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# Sex Research at the Borders of Gender: Transvestites, Transsexuals, and Alfred C. Kinsey

JOANNE MEYEROWITZ

**SUMMARY:** Sex researcher Alfred Kinsey's vision of sexual taxonomy continued to evolve after he published his first landmark volume on human sexuality, and his research into sexual subcultures went beyond his initial studies of homosexuality and prostitution. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, he developed a new interest in cross-dressing and cross-gender identification. This article outlines how and why he began to interview transvestites and transsexuals, and places his emerging vision of gendered behavior and gender identity within the scientific theories of his day. Kinsey rejected the prevailing views, preferring instead a behaviorist model of gender. He saw cross-dressing and crossgender identification as male phenomena and used them to speculate about sex differences in the capacity for psychological conditioning. In his usual style, he did not condemn transvestites or transsexuals, but he disapproved of the genital surgery requested by male-to-female transsexuals. It was here that Kinsey hit the limits of his well-known sexual liberalism in which he approved of all sexual variations that did not involve coercion.

**KEYWORDS:** Alfred Kinsey, Louise Lawrence, transvestism, transsexualism, gender, sex differences, sex research, crossgender identification, psychological conditioning

Historians have long recognized zoologist Alfred C. Kinsey as the key American figure in sexological research of the twentieth century. His landmark volumes *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) still stand as classic surveys of American sexuality. Less well known is Kinsey's work in defining the shifting

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meanings of what we now call biological sex (maleness and femaleness) and gender (masculinity and femininity). In the mid-twentieth century, many of the scientific studies of sex and gender focused on the study of the “abnormal”: the study of “deviants” on the margins helped define the center. In this area, Kinsey made distinctive contributions.

In the early twentieth century, the scientific studies of crossgender behavior and identification highlighted some fundamental debates on the definition of sex and the sources of gender. Some biological scientists posed a theory of human bisexuality, in which all men and women had, in varying proportions, both male and female physical characteristics and corresponding masculine and feminine traits. Scientists who adopted this view cast transvestites and transsexuals as extreme versions of a universal bisexual (or mixed-sex) condition.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, psychologists and psychoanalysts increasingly rejected biological explanations of masculinity and femininity and emphasized the psychodynamic processes of gender differentiation. In their view, transvestism and transsexualism were mental disorders, reflecting disturbances in early childhood experience. Kinsey’s place in these debates illuminates not only his own evolving visions of sex, gender, and sexuality, but also some of the larger tensions and changes in post–World War II American medical and scientific thought.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Kinsey developed an ardent interest in cross-dressing and crossgender identification, which he pursued with his usual zeal for locating and interviewing sexual subjects. He placed his work on transvestism and transsexualism within the prevailing scientific theories of his day. He dismissed both the biological and psychoanalytic explanations, and instead stood with a group of American physicians and scientists who in the 1950s postulated an increasingly influential behaviorist model of gender roles and gender identification. Kinsey died before he could elaborate this vision in any detail, but at the end of his career he was heading toward it.



From the late nineteenth century on, sexologists published case studies of cross-dressing and crossgender identification—of men and women who dressed as if, felt as if, or acted as if they were the other sex. The early sexologists included cross-dressing and crossgender identification as

1. I use the term *transvestites* to refer to cross-dressers and *transsexuals* to refer to those people with crossgender identification who hoped to transform their bodily sex characteristics through medical interventions.

components of “contrary sexual instinct” or “inversion,” terms they also used to refer to homosexuality. In the early twentieth century, the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld coined the word *transvestism* (and the British sexologist Havelock Ellis coined the word *eonism*) as a distinct category that included not only cross-dressing but also crossgender identification. Hirschfeld, in particular, acknowledged that some of the people he called “transvestites” hoped to change their sex, and in the 1920s and early 1930s he helped arrange some of the first sex-change surgeries through his Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin.<sup>2</sup> Although variants of the word “transsexualism” appeared occasionally in earlier writings, including in an article by Hirschfeld, it did not enter the medical parlance or connote a desire for sex-change surgery until 1949. In that year Dr. David O. Cauldwell, a psychiatrist, used the phrase “psychopathia transsexualis” in a popular magazine article, and in the following year he published a pamphlet that used the word “transsexual.”<sup>3</sup>

Through most of his career, Kinsey paid little attention to this emerging literature. In *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, he and his colleagues addressed neither cross-dressing nor the desire to change sex. In his initial research, Kinsey had specifically targeted only two illicit sexual practices: homosexuality and prostitution. He had, however, made contacts with transvestites and transsexuals. From at least the early 1940s he had asked his interviewees, both female and male, whether they cross-dressed. He had also engaged in extensive correspondence with a man in Chicago who desired desperately to change his sex,<sup>4</sup> and he had acquired a collection of materials on a transvestite in New York.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, Kinsey did not yet see cross-dressing or crossgender identification as significant independent sexological categories.

In the summer of 1948, though, Kinsey met Louise Lawrence, a male-to-female cross-dresser who lived in San Francisco full-time as a woman.<sup>6</sup>

2. For more on Hirschfeld’s involvement, see Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming), chap. 1.

3. See Joanne Meyerowitz, “Sex Change and the Popular Press: Historical Notes on Transsexuality in the United States, 1930–1955,” *GLQ: J. Lesb. Gay Studies*, 1998, 4: 159–87.

4. See Correspondence file: S. W., Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind. (hereafter KI); and additional letters from S. W. to Kinsey in TV-BNJ notebook, Harry Benjamin Collection, KI.

5. Harry Benjamin to Alfred C. Kinsey, 8 October 1947, Correspondence file: Harry Benjamin, KI.

6. The Kinsey Institute gave me permission to use Louise Lawrence’s name. The archival records make it clear that she wanted her contributions to science recognized. For other transvestite and transsexual correspondents, I use pseudonyms, noted in the text, in

At the time, Kinsey allegedly claimed that he “had case histories of only two or three transvestites” in his extensive files.<sup>7</sup> (Actually, the computerized records show that he and his colleagues had interviewed eleven transvestites, nine male and two female, by the end of 1947.<sup>8</sup> Still, the numbers were indeed small.) When Kinsey interviewed Lawrence, he asked her, in his usual style, whether she knew others he might meet. He had asked the right person. For around a decade, Lawrence had corresponded with other cross-dressers throughout the United States. She had a wide circle of transvestite friends, and, more important, she had a mission to educate the public about transvestism. She hoped to convince Kinsey that cross-dressing was a significant phenomenon, worthy of scientific study. As she recounted at the time: “In talking to Dr. Kinsey I brought up . . . my interest in transvestism . . . and to my surprise he said that he thought the problem was relatively rare. . . . I am very sure that it is much more common than most of us, even prominent doctors, are willing or able to admit.” She told Kinsey, “I was going to try and prove to him that I was right and he encouraged me by saying that any facts or figures I could contribute would be valuable.”<sup>9</sup>

With Kinsey’s blessing, Lawrence set out to make her case. Over the next several years she introduced him to an array of cross-dressers, professional female impersonators, and eventually transsexuals. She encouraged her friends to give their life histories to Kinsey: “I . . . try,” she said, “to point out the value of it, the sincerity of Dr. Kinsey, the complete anonymity as well as the personal pleasure they will get from the interview itself.”<sup>10</sup> Lawrence hoped to educate Kinsey and other scientists, even though she recognized that he was “interested strictly from a statistical viewpoint.”<sup>11</sup> She also sent him clippings and books, and transcribed

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order to protect their privacy. For public figures, like Christine Jorgensen, and activists, like Virginia Prince, I use their names only if they already appear elsewhere in the public domain.

7. Louise Lawrence, typewritten autobiography, continuation 1947–58, 2, large box, Louise Lawrence Collection, KI. In this account, Lawrence says she met Kinsey in 1948; another record gives the year as 1949.

8. From the computerized records, I used the variable “year of interview” for all women and men “who said transvestism was more than incidental.” Kinsey and his colleagues interviewed transvestites from 1941 to 1962. Almost half (54) of the 116 interviews took place in 1954 and 1955. Thanks to Thomas Albright of the Kinsey Institute for running the program.

9. Louise Lawrence to Harry Benjamin, c. December 1949, in TRNSV notebook, Lawrence Collection.

10. Lawrence to Benjamin, 9 December 1952, *ibid.*

11. Lawrence to Benjamin, 11 May 1953, *ibid.*

manuscripts for his library. In 1950, Kinsey began to pay her for typing the life histories of her acquaintances and for copying transvestite fiction, especially stories of “petticoat discipline,” an underground genre of erotic writing in which cross-dressed men suffer humiliation at the hands of sadistic women.<sup>12</sup> Lawrence sent Kinsey mounds of manuscripts of short stories and novels.

By the early 1950s, Lawrence had planted her seed of doubt. Earlier in his career, when Kinsey worked with gall wasps, he had classified them however he chose without the wasps’ objecting. When he worked with human subjects, though, he learned that they talked back: they engaged with the scientific discourse and sometimes tried to change it.<sup>13</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s, he worked closely with gay men who connected him with urban homosexual subcultures and shaped his views on homosexual behavior. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Louise Lawrence, on her own scientific mission, pushed him to reevaluate his understanding of transvestism. To his credit, Kinsey listened. He began to wonder whether he had perhaps underestimated the significance of transvestism.

But it was not just Lawrence’s campaign that pushed him toward a reconsideration. In the postwar United States, transvestism captured the public imagination in the form of professional female impersonation. The popular military drag shows of World War II burgeoned commercially in the years after the war ended, reviving the fascination with female impersonation seen earlier in the century. In the early 1950s, according to one observer, “the number of entertainment places featuring female impersonation doubled.”<sup>14</sup> Men who appeared on stage as women safely embodied the rising public interest in the performance of gender, especially femininity. But in the anxieties of the day, transvestism also elicited hostile reaction, as evidenced in postwar arrests for cross-dressing. In the post–World War II era, changing gender roles provoked what popular magazines dubbed a “crisis in masculinity.” Commentators feared a decline in masculine strength that seemed to threaten the nation’s vigor. Conservatives fretted over the rising numbers of women in

12. Kinsey to Lawrence, 16 May 1950, in file: Alfred C. Kinsey, Lawrence Collection.

13. See, e.g., Henry Minton, “Community Empowerment and the Medicalization of Homosexuality: Constructing Sexual Identities in the 1930s,” *J. Hist. Sexual.*, 1996, 6: 435–58; Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), chap. 7.

14. E. Carlton Winford, *Femme Mimics* (Dallas: Winford, 1954), p. 19. On female impersonation during World War II, see Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990), chap. 3. On female impersonation earlier in the century, see, e.g., Sharon R. Ullman, *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), chap. 3.

the labor force and called for women to return to the home.<sup>15</sup> In this context, male-to-female cross-dressers provided one more piece of evidence that men might behave as women and women as men.

As the interest in gender mounted, various critics noted publicly that Kinsey had left cross-dressers out of his volume on the human male. *Why*, a magazine of popular psychology, ran an article entitled “Transvestites: The Men Kinsey Forgot.” The article noted that another (unnamed) periodical had “recently referred” to transvestites “as ‘Kinsey’s Forgotten Men.’”<sup>16</sup> By training and temperament, Kinsey was foremost a taxonomist.<sup>17</sup> In his work on sexuality, he attempted to capture human sexual variation by noting the range and types of sexual behavior, yet the magazine articles suggested a serious taxonomic omission. He must have been stung.

In the early 1950s, Kinsey began to collect materials on transvestism with the same intensity with which he had amassed materials on homosexuals. He traveled to meet transvestites, and he took up correspondence with them. He also asked Louise Lawrence to “begin keeping a list of specific persons whom you know to be transvestites . . . [and] also of the cases you run across in the newspapers”; the lists, he hoped, could “give some clues to the number of transvestites.”<sup>18</sup> Eventually, in 1954, Lawrence sent him lists of all the cross-dressers she knew: 19 in the San Francisco Bay Area, and 152 nationally.<sup>19</sup> She also agreed to send personal materials, and over the next several years she sent a massive collection (now in the Kinsey Institute archives) that includes correspondence, a diary of the year (1944) she began to live as a woman, scrapbooks of clippings and photographs, and her autobiographical writings.

15. On postwar contests over gender roles, see, e.g., Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946–1958,” *J. Amer. Hist.*, 1993, 79: 1455–82; William H. Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), chap. 10. On wartime and postwar concerns about masculinity, see Edward A. Strecker, *Their Mother’s Sons: The Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem* (New York: Lippincott, 1946); Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1983), chaps. 3, 4; Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 103–8.

16. Henry Lewis, Jr., “Transvestites: The Men Kinsey Forgot,” *Why*, c. November 1950, p. 87, in Kinsey Clipping Notebooks (Male Series), KI.

17. James H. Jones, *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life* (New York: Norton, 1997), chap. 7.

18. Kinsey to Lawrence, 17 August 1950, in file: Alfred C. Kinsey, Lawrence Collection.

19. The Bay Area list, dated May 1954, and the national list, dated 28 October 1954, are both in TRNSV notebook, Lawrence Collection.

With Louise Lawrence's help, Kinsey made contact with—and, in a limited way, inspired—an emerging movement for transvestites' rights. In 1951, Lawrence personally took Kinsey to a social gathering of male-to-female cross-dressers in southern California. Shortly after the introduction, some members of this social network announced plans to inaugurate a newsletter for transvestites. Johnny Thornton, an impoverished cross-dresser who lived in Long Beach, allowed his name and address to be used for the venture. He and Eddie/Edythe, a retired lawyer with a penchant for multisyllabic prose, took the lead in producing the newsletter. Virginia Prince, who later became the nation's foremost advocate for transvestite rights, also wrote for the publication.<sup>20</sup>

To launch their newsletter, they circulated a letter (written by Prince but signed by Thornton) asking for donations, to a list of correspondents that now included Alfred Kinsey. The letter made direct reference to Kinsey and his studies: "Alfred Kinsey," it said, "left us out of his book. . . . He is now trying to make amends and is collecting all available information on transvestites. . . . The newsletter may aid the educational campaign."<sup>21</sup> Like the homophile (or homosexual rights) movement that emerged in the same era, the transvestite activists of the 1950s had an abiding faith in the legitimating authority of science, but they did not trust all scientists. Kinsey, in particular, had won their allegiance with his face-to-face meetings, earnest and sympathetic questioning, and refusal to moralize about or pathologize those on the sexual margins.

In 1952 the newsletter appeared, entitled *Transvestia* with the subtitle *Journal of the American Society for Equality in Dress*. It was intended for male-to-female cross-dressers; the publishers hoped to combat discrimination and prejudice, and specifically to distinguish cross-dressing from homosexuality. (In their attempts to win respectability in the 1950s, homophile activists often attempted to distance themselves from cross-dressers; and conversely, transvestite activists often attempted to distance themselves from homosexuals.) The newsletter *Transvestia* aimed in part to help researchers "in their worthy efforts in convincing the public that the true transvestite is sexually normal," and it specifically mentioned Alfred Kinsey as well as two sympathetic physicians.<sup>22</sup> Although one correspondent questioned whether anything "has been gained by Dr. Kinsey's

20. For a firsthand account of this history, see [Virginia Prince], "The Life and Times of Virginia," *Transvestia*, 1979, 100: 26.

21. J. Thornton to "Dear Friends," enclosed with Thornton to Kinsey, December 1951, in TRNSV notebook, Lawrence Collection.

22. *Transvestia*, 1952, 1: 4.

book,”<sup>23</sup> the overwhelming tone of the newsletter, in which Kinsey’s name appeared five times, indicated not only his influence but also a desire for his aid and approval. The newsletter even included a short quotation from a letter from “‘THE’ (eminent) Prof. Alfred Kinsey,” in which he blandly expressed his interest in and sent a “remittance” for the newsletter.<sup>24</sup> Within three years of beginning his concerted research on transvestites, then, Kinsey, despite his official position of scholarly detachment, found himself at the center of a fledgling movement for transvestite rights.<sup>25</sup>

In the same years, other events transpired that piqued Kinsey’s interest in transsexuals. In 1949, in San Francisco, he met and interviewed Val Barry (a pseudonym), a male-to-female who already lived as a woman and sought sex-change surgery. Kinsey took an unusual interest in Barry’s case. He referred her to endocrinologist Harry Benjamin, who not only administered hormones but also tried, unsuccessfully, to find her a surgeon in the United States. Working with Benjamin, Kinsey arranged for Barry’s psychiatric treatment and evaluation at San Francisco’s Langley Porter Clinic, where psychiatrist Karl M. Bowman had already taken a sympathetic interest in transvestites. Kinsey also asked Louise Lawrence to house Barry in one of the apartments she and her partner owned and managed. For several months, Kinsey corresponded with Barry, Lawrence, and Benjamin about the details of the case. As Barry became increasingly angry at the physicians and their delays, Kinsey became more deeply involved in the evaluations. In 1950, he participated in an “informal” meeting on Barry’s case at the Langley Porter Clinic. Kinsey and Bowman (the head of Langley Porter) concluded that “it is probable the operation the patient desires would not be of benefit.”<sup>26</sup>

Two years later, at the end of 1952, Christine Jorgensen made the news. Jorgensen had undergone sex-change surgery in Denmark, and the initial story on her operations immediately escalated into a sensational media circus. Kinsey was already primed. He told Harry Benjamin, who was Jorgensen’s physician in the United States, that he wanted an interview. “I should, of course, like very much to have a chance to

23. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

25. After two issues, the newsletter folded due to lack of funds. Virginia Prince revived it in 1960 and turned it into a national publication. On Virginia Prince and the second version of *Transvestia*, see Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), chap. 12.

26. Berdeen Frankel Meyer, “Case Summary and Closing Note,” 2 October 1950, p. 8, in V. B. correspondence, TV-BNJ 1 notebook, Benjamin Collection.

interview her," he wrote Benjamin, "for obviously it will cover material that we cannot get except from that type of operated case."<sup>27</sup> Kinsey contacted Jorgensen and arranged for her to come to Indiana University for an interview. Although he hoped to avoid the newshounds who dogged Jorgensen's every step, someone, most likely Jorgensen, alerted reporters to her visit. The newspapers jumped on the story, linking the nation's foremost sex researcher with the nation's most famous "sex change."<sup>28</sup>

For Kinsey, one interview was never enough. He wanted interviews with other transsexuals as well. Once again, Louise Lawrence came to his aid. In San Francisco, she served as his primary contact, locating cross-dressers who hoped to change their sex. Harry Benjamin also helped him out, introducing him to his patients. Because there were few postoperative transsexuals in the United States, Kinsey hoped for a 100 percent sample. In 1955, he wrote Benjamin: "We now have the histories of all of the persons, I think, who have had genital operations for the sake of assuming the role of the other sex. . . . Do you know of other cases?"<sup>29</sup> Although he focused almost wholly on male-to-female transsexuals, by 1956, the year of his death, Kinsey showed an interest also in female-to-males. He told Benjamin that he would "be delighted" to interview his "two cases of female transsexualists."<sup>30</sup>

In 1953, Kinsey published a few paragraphs on transvestism in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, which constituted his sole published contribution to the field. Toward the end of his life he included transvestism on a list of projects on which he hoped to write, and after his death, his colleagues Paul Gebhard and Wardell Pomeroy continued his work. They noted on several occasions that they hoped to write a volume on transvestites and transsexuals.<sup>31</sup> To that end, Kinsey and his colleagues had, by the end of the decade, interviewed a total of 100 male-to-female transvestites, 11 female-to-male transvestites, and 10 postoperative male-to-female transsexuals.

In the 1960s, though, Kinsey's colleagues at the Institute for Sex Research abandoned their proposed book. According to Gebhard, the

27. Kinsey to Benjamin, 9 May 1953, Correspondence file: Harry Benjamin, KI.

28. See, e.g., Wardell B. Pomeroy, *Dr. Kinsey and the Institute for Sex Research* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 386–87; Christine Jorgensen, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (New York: Eriksson, 1967), pp. 221–23.

29. Kinsey to Benjamin, 5 January 1955, Correspondence file: Harry Benjamin, KI.

30. Kinsey to Benjamin, 6 March 1956, *ibid.*

31. Jones, *Kinsey* (n. 17), p. 748; Paul H. Gebhard et al., *Sex Offenders: An Analysis of Types* (New York: Harper and Row and Paul B. Hoeber, 1964), p. 412.

National Institute of Mental Health offered research funds for studies of homosexuality, and the Institute shifted its research to follow the money.<sup>32</sup> There was little foundation funding for research on human sexuality, and none for research on transvestites and transsexuals. The lack of funding stopped the research in its tracks. In the mid-1960s, when the Erickson Educational Foundation—funded by Reed Erickson, a female-to-male transsexual—began to give grants for research on transsexuals, Kinsey’s colleagues had moved on to other work. Their data were left to sit in obscurity in the Kinsey Institute archives, where they could not possibly influence the new research in the field.



How do we interpret Kinsey’s interest? Two recent biographies suggest that his “crusading interest” in sex resulted “in part from his own evolving sexual orientation.”<sup>33</sup> James H. Jones focuses on Kinsey’s homosexuality, which Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy more accurately dubs bisexual behavior. Perhaps it is necessary to state, then, that Kinsey’s growing interest in transvestites and transsexuals does not seem to have stemmed from his own proclivities or activities. That is, we have no evidence that he cross-dressed or desired to change his sex. One transvestite correspondent posed the question directly and asked him whether he cross-dressed. Kinsey, it seems, gave an oblique answer, which acknowledged only his desire to obtain more interviews: “If it should prove that I really am a transvestite,” he responded, “would that secure more cooperation from your friends, or would that spoil cooperation?”<sup>34</sup> He did not place himself either as an inside participant or an outside observer. Instead, he preferred to straddle the line that demarcated scientific curiosity and empathic interest.

Kinsey’s biographers disagree on his sense of his own masculinity. Jones calls it “fragile,” and suggests that he asserted his masculinity to compensate for his own doubts.<sup>35</sup> Gathorne-Hardy directly disputes that assessment, finding instead that “Kinsey, like most, probably all, men had sides to his character which our culture labeled, often still labels, as ‘feminine.’ . . . But there is no evidence they made him uneasy.”<sup>36</sup> In the

32. Conversation with Paul Gebhard, 23 October 1996, Bloomington, Ind.

33. Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *Alfred C. Kinsey: Sex the Measure of All Things: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), p. 156.

34. Jones, *Kinsey* (n. 17), p. 618.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

36. Gathorne-Hardy, *Kinsey* (n. 33), p. 76.

end, we do not know how Kinsey's sense of his own gender shaped his research. For whatever reasons, no doubt complex, he gravitated to the sexual margins, and once there, he extended his research interests to the multiplicity of variations he encountered.



Kinsey, of course, was not the only scientist to show an interest in transvestism and transsexuality. By the mid-twentieth century, there were two prevailing and opposing views of cross-dressing and crossgender identification. On one side, scientists who were biologically inclined focused on the human body. They held to a theory of human bisexuality that had emerged in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a direct challenge to the concept of separate and opposite sexes, they argued that all humans had both male and female elements. The embryonic potential for both sexes, they said, left latent predispositions that were in turn stimulated or inhibited, especially by hormones. In the 1920s and 1930s scientists startled themselves with the discovery that men had female (as well as male) hormones, and women had male ones. This new discovery boosted the theory of bisexuality. With hormones as the measure, sex was quantitative, literally fluid, and all humans were, to greater and lesser degrees, mixtures of female and male. In the United States, this theory of bisexuality had made its way into medical texts by the 1920s and into popular sexology by the 1930s.<sup>37</sup>

In this vision of sex, though, some humans were more mixed than others. Magnus Hirschfeld was especially influential in promoting this view of biological sex in the early twentieth century. While he placed all humans in the mixed-sex category, he defined four particularly distinctive intergrade conditions: hermaphrodites, androgynes, homosexuals, and transvestites.<sup>38</sup> For Hirschfeld and his followers, transvestism and

37. See Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (London: Heinemann, c. 1906 [first German edition, 1903]); Gregorio Marañón, *The Evolution of Sex and Intersexual Conditions* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932). On hormones and the theory of bisexuality, see Nelly Oudshoorn, *Beyond the Natural Body: An Archeology of Sex Hormones* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 29. For American medical texts, see, e.g., Max Thorek, *The Human Testis: Its Gross Anatomy, Histology, Physiology, Pathology, with Particular Reference to Its Endocrinology* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1924), pp. 247, 254; Robert T. Frank, *The Female Sex Hormone* (Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1929), pp. 7, 8, 115; Hugh Hampton Young, *Genital Abnormalities, Hermaphroditism and Related Adrenal Diseases* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1937), p. 35. For popular accounts, see the magazine *Sexology*.

38. See Magnus Hirschfeld, *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross Dress* (1910; repr., Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1991); idem, "Die intersexuelle Konstitution," *Jahrbuch*

transsexualism were understood as physical conditions, caused by an imbalance of hormones or an underlying constitutional disturbance. This vision of intersex was shared by Christine Jorgensen's physicians in Denmark: they called her transsexualism "genuine transvestism," and speculated that "the most pronounced transvestites might be intersexes (sex intergrades) of the highest degree."<sup>39</sup> In the United States, Christine Jorgensen, following the lead of her Danish physicians, adopted the concept of human bisexuality and popularized it in the American press. "Both men and women," she said, to give just one example, "are both sexes. The most any man or woman can be is 80 percent masculine or feminine."<sup>40</sup> She thus placed herself within a universal mixed-sex condition, but she granted that her own peculiar combination of male and female differed from most others.

Harry Benjamin, too, publicized this vision. When he first met Jorgensen, he wondered immediately to what extent she had the mixed physical characteristics of both female and male. In private correspondence, he asked Jorgensen's endocrinologist in Denmark whether she had "hypertrophic or hypersensitive feminizing tissue in her adrenals," and also asked whether "a laparotomy [had] been performed to discover a possible presence of ovarian tissue."<sup>41</sup> In his first article on the topic, published in 1953, Benjamin wrote: "sex is never one hundred per cent 'male' or 'female' . . . there may be more or less pronounced irregularities in genetic and endocrine development with resultant 'intersexes' of varying character, degree and intensity."<sup>42</sup> In this article and in later writings he acknowledged psychological influences, but he always placed the stress on organic causes.

On the other side, psychiatrists, especially psychoanalysts, saw cross-dressing and crossgender identification as psychological disturbances, resulting from early childhood experience. Although Freud himself had

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*für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, 1923, 23: 9–26; James D. Steakley, "Per Scientiam ad Justitiam: Magnus Hirschfeld and the Sexual Politics of Innate Homosexuality," in *Science and Homosexualities*, ed. Vernon A. Rosario (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 133–54, on p. 143. See also Chandak Sengoopta, "Glandular Politics: Experimental Biology, Clinical Medicine, and Homosexual Emancipation in Fin-de-Siècle Central Europe," *Isis*, 1998, 89: 445–73.

39. Christian Hamburger, Georg K. Stürup, and E. Dahl-Iversen, "Transvestism: Hormonal, Psychiatric, and Surgical Treatment," *JAMA*, 1953, 152: 391–96, on p. 392.

40. *Christine Jorgensen Reveals*, record album interview, c. 1957, available at KI.

41. Harry Benjamin to Christian Hamburger, 13 May 1953, in TRNSV notebook, Lawrence Collection.

42. Harry Benjamin, "Transvestism and Transsexualism," *Intern. J. Sexol.*, 1953, 7: 12–14, on p. 12.

offered limited endorsement of the theory of human bisexuality, other psychoanalysts retreated from it.<sup>43</sup> In an influential article, “A Critical Examination of the Concept of Bisexuality,” first published in 1940, psychoanalyst Sandor Rado wrote that “there is no such thing as [physical] bisexuality either in man or in any other of the higher vertebrates.”<sup>44</sup> Before mid-century, though, psychoanalysts, especially those in the United States, spent relatively little energy developing alternative explanations of cross-dressing and crossgender identification, except to identify them as perversions. Otto Fenichel was one of the few early twentieth-century psychoanalysts who attempted to elaborate on the psychodynamic processes involved. In Fenichel’s words, the male-to-female transvestite “fantasies that the woman possesses a penis, and thus overcomes his castration anxiety, and identifies himself with the phallic woman”; the female-to-male transvestite, in whom he took less interest, displaced “envy of the penis to an envy of masculine appearance.”<sup>45</sup>

In the early 1950s, psychologists and psychoanalysts took a new interest in transvestites and transsexuals. After the surge of publicity surrounding Christine Jorgensen, a number of psychoanalysts vociferously objected to sex-change surgery and elaborated their views. They explicitly repudiated the biological theories. In the case of Jorgensen, they found “nothing in the preliminary physical and hormonal examination” that offered “convincing evidence that somatic, genetically determined factors played a predominant role.”<sup>46</sup> They provided a different interpretation that placed crossgender identification amid the sexual perversions and directly associated it with several specific perversions and pathologies, all portrayed as psychogenic. Emil Gutheil argued that transvestism and transsexualism always included “six psychopathologic factors”: homosexuality “with an unresolved castration complex,” sadomasochism, narcissism, scopophilia, exhibitionism, and fetishism.<sup>47</sup> He blamed mothers

43. Freud wrote that “a certain degree of anatomical hermaphroditism really belongs to the normal. In no normally formed male or female are traces of the apparatus of the other sex lacking” (Sigmund Freud, “Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex,” in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, ed. A. A. Brill [New York: Modern Library, 1938], p. 558).

44. Sandor Rado, “A Critical Examination of the Concept of Bisexuality,” in idem, *Psychoanalysis of Behavior: Collected Papers* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1956), p. 145.

45. Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York: Norton, 1945), pp. 344–45. See also Emil Gutheil, “Analysis of a Case of Transvestism,” in Wilhelm Stekel, *Sexual Aberrations: The Phenomena of Fetishism in Relation to Sex*, 2 vols. (New York: Liveright, 1930), 2: 281–318.

46. George H. Wiedeman, “Transvestism,” *JAMA*, 1953, 152: 1167.

47. Emil A. Gutheil, “The Psychologic Background of Transsexualism and Transvestism,” *Amer. J. Psychother.*, 1954, 8: 231–39, on p. 233.

for the pathology. Others presented transvestism and transsexualism as “sexual perversion,” possibly involving “an underlying schizophrenic process,”<sup>48</sup> or as a “neurosis” of an “exhibitionist nature.”<sup>49</sup> As they did in other areas (schizophrenia, for example), the psychoanalysts criticized the endocrinologists and surgeons who used medical interventions rather than “talking” cures. While they conceded that psychotherapy had thus far failed to change the crossgender identification of patients, they tended to place the blame, as Gutheil put it, on “the patients’ uncooperative attitude.”<sup>50</sup>

Kinsey did not adopt either of these prevailing views. As a biological scientist, he was in some ways more inclined to organic than psychological etiology. In the 1930s he showed an interest in studies on “sex determination, sex reversals, and sex intergrades.”<sup>51</sup> But in his volume on the human male, he explicitly repudiated the theory of human bisexuality. He did not accept the concept of sexual intermediacy, except in the rare cases of obvious physically intersexed conditions; no one else—and he specifically mentioned homosexuals—qualified as an intermediate sex.<sup>52</sup> He also rejected the psychoanalytic view. He had a well-documented antipathy to psychoanalysis: he abhorred the psychiatric pathologization of what he saw as natural variations in sexual behavior. More generally, Kinsey, the empiricist, expressed a fair amount of hostility toward the more theoretical models of Freud and his followers, and also toward the growing cultural authority of psychoanalysts.<sup>53</sup>

So how did Kinsey explain cross-dressing and crossgender identification? By the end of the 1940s, he had begun to emphasize individual variation, as he usually did, and he separated transvestism from homosexuality. Toward the end of 1949 he wrote Louise Lawrence: “We must have twenty or thirty transvestites in our histories, and no two of them are very much alike”; only a small portion, he said, were homosexual, “and this is something that the psychiatrists have not begun to understand.”<sup>54</sup>

48. Wiedeman, “Transvestism” (n. 46), p. 1167.

49. Mortimer Ostow, “Transvestism,” *JAMA*, 1953, 152: 1553. See also Karl M. Bowman and Bernice Engle, “Medicolegal Aspects of Transvestism,” *Amer. J. Psychiatry*, 1957, 113: 583–88, on p. 586.

50. Gutheil, “Psychologic Background” (n. 47), p. 238.

51. Jones, *Kinsey* (n. 17), p. 306.

52. Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1948), pp. 658–59.

53. Pomeroy, *Dr. Kinsey* (n. 28), p. 68; Jones, *Kinsey* (n. 17), pp. 299–300, 426, 494–95, 524, 577.

54. Kinsey to Lawrence, 10 October 1949, folder: Alfred C. Kinsey, Lawrence Collection.

In a letter to Harry Benjamin, he elaborated on his views of individual variation. In some cases, he said, transvestism originated in “childhood attractions” or “childhood games,” sometimes encouraged by the mother. In other cases, he related it to “the individual’s physical weakness or weak personality which makes them woo boys as companions and learn the arts of seducing as a female when they are young.” For still others, “physical configuration” made “the person uncomfortable in playing the role of their own sex. . . . We have seen this in the case of over-sized females who have no feminine graces.” Finally, he also pointed to developments later in life, especially in men who became “interested in female clothing as fetishes.” He concluded: “There seem to be as many factors as there are individual cases.”<sup>55</sup>

In *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, Kinsey seemed more willing to engage in generalization. Here he emphasized the behaviorist concept of psychological conditioning. Humans modified their behavior on the basis of their experience; if a human came to identify a particular stimulus with a positive response, she or he would seek to repeat the experience. Kinsey distinguished this form of “conditioning” from the psychoanalytic emphasis on early childhood experience: humans could continue to learn and be conditioned “at any time” during their lives.<sup>56</sup> For Kinsey, conditioning explained much of human sexual variation, including transvestism. In his view, conditioning separated humans from other mammals: although the sexual response in humans had much in common with other mammalian species, the greater variations among humans seemed to result from humans’ greater capacity to learn from experience. Kinsey located the distinction in the brain. “Man,” he wrote, “because of his highly developed forebrain, may be more conditionable than any of the other mammals.”<sup>57</sup>

Conditioning also separated males from females. According to Kinsey, experiences, associations, and sympathetic reactions conditioned the sexual responses and behaviors of the average male more than the average female. Although he found a wide range of sexual variation among both women and men, he identified gender differences in the frequency and patterns of sexual behavior. He found “no basic differences” in anatomy that might explain sex differences in sexual behavior, but he did point to hormones to explain a few differences, and especially

55. Kinsey to Benjamin, 27 November 1953, Correspondence file: Harry Benjamin, KI.

56. Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, and Paul H. Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1953), p. 643.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 644.

to “responses to psychologic stimuli” to explain others.<sup>58</sup> He saw “the effectiveness of . . . psychologic stimuli” as the “the most striking disparity which exists between the sexuality of human female and male,” and he asserted, with no apparent evidence, that it “must depend on cerebral differences,” perhaps located in “the biochemistry of the cerebral cortex.”<sup>59</sup> In this way, at least by implication, Kinsey associated the human female with lower mammalian species. Women and lower mammals seemed to share a less sensitive neurophysiology, or, to put it another way, an underdeveloped brain; they did not respond to stimuli in the same ways men did.

In his discussion of transvestism, Kinsey emphasized the male’s propensity for conditioning. “There are few phenomena,” he wrote, “which more strikingly illustrate the force of psychologic conditioning.”<sup>60</sup> He found it “highly significant” that “an exceedingly large proportion of the transvestites are anatomically males who wish to assume the role of the female”: by his estimate, only 2 to 6 percent of transvestites were “anatomic females who wish to be identified as males.”<sup>61</sup> “Transvestism provides one of the striking illustrations,” he wrote, “of the fact that males are more liable to be conditioned by psychologic stimuli. . . . The males who wish to be identified as females are in reality very masculine in their psychologic capacities to be conditioned.”<sup>62</sup> For Kinsey, transvestism illustrated (and helped define) male-female difference.

In the case of transsexuality, Kinsey also pointed to psychological factors, but he did not treat it entirely as benign variation. Although he expressed concern and sympathy for people who sought to change their sex, he had trouble accepting transsexual surgery. His initial position, it seems, was mainly one of denial: he could not quite comprehend people, especially male-to-females, who had such a strong sense of crossgender identification that they sought surgery to change their sex. In the 1940s, he seems to have advised a correspondent who wanted sex-change surgery “to see a very good psychiatrist.”<sup>63</sup>

In 1950, when Kinsey collaborated with Karl Bowman in the case of Val Barry, he and Bowman explained why they would not recommend surgery. Surgery, they said, would not change the secondary sexual

58. *Ibid.*, p. 712.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 681.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

63. S. W. to Kinsey, 2 October 1945, TV-BNJ notebook, Benjamin Collection.

characteristics or “solve the underlying psychological problem.”<sup>64</sup> But perhaps the most telling phrase in the report was the following: “Sexual desire would remain, with no possibility for genital outlet if a simple penile amputation were done.”<sup>65</sup> The word “outlet,” referring to orgasm, was Kinsey’s signature obsession.<sup>66</sup> He seems to have worried that the postoperative male-to-female transsexual would not be able to orgasm, which for Kinsey was the *sine qua non* of healthy sexuality. In the case of Val Barry, he encouraged homosexuality. The report stated: “The patient should be encouraged to undertake homosexual relations as a means of learning to value his genitals and as an interpersonal expression possible to him of his genitality.”<sup>67</sup> Barry was not convinced: “I have given a great deal of thought to the things we discussed,” she wrote Kinsey later; “I sincerely feel that having a [homo]sexual relationship with someone . . . would not prove my salvation. . . . I feel that only through surgery will it be possible for me to make my final adjustment with society.”<sup>68</sup>

Kinsey continued to doubt the wisdom of transsexual surgery and continued to advise homosexuality for male-to-females who sought to change their sex.<sup>69</sup> He worried that those who changed their sex would not be able to find employment.<sup>70</sup> But mostly he seemed concerned about genitals: “A male cannot be transformed into a female through any known surgical means,” he wrote one correspondent; “in other words, it would be very hopeless to attempt to amputate your male organs and implant a vagina.”<sup>71</sup> As his colleague Paul Gebhard remembered, Kinsey asked postoperative male-to-female transsexuals whether they could orgasm, thus revealing his ongoing concern with the “genital outlet.” Gebhard also remembered that Kinsey, despite his sympathy and tolerance, thought that some transsexuals, in particular, were “neurotic.”<sup>72</sup> To the end of his life, Kinsey hesitated to endorse transsexual surgery, although he came to understand that transsexuals were not simply self-denying or guilt-ridden homosexuals. In 1953 he told a correspondent that sex-change operations were illegal and beyond acceptable medical practice in the United States, and encouraged him instead to live as a woman

64. Meyer, “Case Summary” (n. 26), p. 8.

65. *Ibid.*

66. See, e.g., Pomeroy, *Dr. Kinsey* (n. 28), p. 77.

67. Meyer, “Case Summary” (n. 26), p. 8.

68. V. B. to Kinsey, 31 January 1950, in TV-BNJ1 notebook, Benjamin Collection.

69. See, e.g., Jones, *Kinsey* (n. 17), p. 622.

70. Kinsey to Benjamin, 5 January 1955, Correspondence file: Harry Benjamin, KI.

71. Jones, *Kinsey* (n. 17), p. 622.

72. Conversation with Paul Gebhard (n. 32).

without the benefit of surgery.<sup>73</sup> Two years later, he noted that “many persons act too quickly in deciding that they want genital operations.”<sup>74</sup>



This episode in *Kinseyana* provides us with some clues both to Kinsey and to mid-twentieth-century sexual science. It suggests that his vision of sexual taxonomy continued to evolve after he had published his landmark volume on the human male, and it also points to the ways in which he remained at the center of movements for sexual minority rights. His research into sexual subcultures went beyond his initial interest in homosexuality and prostitution. He used his scientific authority as an entrée into other sexual minority networks, with the implicit promise that his research would teach the public tolerance. Kinsey had interest in, empathy for, and no apparent aversion to those who crossed the gender divide. He listened to the people he interviewed, and to a certain extent he allowed some of his subjects, like Louise Lawrence, to shape his views on sexual behavior.

Kinsey could accept cross-dressing and even crossgender identification, but he balked at genital surgery. Although his interviewees and correspondents tried to remind him of his own principle of human variation—that humans varied in what they did and desired—he found himself caught perhaps by his own version of castration anxiety: his belief in the centrality of genitals, especially male ones, to human well-being. It was here that he hit the limits of his sexual liberalism in which he approved of all sexual variations that did not involve coercion.

Kinsey’s forays into the boundaries of gender also helped solidify his theories of sexual difference. As he recognized the permeability of gender boundaries, he simultaneously reinscribed sex difference. For Kinsey, cross-dressing and crossgender identification illustrated the gulf between females and males: he saw these as male phenomena, and he used them to speculate about sex differences in the brain that he thought explained differences in the capacity for psychological conditioning. He proposed a modified version of sexual dimorphism. In terms of anatomy, physiology, and orgasm, he emphasized repeatedly that women and men scarcely differ. In this, he directly challenged those of his contemporaries who envisioned men and women as different species of sexual beings. And yet he posited his own version of sexual difference, in which the

73. Kinsey to S. W., 23 January 1953, Correspondence file: S. W., KL.

74. Kinsey to S. W., 13 September 1955, *ibid.*

brains of men were more highly sensitive, and more developed, than those of women.

In many ways, Kinsey was a man of his times. Other American researchers in various scientific fields were also developing, in different renditions, some of the points on which Kinsey touched. Most notably, behaviorist explanations of gender, developed primarily in the United States, came to challenge, though not supplant, the older biological and psychoanalytic models, developed primarily in Europe. In the mid-twentieth-century United States, with the growing influence of social science, environmentalist theories rose to renewed prominence to explain various forms of human behavior.<sup>75</sup> In this context, some American scientists began to emphasize that social learning created what they called “psychological sex” or, later, “gender orientation.”<sup>76</sup> While later researchers did not adopt Kinsey’s version of male-female difference, in which men were more easily conditioned than women, they did replicate his vision in which crossgender behavior and identification were increasingly seen as learned or imprinted or conditioned, and largely immutable in adults. In the 1960s and after, increasing numbers of observers applied concepts of social learning more generally to gender, not just to crossgender behavior and identification. The notion that gendered behavior and identity were socially learned helped legitimate the various “gender identity clinics” established in university hospitals in the 1960s and 1970s, and also served as a mainstay of the emerging feminist movement.

75. See, e.g., Gerald N. Grob, “Psychiatry’s Holy Grail: The Search for the Mechanisms of Mental Diseases,” *Bull. Hist. Med.*, 1998, 72: 189–219, on pp. 211–12.

76. For a summary of some of this literature, see John L. Hampson and Joan G. Hampson, “The Ontogenesis of Sexual Behavior in Man,” in *Sex and Internal Secretions*, ed. William C. Young, A. Albert, and Edgar Allen, vol. 2, 3d ed. (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1961), pp. 1401–32.