

20 questions for Julia Heiman

Interview by Beth Wood Photography by Steve Raymer

Carrying the Torch at The Kinsey

In 2004, The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction chose Julia R. Heiman to be its sixth director. Heiman came from Seattle's University of Washington where she was a leading sex researcher, professor, author, and therapist. Arriving shortly before the release of the film *Kinsey*, the new director faced the world's reawakened curiosity about the Institute, its founder Alfred Kinsey, and its current research. As she completes her third year at Kinsey, Heiman maintains a complex schedule. In addition to directing the Institute, she is conducting her own research here and in Washington, guiding the research projects of doctoral students, and working with the Indiana University School of Medicine to establish a sexual medicine research clinic in Indianapolis.

BLOOM What attracted you to the field of sex research?

HEIMAN I was really interested in studying the connection between people's physical experience and their mental or emotional experience. The fall that I arrived in graduate school, Masters and Johnson's book on human sexuality was just published. They talked about sexual response—arousal and orgasm—in men and women in a way that really shocked America because they looked at it in a laboratory setting. Like Alfred Kinsey, Masters and Johnson were pioneers. Their research made a difference in how people could talk about sexual experience.

My adviser was interested in exploring this area...from a perspective of emotion and the





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psychophysiology of emotion. I decided that since no work was being done there, it would be more interesting to do something new than to work in an area that was well established. He and an engineer in the department developed a way to measure female sexual arousal that is still used today. I was the first person to publish a large study comparing men and women in their physical and subjective sexual arousal responses. And that really launched my career.

BLOOM Why did you decide to take on the leadership of the Institute?

HEIMAN I decided that it was the right time to focus on something other than my own career and to do something for the field. That was very energizing and attractive. I think this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and challenge. It is extremely engaging to think about putting this wonderful Institute on the map of future scientific and human endeavor and interest.

BLOOM The Kinsey Institute has a colorful history, much of which is controversial because of the nature of its research. Did that cause you to have reservations about accepting the job of director?

HEIMAN I decided that the fact that it was controversial was outdated. What controversial things had it truly done since Kinsey first published his books? Maybe there were some individuals that people had opinions about, but in fact, this has been a busy place that is doing good work. Even when I got here I found the objections people had were objections based on misinformation they had about Alfred Kinsey himself and his initial work. It had nothing to do with the present.

In some sense, sex research has never been fully accepted in the United States like it has in many places in Europe, so I was used to that. Some people just object to any study of sexuality. I'm not going to change their minds, but they are the minority. What we do is for the majority of people. They know that if we don't pay attention to sexual issues, we rob ourselves of important information and we put ourselves in danger. The HIV epidemic is a case in point. The HIV epidemic is definitely caused by a virus. However, the things that spread that virus have to do with human behavior, human ideas, and gender roles. And we did not spend enough time seriously understanding that before the virus came along. We should take heed.

BLOOM You came right before the release of the *Kinsey* movie. How did that affect your role as director?

HEIMAN It made me aware of how little I knew about how to deal with all of the things around a major feature film! It was true on-the-job training. It gave me a lot of external exposure as director that I could have made better use of a year later. I was completely impressed by the support we had in the community. It made me feel extremely warm toward the community's investment in us being a part of their history.

BLOOM How accurate was the movie in depicting Dr. Kinsey and the early days of the Institute?

HEIMAN It helped capture the singularity of his effort, the intensity of his focus. This was a man who felt that information and knowledge would make a difference. When he found no information about sexuality in marriage, and sexuality in general, he went after it with the same determination and focus and drive that he had with his study of seven million gall wasps. When you do that, you don't always

do things that the rest of the world—no less academics—would do.

Some of the things depicted in the movie about his personal life were written about him in biographies. Kinsey was not alive when

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they were published to say whether those things were true. So honestly, I can't say one way or the other. He never spoke, for example, of his own intimate personal life in writing. I would just like to leave it at that because he, himself, was so protective of people's privacy.

BLOOM If you could meet Alfred Kinsey today what would you like to ask him?

HEIMAN I would ask what he'd be interested in studying about the biology of sex and how he would try to fit that into the cultural aspects of it. Given we are beginning to look at genetic influences on sexual behavior, what would he go after? What would he see

as valuable and how would he try to connect the two? And then I would ask him about new theories and new ways of thinking about evolution since he was, in a sense, an evolutionary biologist.

BLOOM Are there other sex institutes in the world like Kinsey's or is it unique?

HEIMAN Kinsey is unique because it has an active research program combined with a remarkable and ever-growing collection of art and artifacts and research materials. That combination is unparalleled. There are other institutes in the world that have some art work. There are some research centers around the world. But the combination of research, art, and collections is unique. The other thing that makes it unique is that the Institute has endured 60 years.

BLOOM What type of work were you doing before you came here?

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“Bloomington always surprises me. For a small community it has such vitality and breadth and depth.”

HEIMAN I was at the University of Washington Medical School running a reproductive and sexual medicine clinic. We saw men and women and couples with sexual problems. We saw some people with gender distress, some with compulsive sexual problems, some with sexual pain disorders, and some who were looking at sexually explicit material and endangering their relationships and work situations. We had a very large clinical program where we offered treatment and we had an active research program. I also did some teaching, particularly to psychiatry and OBGYN residents in the medical school.

BLOOM What work are you currently doing in Seattle and how do you manage it all?

HEIMAN Not always gracefully. I still have one ongoing project with the University of Washington and another one submitted. I am working with a team that is particularly interested in the effect of alcohol on sexual risk-taking and sexual decision-making. We are planning a future study that involves using imaging techniques to study processes of sexual response in the brain and throughout the body.

My husband (Johan Verhulst, M.D.) lives in Seattle, so we have a bit of a commute. He works part time at the University of Washington's Department of Psychiatry doing both teaching and clinical work. He comes here twice a month and I see him when I go back to Seattle. He's getting to know Bloomington and he enjoys being here.

BLOOM As someone who has lived in other parts of the country what are your thoughts about Bloomington and Indiana?

HEIMAN Bloomington always surprises me. For a small community it has such vitality and breadth and depth. Part of that is the university, where I think the intellectual energy is impressive. Coming from Seattle, I wasn't prepared for how beautiful this part of Indiana is. I feel that most people are very proud and protective of that. They should be, because this kind of beauty shouldn't be taken for granted.

I don't feel I know Indiana because I have been a little bit too sequestered in my focus between the Institute and its connection to Indianapolis. My impressions are naive, perhaps, and limited. What I have been surprised about in Indiana is a great suspiciousness about change, and there may be good reasons for that. Maybe change has come here in ways that have hurt people and have hurt lives. But we're all going to have to cope with rapid change and we must find a way to protect the things we care about and foster the things that make sense for the future. I think if the state's going to remain as beautiful as it is, and have a place of meaning and importance in the future, then positioning around change and how to cope with it is vital.

BLOOM What are your current research interests?

HEIMAN I am interested in continuing to do more intensive work on understanding the processes of sexual desire and sexual response. I'd like to study couples more, rather than just study individuals. There's a lot to find out about couples.

Sexual health is another area. There are three particular areas under that broad heading that we are trying to spend more time on. One is predicting sexual risk-taking. We are looking not just at risk-taking for sexually transmitted diseases but at people risking their relationships by a variety of things, like affairs or just not taking care of the relationship. Another area we're trying to understand

is sexual aggression and sexual coercion. And here, not to just understand what goes on for women who are involved in these interactions, but for the men too. The third area is understanding the whole process of reproduction and how it might impact sexual function-

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ing and relationships. We are just starting a study of women in the first six months after they've given birth to see what goes on for them emotionally in terms of relationships and in terms of their brain functioning.

Instead of studying sex by separating it from everything else people do, we want to see how sex fits into people's lives—or not. Sex is not something that's important to everybody's life, but at some point in everybody's life it may be important for a while. For other people, it's important their whole lives. How does it fit into how people conduct themselves in the world? Why is it important? And, in what ways is it important or not to people?

BLOOM What is the current focus of The Kinsey Institute?

HEIMAN The Kinsey Institute is about advancing sexual health through knowledge. Research is the current focus, as is expanding

our faculty. We are gradually building our worldwide research contacts in a more structured way. We are in a period of serious planning for the future. That includes having an endowment and new space because we have outgrown our space. We need funding that is not dependent on the sources that we currently have. Those are critical areas of focus.

BLOOM What's the biggest misconception about The Kinsey Institute?

HEIMAN Among the scientific community it's that we only do one kind of research...only biological research or only survey research. For others, the misconception about us is that



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we do research that's relevant for only very few people and that it doesn't have anything to do with people's everyday lives. That really is a misconception.

BLOOM Is it true that the Institute has a collection of pornography second only to the Vatican's?

HEIMAN I've heard that a lot. We certainly have a large collection—over 40,000 photo-

I think there is much that is easily available to people when they're too young, before they have a chance to form their own ideas and try things out for themselves.

graphs and over 110,000 other items. I have yet to see the Vatican's collection or anything published about it, but I would be happy to go on a fieldtrip to see whether or not this is true. I doubt the Vatican would open their doors. We would open our doors to them.

BLOOM What would you like to accomplish as director of the Institute?

HEIMAN The first thing I want is to get a strong start for the endowment. This would allow the Institute to rely more on itself. In the very long run, funding for projects and research here and for other people's projects and research throughout the U.S. and beyond. The other thing I would like to find is a creative, innovative, youthful, and environmentally friendly solution to our space needs. I would like to see at least ten faculty directly connected with The Kinsey Institute and spending time here on a regular basis.

I'd also like to see another five international faculty coming through at any point in time. Fifteen years from now, whether I'm here or not, I'd like to see the Institute looking something like that.

BLOOM What questions about sex do you get most frequently from college students through your website and your syndicated column *Kinsey Confidential*?

HEIMAN A very large number of their questions are either directly or indirectly about relationships—how to negotiate sex in a relationship or how to negotiate not wanting to be sexual and working that out. We get questions about safety, symptoms people are having that may be serious or not. Most commonly we're asked about worries, hopes, concerns, and uncertainties.

BLOOM How do popular entertainment media such as *Playboy*, *Maxim*, *Cosmopolitan*, sexually explicit websites, and other media affect our knowledge of sexuality?

HEIMAN Some people are trying to study this and they're particularly interested in the impact of pop culture materials on emerging ideas of sexuality. What I'm interested in knowing about is how it affects people when they get in a real relationship with somebody as opposed to watching a relationship in the media. How do you trust the sources? How do kids decide what's a good source of information? What about adults? I don't know. The kind of sex you see typically, even on TV, is not very realistic for most people's lives. That's okay. Things don't always have to be realistic. But then how do you deal with real sexual relationships and real commitment? How do you make sense of it for yourself? What are the values that you should be developing? I think there is much that is easily available to people when they're too young, before they have a chance to form their own ideas and try things out for themselves. I'm concerned about what could be done, but I don't have any predictions. I just hope that people will find a good set of values from which to choose. That's really the issue here.

BLOOM How do politics affect the work at the Institute?

HEIMAN Politics directed at The Kinsey Institute have been very intermittent and nothing serious. If we look at the larger political atmosphere, the dangers to the Institute are the dangers to science. That would be the tendency to negate good quality science in favor of a biased opinion for political purposes. This is of great concern for me and my colleagues because we are about generating and disseminating unbiased, balanced coverage of knowledge. If someone doesn't respect that, we're in great trouble on all sorts of levels and The Kinsey Institute is only part of that concern.

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BLOOM The Institute has been more accessible to the public in recent years. Has that helped you in any way?

HEIMAN I think it's a good idea and it has at least helped people feel like there's not something really awful going on here. There are just ordinary people here doing extraordinary work. They can see that we are serious and not just here to amuse ourselves. A lot of the material that we have here was actually not meant to

I would like to see us do more on the fact that sexual violence is so normative in this country and worldwide. People don't seem to be upset enough about it.

be kept private. The Chagall paintings that we have, for example, were meant to be seen. People can see (through our collections) how people have looked at sexuality in different cultures and over time.

BLOOM If money were no object and you could fund the sex research of your dreams, what would the Institute be studying?

HEIMAN We would be studying how sex fits into people's lives. We would be studying couples and following them over time. We would be studying predictors of what makes good relationships and not good relationships and how important sex is to that. We'd have more cross-cultural research than we do now. We would have an annual conference that would look at the absolute leading edge of questions we need to study. We would not be doing all the research ourselves, but we would be helping other people get research done, because it's not going to be up to one place, ever.

We'd also study some clear social problems—such as disease and how sex fits into other human problems such as abuse of drugs and alcohol. I would like to see us do more on the fact that sexual violence is so normative in this country and worldwide. People don't seem to be upset enough about it. There is a lot of sexual violence or sexual coercion going on in this country and people accept it like it's part of life. The other area would be how changes in our environment that may be unhealthy for us, in general, may be unhealthy for sexual reproduction. ✧

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