, and it has emphasized the importance of sex education for priests and clergy.

The problem in the Catholic Church in this country was that priests were recruited at 12 or 13 and then isolated into seminaries without contact with the opposite sex and no real adolescent experimentation with relationships. They often became fixated on what

would have been their adolescent peers. Sex was such a forbidden topic in the seminary that they knew little about it, especially if they had not come from a large family. Those who were the only children or had only one or two siblings did not have much experience with sexual differences.

What are the opportunities when somebody wants to study sexology in America?

Essentially I am a self-taught expert on sex. I started out as a historian of medicine and science, but with a strong interest in sex and gender issues. (I tell about this in a book I edited entitled HOW I GOT INTO SEX, which includes personal statements from about 40 sex experts in the U.S.)

I did intensive reading, went to a lot of professional meetings, talked to other sex professionals, and gained a broad-based knowledge. Concerned about how others would become interested in sex research, a group of people including Wardel Pomeroy organized the Institute for the Study of Human Sexuality in San Francisco which is a degree-granting institution (including Ph.D.) but its degree is not recognized by the accrediting associations in the United States. Lack of high-quality sex research led a number of American Foundations in the late 1990's to begin giving grants to students studying human sexuality. The grants are usually in a specific discipline, i.e. psychology, sociology, biology, what have you, but also with special studies in sex. The University of Indiana, the home of the Kinsey Institute, is offering its first Ph.D. I believe the University of Minnesota is also. San Francisco State offers

a Master's Degree, as does California State University, Northridge, and other places. It is felt by many, including myself, that sexology is interdisciplinary, but since higher education in the United States is set up mostly along disciplinary lines, and the hiring of young academics is usually within specific disciplines, it is best for the person in question to be qualified in a discipline, but with a specialty in sexuality gained by taking classes in other disciplines. The University of Chicago, which I attended, has always had interdisciplinary programs for Ph.D., and they also have a strong program in sexuality in several different disciplines but centered in sociology. I believe grants for studying sexuality come from the Social Science Research Council but there is a consortium of groups supporting it.

What is necessary for one nation or state, to start studying sexology on the institutional level?

It is difficult to study sex on an institutional level because it is such an interdisciplinary subject: biology, psychology, medicine, law, history, sociology, literature et al. This means, I think, that specialists in these and other fields have to take some additional courses in sex, and this is best done at universities which allow some interdisciplinary cooperation. Sometimes it can be done at a specialized institute giving people who already have other specialties the kind of information they need to be sexologists.

As a historian of sexuality have you had insight into Orthodox nations and their sexuality? Especially in Eastern Europe?

Part of the difficulty with sex in Orthodox nations is that for much of the twentieth century

these nations were dominated by Soviet ideas and their ideas about sex were naive and basically repressive. Early on in the Soviet revolution there was an attempt to establish more sex-friendly laws, but once Stalin gained power, this more or less ended and the Russians were more prudish than the Puritans. Theologically Orthodoxy was much more permissive of sexuality than Catholicism and it was also in a less strong position to enforce its teachings because in so many countries it was dominated by non-Orthodox governments. It is a subject, however, that is much less explored than it has been in the West, and the language requirements make it more difficult for Westerners like me to explore it as I can in other areas.

What were the ideas of Communists about sex?

In my lectures in the old Soviet Union and in the current Russia, I have been impressed by how much they were still influenced by traditional Christian attitudes. The Soviets were very parochial and puritanical about sex. There was, in fact, a mass denial that such things as prostitution or homosexuality existed and when they were reported it was regarded as a failure to live up to the Communist ideal. Russian sex manuals, which began appearing in the 1950's, are full of misinformation or rather reflected the state of the research of the pre-World-War-I period. They are sad to read. Unfortunately they were translated into Chinese, and the same misinformation was passed on there. The first Chinese book to reflect some of the current Western research was published by Fan Fur Ruan in the 1970's and it sold over a million copies within a few months.

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As Igor Kohn will tell you, the Soviets were not very sophisticated in sexual matters. The East Germans were a little more sophisticated, but open and frank sexual discussion was not encouraged. Certainly, attitudes are changing, encouraged by the movies and the media, but old myths still persist.

What is the importance of sex education and is it better to have any kind of sex education than not have it at all?

Sexual education is important if it is done correctly. This is because much of the information about sexuality is based on tradition rather than knowledge. This is why even non-believers have difficulty because the cultural tradition of Western societies is so heavily influenced by Christian ideology and by lack of real knowledge in the past. Research in sexology during the past has undermined most of the traditional ideas and the only way to bring this knowledge to people is through education. Television and movies and other media are important and are indicative of the changes taking place, but without the basic knowledge it sometimes creates a kind of schizophrenic attitude and helps perpetuate traditional mythology.

What is the importance of the law for changing sexual attitudes?

Law does not normally set conduct but tries to regulate it, and what the law should be is dependent on a number of variables. European civil law, for example, has followed the example of the French in many countries since the French revolution in establishing only two conditions for determining whether a sexual activity is legal: age and consent. If a person is of age and

consents, then there is nothing wrong with the sex act. Not all countries have followed this. Germany, for example, has not although in the first part of the nineteenth century, Western Germany did under French influence. Imperial Germany followed the traditional civil law which made homosexuality a crime. In English common law, there were various ambiguities (and in American as well) but in the last part of the nineteenth century penalties were made harsher. In either case, homosexuality was not eliminated. It just went underground. The law is important in bringing out into the open what has previously been ignored, criminalized, or medicated.

How can situation be changed in a country which still considers homosexuality a sin or illness under strong political and clerical pressure?

As far as homosexuality is concerned, I think attitudes everywhere are changing, in some countries more slowly than in others. Even the EU accepts homosexuality. The thing that has changed attitudes is in part the findings of sexologists themselves who, apart from a difference in sexual orientation, find homosexuals to have much the same feelings as heterosexuals. In the United States this began to be demonstrated in the 1940's, and though there have been changes brought about as both psychologists and psychiatrists admitted they could not find any basic differences and that same-sex relations were not necessarily a sign of illness, change is slow, and in the U.S. varies from state to state. Many religious people, especially fundamentalist Protestants who are biblical liberalists, and Catholics who still consider homosexuality as a

major sin in the canon law, still feel it is wrong. The Catholic Church, however, is changing since between 40 and 60% of the clergy in this country are homophile, i.e. if they were not celibate they would be homosexuals, and in fact many of them in spite of their vows of celibacy have same-sex relations.

I do not think homosexuality is an illness, an inversion, or a perversion. It is part of the human condition. We have always had people who have been interested in same-sex relationships, but often in the past such interests had to be denied, covered up, or repressed, often not successfully, which resulted in a lot of maladjusted people in society. Probably most conformed outwardly, many married, had children, and struggled against their desires. I think there are a number of factors which cause someone's homosexuality, and many if not most are biological in origin, including perhaps some hereditary factors, but what has been mostly demonstrated is the developments which take place in the uterus and during pregnancy. Obviously there are also developmental factors in childhood and adolescence which are important also but if the template is patterned in a certain way in utero, then the individual has a greater tendency to respond to these cues or crises in a different way than one who has been programmed differently.

What is for you the hardest issue for research in sexology?

I find the most difficult one to study is pedophilia because children are involved and people don't want to hear about it, cannot understand it, and are hostile to anyone who attempts to discuss it. When I first started study-

ing homosexuality, I received some of the same hostility but at least there were a lot of undercover homosexuals and lesbians who supported what I was saying. It is almost impossible to study pedophilia, however, since in the U.S. it is only possible to interview "victims" who are known and not find out how representative they are, and if any person confesses to his counselor that he has pedophilic feelings, he has to be reported to the government. In the past priests and the religious were exempt from such reporting but that will now probably take place as well. This means that the only pedophiles available for study are convicted criminals. In short, it is the most difficult field of study. Prostitution is probably the easiest one because people genuinely seem to want to find out about the topic.

My first work in sexology was a study of prostitution which I did in the early 1960's. As a result of a book review of the Wolfenden Report, a British Parliamentary Study of prostitution and homosexuality, I was contacted by a publisher to write a book. I decided to do it on prostitution because I was fearful of being labeled homosexual and only gradually did I and my late wife, Bonnie, publish in the broader range of sexuality. Essentially, however, I followed the advice that George Corner, one of the pioneering physicians in sex research, gave to his student, William Masters, who asked him for advice on a career in sex research. Corner told him to be married, have children, be in his late thirties, to have established himself in a specialty in the academic circles with suitable publications, and then, and only then, declare his real interest in

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sexuality. It is somewhat easier to make a career in sex in the United States now but one has to put up with a lot of joking, some hostility and considerable suspicion. Why are you doing this? I have been labeled a homosexual, a pedophile, a sado-masochist, a pornographer, and other things, and one web site still continues to label me as a pedophile because I have written on the subject. Such is life. You have to be willing to stand up for your beliefs and eventually most of your colleagues and people in general accept you for what you are, a sexologist.