America in Aggregate

The committee will study the American people, their jobs, the insides of their houses, what they do evenings and holidays, what they learn in school, what they think of their neighbors, what is wrong with their health, and so on. It may even track down that slippery specter, the average American, so long pursued by novelists with kodaks and fountain pens.

—Outlook and Independent, on the Committee on Social Trends, 1930

This is the great age of confession... We tell Dr. Gallup how we are going to vote and Mr. Hooper what we propose to listen to on the radio. Our psychiatrist delves into our sex dreams and Dr. Kinsey into our actual performance along those lines.

—New York Herald Tribune, 1948

The 1947 James Stewart film *Magic Town* tells the story of Grandview, an American community so perfectly average that the views of its citizens mirror those of the national population. Stewart's character, Rip Smith, is a struggling opinion pollster who discovers this statistical shortcut and hopes to profit from it. Posing as an insurance agent, he arrives in Grandview determined to keep its typicality a secret, its ways just as they are. Naturally, however, the secret gets out, and the townspeople become too self-conscious about
their own opinions to make them representative. Further undermin-
ing Grandview's ordinariness is the fact that Americans from all over the country flock to the town, aspiring to live in this most nor-
al of communities.

Appropriately enough for a Hollywood movie, Magic Town played upon two sorts of fantasies in the modern United States. One was the promise of empirical surveys to disclose the society to itself. The other was the possibility of locating a definitive midpoint in an infinitely heterogeneous nation, whether through a typical community like Grandview (almost certainly modeled on an actual social survey, Middletown) or through more elaborate techniques of scientific sampling. In the middle decades of the twentieth cen-
tury, this core America was the elusive target of social scientists but also marketers, commentators, and politicians. As Magic Town's fascination with statistical normality suggests, average America could be an alluring entity for ordinary moviegoers as well. But how could they know what the average was, or what typical Americans did or believed? New social scientific techniques of polling, sampling, and quantifying the nation developed in these same years would provide compelling answers. Bound up with citizenship in ways obvious and subtle, surveys demarcated lines of inclusion, ex-
clusion, and affinity in a national public. As such, they sat in comp-
licated relationship to both social reality and mass culture. In the pages that follow, I explore the ramifications of this knowledge about "ourselves" in the public sphere.

Americans today are accustomed to a seemingly endless stream of questions from survey researchers, political pollsters, marketers, and census takers. They are equally familiar with the battery of re-
results flowing from social scientific investigation, of knowing that the majority of the nation supports the death penalty or that half of all marriages end in divorce. Public life is awash in statistics docu-
menting phenomena as diverse as consumer confidence and religious faith. None of this will surprise twenty-first-century readers. Of course experts tabulate buying habits, political tendencies, and attitudes toward work and family. Of course we rely on statistics to gauge our economic status and follow polls to know whether we swim with or against the aggregate tide. Being studied, and being privy to the results, is an understood and unexceptional feature of modern life. It is perhaps the principal way that we know ourselves to be part of a national community.

Despite our daily immersion in social data, we generally do not inquire into how certain kinds of facts have achieved their prominence, their stability, and their seeming inevitability in public life. What is surprising about this intimacy between social scientific in-
quiry and U.S. culture is that it is so new. Only in the years after World War I did mass surveys telling Americans "who we are," "what we want," and "what we believe" enter the public domain. Over the next several decades, they would transform it. But this was a fitful, if relentless, transformation. It was not obvious in the 1920s that citizens would accept prying questions from market re-
searchers or opinion surveyors, or that they would trust the assembled answers as either trustworthy or true. Even those who stood to benefit from such data gathering were not convinced of its value. It took considerable work, for example, to persuade business owners in the 1910s and 1920s that collecting information about their cus-
tomers' buying habits was worthwhile. And as one historian has noted, in the 1930s "it was a commonplace that the United States had better statistics on its pigs than on its unemployed people."

If it is nearly impossible for us to imagine a world without such facts—what a journalist called the "nuggets of knowledge that have replaced anecdote, hearsay, imagination and history as the fodder of so much modern discourse"—Americans in the middle decades of the twentieth century were clear-eyed about their novelty. For them, "surveys" were a catch-all category containing a multitude
of modern information-gathering techniques: market research, academic surveys, opinion polls, community studies, and quantitative reporting. Social critics and commentators, but also ordinary individuals, were alert to the gradual infiltration of new kinds of questions and new kinds of data into everyday life. As a journalist remarked in 1948, "Our living—so poll-minded has it become—has reached such a state of public and private inquisitiveness that taboos of even a previous decade are rendered obsolete." Mused another just a few years later, "Today, unless you can say 'According to the Poop-A-Doo survey, Umpty-ump percent of the people chew gum while they read Hot Shot News!' you fail to make an impression." Such observers commented quizzically upon the modern mania for data and complained about being "statisticized." Whether they welcomed or decried it, they recognized a culture of surveying—and a surveyed culture—coming into being.  

Surely an awareness of these social facts altered citizens' views of the American public and their place within it. But how? In what ways is a society changed by the very tools employed to represent it? In the modern United States, such tools were increasingly those of empirical social science: graphs, percentages, and curves professing faithfully to reveal the nation to its members. There were, of course, many other ways to envision America, beginning with works of literature, photography, and history. But the modern survey, as one commentator has noted, is "an instrument of special power for viewing mass populations in industrial societies, especially in their character as social facts, political publics, and economic markets." Scientific surveyors—bolstered by newfound authority and armed with new knowledge-making techniques—would assert a unique ability to measure and express the nation. Crucially, the information their techniques yielded was not intended solely for experts. It was for the citizen as well. Surveys are a peculiar sort of social investigation in which the public is simultaneously object, participant, and audience. In the twentieth century, Americans would take part in, and depend upon, social scientific surveys as never before. Many learned to offer up information about themselves to strangers. And masses of new facts about national habits, practices, and attitudes found their way into public forums. Social data, freely divulged and widely broadcast, would come to bear profoundly on how Americans understood their society and themselves.  

Professional statisticians, government bureaucrats, academic social scientists, and all manner of planners claimed that survey methods, newly "scientific," were essential for understanding the changes sweeping the United States and for managing a complex industrial society. Carefully collected data could be used to assess economic conditions, tap efficiently into public opinion, guide national policies, and perceive social reality more clearly. In 1939 Henry D. Hubbard, a spokesman for the National Bureau of Standards, put it this way: "There is a magic in graphs... Wherever there are data to record, inferences to draw, or facts to tell, graphs furnish the unrivalled means whose power we are just beginning to realize and to apply." Scientific surveys were trumpeted as both a sign of, and a route toward, a modern culture that prized empirical investigation over faith, tradition, approximation, common sense, and guesswork.  

Many contemporary observers thus viewed surveyors' aggregating techniques as the inevitable product of a "mass society." But national polls and surveys, we shall see, were as much responsible for creating a mass public as they were reacting to its arrival. Social data were not, of course, the only force driving in this direction during the peculiarly cohesive era marked by the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. A truly national public was bolstered in this period by the popular culture of radio and film, the joining together of different ethnic groups in the unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the spike in citizenship rates after the curtailing of immigration in 1924, wartime bond drives, and
anticommunist rhetoric. We know much about these forms of national glue. What, however, of the impact of knowledge about “ourselves”—all the more potent for its status, not as entertainment or propaganda, but as truth? Ways of knowing, although less visible than memberships in civic associations and labor unions, are equally critical resources for fashioning public identities and political communities, and for structuring people’s encounters with the social world.5

Midcentury surveyors’ depictions of the population were at once the essential means by which individuals could perceive a mass society and the incontrovertible evidence for its existence. That is, in the statistics, surveys, and spectra now available to them, citizens could see themselves as part of a new collective, one constituted by and reflected in data compiled from anonymous others. This book offers a history of Americans’ encounter with modern surveys, and especially these surveys’ bid for legitimacy, their popular diffusion, and their cultural power. It documents the emergence of novel ways of knowing society as well as the sharp controversies they provoked. Along the way, it charts the deeply entangled fates of mass surveys and the U.S. public. And it highlights a little-noticed transformation: one whereby statistical majorities, bell curves, and impersonal data points came to structure Americans’ social imaginations.

Survey data did not arrive out of the blue in the twentieth-century United States. Social statistics themselves have a much longer career, emerging originally as a “science of state”—that is, the gathering of information useful for governing. Rulers have counted, administered, and made “legible” populations for military service and taxation stretching back at least as far as William the Conqueror’s Domesday Book of 1086. Modern nation-states have depended on the systematic collection of demographic data to manage public health, assess economic progress, and craft social policies. In the United States, the official census initiated in the 1780s was coincident with the nation itself. Too, already by the turn of the eighteenth century, a variety of nonstate enterprises were tabulating birth and death rates, or “vital records,” in order to track epidemics and devise insurance tables. Western countries in the nineteenth century witnessed a wave of surveying by private citizens and philanthropists, producing a veritable “avalanche of numbers” in the service of industrial and social reform. This latter sort of information gathering about national bodies, whether to track fertility or poverty, is what Michel Foucault so provocatively called the “bio-politics of population,” a distinctly modern mode of governance more attentive to regulating individual persons than territorial claims.6

Clearly, social information encased in numbers is not, in and of itself, a recent invention. But the purposes and effects of gathering such data shifted dramatically in the twentieth century, and nowhere as rapidly as in the United States, where, as Olivier Zunz points out, “new ideas about statistical distribution . . . were to flourish in ways unfathomable in Europe.” Not only did efforts to collect social facts intensify in all corners of American society. Surveyors also probed more deeply into the character of the citizenry, tallying not just observable characteristics but less visible behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. New individuals—notably, white middle-class Americans—were targeted for investigation as old strictures guiding whom and what could be asked were loosened and then discarded. These changes were related to the new status of social science in the early twentieth century. Shedding an older language of reform, social investigators proclaimed that their goal was to provide neutral descriptions of, rather than prescriptions for, society. Yet, again especially in the United States, they also billed their methods as democratically useful, instruments of national self-understanding rather than bureaucratic control. For this reason, the gatherers of facts and figures sought not to restrict their data
to elite decision makers but to disseminate their findings widely. Indeed, they proclaimed the special relevance of aggregate data in a representative democracy. Modern surveys had an egalitarian ring to them, purporting to discern just who Americans were and what they wanted. Relying on voluntary rather than state-mandated cooperation, surveyors emphasized the participatory aspect of their work, as well as the virtues of contributing information for the good of the whole. All of this would permit social data to play a novel role in the public sphere as well as individual lives.7

How and why did these survey technologies arrive on the scene when they did? Several streams—scientific, institutional, commercial, and cultural—converged to permit survey data to take on a new prominence in the twentieth-century United States. These ranged from innovations in sampling techniques to the professionalization of social science, and from the waging of war to the expansion of the national media.

One stream was scientific: the invention of new or newly precise methods for calculating change and measuring variability across populations. Standardized questionnaires and formal interview schedules had been pioneered in the nineteenth century. Refinements of these techniques, but especially the development of scientific sampling, would be of central importance in extrapolating from small numbers to national publics in the twentieth. A related current was the advance of social scientists into the academy. Sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, and psychology—not yet truly separate disciplines—gained sharper definition after the Civil War, answering calls for a “science of society” from across the Atlantic by Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, and in the United States by William Graham Sumner and Lester Frank Ward. A loose tradition of social investigation crystallized at the turn of the century as universities carved up intellectual inquiry into discrete departments, and professional societies such as the American Economic Association and the American Sociological Society codified legitimate social scientific practice.8

Still other streams were bureaucratic. Statistical information answered the demand of an advanced industrial society for ways to order a diverse and swelling population. The federal government had sponsored the U.S. census as well as labor statistics bureaus and the ethnographic surveys of the Smithsonian in the nineteenth century. But it was during World War I that bureaucrats would discover a broader utility to social scientific knowledge, especially in the areas of motivation, morale, and persuasion. The war era itself saw new techniques of evaluation, such as army intelligence tests, employed on a national scale. Architects of the “technocratic” state of the 1920s, with its managerial charge and emphasis on planning, took a further step, seizing upon social statistics as objective, seemingly nonpolitical instruments for decision making. Government and foundation support for the social sciences was crucial to surveyors’ growing cultural authority. In President Herbert Hoover’s two ambitious information-collecting projects of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Committee on Recent Economic Changes and the Committee on Social Trends, official statistics were elevated as ends in themselves, tools for expressing facts about the population and capable of giving shape to the nation. The Great Depression and World War II would bind surveyors and the state even more tightly, as federal agencies tapped academic social scientists to advise the government directly.9

Emerging alongside academic, foundation, and state investment in statistics was a corresponding private and commercially based commitment to social scientific practices. This much is evident in the sheer range of enterprises devoted to quantifying and sorting the stuff of American life in the early decades of the twentieth century. Modern market research arrived in 1911 with the establishment of the Harvard Bureau of Business Research. Intelligence measurement began in earnest in the years just before World War I, and standardized achievement assessments were launched by the Carnegie Corporation beginning in the late 1920s. In that decade, some four million schoolchildren submitted to mental tests annu-
ally. Management science and “human relations” came of age with efficiency and productivity experiments such as those at the Hawthorne Plant in Chicago between 1924 and 1932. Widespread personality testing was soon to follow, as would systematic newspaper and radio audience research. A broad array of corporate, educational, and media interests in these years created a market for evermore-precise social indicators, embedding survey techniques in far-flung corners of American society.10

Scientific innovations, accredited experts, statecraft, and commerce were all critical to the circulation and use of new social scientific facts. But there was also a broad cultural demand, palpable by the early twentieth century and generated by a complex of worries about modern industrial society, for new ways of visualizing and making sense of the nation as a whole. As historian Robert Wiebe observed, “It seemed that the age could only be comprehended in bulk,” and so “people everywhere weighed, counted, and measured it.” Americans in this period confronted a new corporate order, rapid rates of urbanization, and at least early on, a heavy flow of immigration. It was an era whose commentators invented the phrase mass society, a capacious term used to denote the transition from local communities to a national one, and not usually for the better.11

Anxious public discussions about the ebbing of traditional social bonds raised urgent questions. How, with diverse peoples clashing in cities, would the nation summon unity and stability? How, given accelerating bureaucratic organization and economic consolidation, could it remain democratic? How, amidst a dazzling array of new commercial entertainments, might common mores be determined? Many commentators in the new century sensed a crisis in older notions of the American public, and particularly the breakdown of conventional religion, culture, or morality as regulating ideals. Social surveyors were among those who searched for a replacement, for new definitions of community, citizenship, and norms when the old moorings no longer seemed to hold. The alignment of national introspection and social scientific description across the first half of the century was thus not accidental. Surveyors’ questionnaires and statistics were tightly intertwined with the distinct challenges facing the society in which they lived.

Crucial to the intersection of pressing questions and new techniques that aimed (however imperfectly) to answer them were the actions of information gatherers themselves. Here it was not so much government agencies like the Census Bureau but entrepreneurial pollsters, marketers, and academics who aggressively expanded the terrain of social investigation. Surveyors thereby hoped to arrive at a more robust and trustworthy knowledge of the contemporary world. They aimed to explain the workings of mass culture, to discern more accurately public opinion, and to provide detailed accounts of actual rather than idealized social behavior. They did so, most significantly, by turning to empirical descriptions of the mainstream, designing instruments to measure everything from what citizens were buying, to what they believed, to what they did in the privacy of their homes.

Scientific characterizations of “average” or “typical” Americans were a striking phenomenon of the new century. This constituted a shift away from the almost exclusive study of “degenerates, delinquents, and defectives” that had marked nineteenth-century social investigation: “the numerical analysis of suicide, prostitution, drunkenness, vagrancy, insanity, crime, les misérables.” To be sure, an understanding of the “normal” had informed earlier medical practice and social theory; otherwise pathologies and deviants could not have been classified as such. Too, statisticians across the nineteenth century plied their tools to establish demographic medians and outliers. But rigorous inquiry for its own sake into the typicality of everyday practices and opinions was a twentieth-century enterprise. Investigators would successfully colonize new realms, from routine habits to social and political attitudes to the most intimate areas of personal experience.12

Surveyors’ turn from the margins to the presumed center of
American life engendered popular fascination. By bringing “normal” behaviors, beliefs, and personalities into their orbit, surveyors found new consumers for their facts. But their studies did not make their way to the lay population unmediated. The demand for social data was fueled by a revolution in mass communications, a dramatic expansion of the media that by the end of the 1920s “formed a new constellation of power . . . visible to a vast public, national in scope.” Media establishments were themselves in need of the kind of information surveys supplied, their audiences invisible and too large to “know” otherwise. Surveyors were thus abetted by print and broadcasting networks that saw a profitable market in reports about “average” Americans and were ready to transform aggregate data into news. This merger between new facts and new outlets for them meant that ordinary people now had access to sorts of data once reserved for a few. It also meant, in a powerful fashion, that the public could now find out who “the public” was. As Diana Mutz writes, “What media, and national media in particular, do best is to supply us with information about those beyond our personal experiences and contacts, in other words, with impressions of the state of mass collectives.”

But media coverage alone cannot explain the rapt attention many paid to detailed surveys about mainstream America. There was a keen interest in surveyors’ tabulations in segments of the public itself. Over the course of the century, this appetite for social facts would lead more and more individuals to participate, either as research subjects or as consumers of information, in a dense traffic of social scientific numbers, knowledge, and norms.

Surveyors’ modes of representation were ubiquitous in the twentieth century, and crucial to the making of a self-consciously mass society. Yet this is a theme strangely absent from discussions of American nationalism, mass culture, and public life. Apart from those interested in public policy, scholars of the modern United States have barely registered the movement of social data into everyday life as a question or problem. This is true even as they regularly treat survey results as historical or sociological evidence. Those who have studied the rise of the modern social sciences, on the other hand, have focused first and foremost on professionalization and disciplinary consolidation. By foregrounding the producers rather than the consumers of new knowledge, they too have missed the key role that social facts played as they moved out of research institutions and into popular venues. Even those attentive to the uses of social scientific authority have generally asked how elites—whether states, corporations, or courts—mobilized empirical data for particular ends. Few have paid attention to what ordinary people, “the studied,” did with the same kinds of information.

At the turn of the twentieth century, surveys were the province of statisticians, social reformers, the federal Census Bureau, and scattered businessmen and entrepreneurs. By the century’s end, social scientific methods, findings, and vocabularies were omnipresent. What had been quite unfamiliar several generations earlier had become as natural—and invisible—as the air Americans breathed. To understand how ordinary individuals grappled with the ascendance of social scientific ways of knowing, we need to look closely at several formative surveys of the first half of the century: Robert and Helen Lynd’s Middletown studies of 1929 and 1937; George Gallup’s and Elmo Roper’s public opinion polls beginning in 1935; and Alfred Kinsey’s sexual behavior reports of 1948 and 1953. The Middletown studies, the Gallup and Roper polls, and the Kinsey Reports were among the most successful purveyors of quantitative facts about “average” Americans, and the best-known and most talked about social scientific productions of their day. They attracted surprising amounts of publicity, cropped up in radio broadcasts and comedy sketches, and became household words.
Neither these surveys, nor the individuals who conducted them, were “representative” of their era. Their very prominence suggests the opposite. Yet they reflected a new strain in American social inquiry. Unlike earlier reform-oriented efforts and many contemporary studies, these were not aimed at specific social problems or “marginal” populations—whether racial or ethnic minorities, southerners, immigrants, gang members, or the poor. Nor were they engaged in sorting or grading the population for bureaucratic ends, as were parallel enterprises in intelligence, personality, and achievement testing. Each aimed instead to sketch the collective whole of society, to profile the mainstream. The Lynds made a midwestern town the archetype of a supposedly typical American community. Pollsters publicized the “average American’s” viewpoint on subjects ranging from cereal brands to presidential nominees. Kinsey professed to investigate and portray for the first time “normal” citizens’ sexual behavior. In fact, it was from such promises that these studies derived their popular appeal. Surveys of typical communities and majority opinions piqued national interest—and provoked intense protests—because of their claims to represent not just their research subjects but the entire U.S. population.

“The behavioral and social sciences,” write two observers, “have undoubtedly found a more receptive market in the United States than anywhere else in the world.” Certainly, social scientific inquiries into the contents of the “average” were undertaken in industrial nations beyond the United States. The British Mass-Observation project, begun in 1937, was akin to Middletown in its attempt to capture ordinary people’s lives and create an “anthropology of ourselves” on topics ranging from wartime rationing to pub sociability. After establishing his polling operation in Princeton, New Jersey, George Gallup swiftly set up affiliates to measure opinion in England, Australia, Canada, Sweden, and France. Similarly, a “little Kinsey” research effort was undertaken in Britain to replicate the scientist’s work on sexual behavior in the United States. Readers around the world were transfixed by the Sexual Behavior studies, which were quickly translated into German, Swedish, and French and found admirers as far away as Japan. Each of these projects, however, arrived later and was received less enthusiastically than its American counterpart. Public opinion polls were especially resisted by other national governments, which perceived surveyors as infringing upon the prerogatives of traditional decision shapers, namely, political leaders and journalists. Polls would not become a crucial aspect of public life in Britain until after World War II, and in France until the 1960s. Surveys had a distinctive career in the United States, not simply because of Americans’ often-remarked-upon fascination with data about themselves but because of the extensive, entrepreneurial, and unrestricted character of American-style social investigation.

Close attention to surveys like Middletown and the Kinsey Reports allows us to trace just how social data entered twentieth-century Americans’ lives. Investigators’ private papers and the raw materials that underpinned their studies permit a view into the production of survey knowledge: how conclusions were fashioned out of empirical results and unarticulated assumptions, science and conventional wisdom. But it is also critical to examine how ordinary citizens encountered such knowledge. This part of the story can be gleaned from media reports on social scientific findings, interchanges between researchers and subjects, correspondence between surveyors and their audiences, and the passage of social scientific concepts into everyday language. The publicity surrounding the Middletown studies and the Gallup Poll, the adoption of their techniques in magazine articles, radio broadcasts, and self-help literature, and the very experience of being studied—an increasingly common fate—all helped usher social data, and statistical thinking, into the mainstream.

The new surveys were the subject of widespread fascination. But they also generated abundant conflicts, surprises, and suspicions.
Consumers of social data did not always readily accept the conclusions of survey research. On the contrary, competing claims of authoritative knowledge and personal experience regularly greeted surveyors’ facts, especially investigators’ claims to speak for “average” Americans. Behind collections of seemingly dry and neutral data lurk stories of criminal charges, religious outrages, and congressional investigations. Social information may have flowed fast and thick, but it was never accepted passively or wholesale.

It was not just survey data but survey methods that were controversial. Listening to the Americans who first answered the Lynds’ questionnaires, found an opinion pollster on their doorstep, or submitted to one of Kinsey’s interviews exposes how unsettling the new modes of investigation were, and how wide-ranging was the opposition to something we now take for granted. Particular techniques—from participant observation to statistical sampling—could seem strange, offensive, or even illegal to the people who were first subject to them. As the reaction to Robert and Helen Lynd’s community study shows, some residents of Muncie, Indiana, in the mid-1920s protested furiously about being placed under a social scientific microscope. Decent people, local critics insisted, would not “permit this peeping into the deepest recesses of their lives.” Many Americans similarly resented the intrusiveness of opinion polling and consumer surveys, not to mention the detailed personal interviews that Alfred Kinsey would conduct during the next three decades. If some were bothered by surveyors’ invasions of privacy, others worried about the implications of quantifying the details of human existence, or the destruction of old values (and the creation of new ones) that might come simply from knowing what others did or thought. Fierce debates over everything from what questions citizens could be asked, to what dangers might lie in publicizing their answers, reveal how much was at stake in social scientific representations.17

Yet, despite challenges from all quarters, it is undeniable that a new relationship among social scientific facts, their creators, and their consumers was emerging as the century progressed. Even as statistics like Gallup’s and Kinsey’s were challenged, commonsense notions about “average Americans” based on their findings were legitimized. Moreover, surveyors’ peculiar ways of collecting and displaying information were coming to define the social landscape. Individuals complained bitterly about the depersonalization that came along with the torrent of statistical information. They could not always resist its lures, however. Some gave new weight to aggregate data, willingly and even eagerly submitted to surveys, and found themselves in social scientific categories. By midcentury, it was clear that impersonal techniques and facts about strangers could penetrate the most private domains of individuals’ lives. Americans were in effect speaking a new language, one they could not unlearn. But it is also true that the individuals who wrestled with and adapted social scientific ways of knowing were joint authors of the statistical public they had come to inhabit.

The word survey, Jean Converse has observed, carries at least three distinct meanings, one being to measure or count. Two other definitions point in opposite directions. On the one hand, surveying means to oversee, or examine closely. On the other, it refers to seeing over in order to gain a broad perspective. This book takes up all three meanings of the term. It inquires into the specific techniques surveyors used to characterize Americans. It explores the probing scrutiny of individuals that surveying entailed. Finally, it considers the new representations of the national public that surveys made available. It asks: What were the ramifications of surveyors’ questioning presence, as they reached more deeply into people’s lives for information? How did the influx of facts and figures purporting to describe “average Americans” shape understandings of the collective and of possible social identities within it? And what were the political and social effects of an aggregated America?18

Social data have a reputation for being dull and dry, the inconce-
quentional means (or even the only means) by which we know things about populations, economies, and societies. But the figures marshaled to portray American beliefs and behaviors have been anything but inert pieces of information. Because they appeared not to interpret or opine—but instead to offer “just the facts”—questionnaire findings and poll results moved into public life with considerable authority. This characteristic of the factual, its seemingly unassailable neutrality, is what makes it so very powerful. Surveyors like the Lynds and Kinsey may have purported to depict social reality with unprecedented transparency. But always, they offered more than simple summaries of data: they encouraged new ways of seeing, perceiving, and imagining. In so doing, surveyors subtly transformed the entities under investigation. Ultimately, it would become nearly impossible to know the nation apart from their charts and curves.19

A self-consciously modern society was in this respect as much an outgrowth as an object of survey techniques. To begin with, aggregate data gave shape and substance to a “mass public.” Midcentury social scientists were covert nation-builders, conjuring up a collective that could be visualized only because it was radically simplified. Investigators’ task, after all, was to generalize broadly from a small number of data points so as to make sense of a messy social world. (After gathering “millions of social facts” over five years of fieldwork in one community, for example, anthropologist Lloyd Warner was able to distill 5,800 “symbolic activities” into 284 “forms” and nineteen “types,” and to determine that there were a total of eighty-nine possible “behavioral situations” or “statuses” within its relational system.) But theirs was a patterned incompleteness. Proclamations about “Americans” could not be made without suppressing the voices and experiences of some, and here surveyors more often perpetuated than challenged the assumptions of their day. Their presuppositions about who constituted the public meant that some Americans—African Americans, immigrants, and poor people, among others—were systematically excluded from their statistics, and that the nation surveyed was always a partial one. None of this, however, prevented Gallup’s and Kinsey’s facts from exercising a forceful sway over perceptions of the social body.20

Surveyors’ aggregating technologies, by their very nature, placed new cultural emphasis on the center point, the scientifically derived mean and median. They helped shift the ground under the concept of normality, so that its meaning increasingly lined up with quantified averages—although not without a fight from those who feared this would upend religious, ethical, or cultural values. This was a tendency perhaps inherent to statistical techniques, evident as early as the 1830s in the Belgian Adolphe Quetelet’s famous search for “the average man,” that “fictitious being, for whom every thing proceeds conformably to the medium results obtained for society in general.” The drive to determine the average was part empirical quest, part cultural preoccupation. Its calculators did not always take care, as did Quetelet, to highlight its fictional qualities. In 1947, for example, Newsweek could announce that there was a “shadowy figure beginning to emerge” from the day’s public opinion polls, which it promptly labeled the “American Majority Man.” Such composite types, placeholders for the nation itself, flowed easily from social scientific tables and graphs. And they took root in places far afield from statisticians’ counting machines. Especially during decades of economic crisis and war, social scientific findings about “typical Americans” and the search for a coherent Americanism in the culture at large were symbiotic. Even if it was never particularly accurate or representative, invoking a “mass subject” to stand in for the whole could play a vital role in consolidating the national public.21

This figment of surveyors’ imaginations could work to highlight and regulate differences, permitting individuals not only to discern an aggregate norm but also to measure themselves against it. As such, the flood of data on majority beliefs, average communities,
and mainstream Americans afforded individuals a new means of relating to the collective. The rhetorical turn from studying "others" to studying "ourselves" in this era’s social scientific practice carried with it both a confessional mode and a voyeuristic stance. What did it mean, for example, for a woman to respond to a thirty-four-page family survey that asked for intimate details of financial, marital, and social adjustment to the Depression? Her personal information, once disclosed, was made the property of experts, merged with others', and then returned to the public, transformed, as data. Transmitted far beyond the initial exchange, such statistics enabled Americans to peer into their neighbors' lives, and, sometimes, to look at their own differently. Access to information about others enabled individuals to filter their experiences through tables and percentages, to fit themselves into social scientific categories, and to identify with strangers. To borrow a phrase from philosopher Ian Hacking, surveyors’ facts could in this way remake “the space of possibilities for personhood.” Indeed, many sought out and were changed by such knowledge.\(^{22}\)

As did an earlier generation of social scientists, contemporary historians have vigorously debated whether a mass society existed in the twentieth-century United States. Those who have argued for the emergence of a modern national culture, however defined, have linked it to one of several developments: the triumph of a corporate-industrial order, the growth of national politics and labor unions under the New Deal, the effects of standardized advertising and consumption, or the emergence of the mass media itself. Others have underscored instead the resilience of local, ethnic, religious, and familial affiliations in the face of homogenizing trends. Emphasizing either the tangible institutions of mass society or the particular social bonds that endured despite it, what most of this scholarship neglects is the consciousness that many individuals in the midcentury decades had of living in a new kind of public. To a great extent, this consciousness was the product of newfound, widely available, scientific data about “average” Americans. By proclaiming the necessity of their impersonal techniques, by presenting collections of facts as more authoritative than individuals’ perceptions, by publicizing cumulative data about strangers, and by fostering communion with abstract others, surveyors helped to manufacture the idea and perhaps even the experience of “the mass.”\(^{23}\)

Americans’ engagements with the scientific facts meant to represent them reveal a process at work that we have not yet fully grasped: a broad shift in consciousness linked to the technologies of social surveying. Immersion in a mass-information economy necessarily conditioned citizens’ thinking about their ties to other people and to the nation. Some twenty years ago, historian Benedict Anderson described the nation-state as an “imagined community.” Taking seriously the possibility of not just imagined, but statistical, communities will help us uncover the knowledge regimes and intellectual frameworks that allowed Americans to relate in new ways to “the public.” That many believed they lived in a mass society does not mean that this was so. However, if we are to understand how this new society operated—at the level of perception, if not of fact—we will need to put aside questions of reality for more ephemeral, although hardly less important, ones of thought and belief. The answers are extremely important if we are to know anything about the kind of public that evolved in tandem with opinion polls and sex surveys. We will also, against at least a half century of scholarship and commentary, have to rethink “the mass” itself: as a social experience distinguished as much by connection as conformity, and composed of actors better described as self-conscious than submissive.\(^{24}\)

Why care about the sort of public that social statistics projected, or the arguments triggered by composite data? To realize that our poll-saturated culture is of recent vintage is of course a reminder...
that our present is an historical artifact. More significantly, a history of surveyors’ instruments helps us appreciate how influential they have been in bounding and enforcing perceptions of social reality across the last century. We need to understand social scientific representations—of “typical communities,” “majority opinion,” and “normal Americans”—not as reflections of the body politic but as an index to political and epistemological power. We also need to reckon with popular modes of knowing in the twentieth century, the social thought not of masses but of ordinary people using the tools at hand to make sense of the world. Only then will we begin to see that a particular form of modern consciousness is anchored in the practices of social surveyors.

1

Canvassing a “Typical” Community

How is one to set about the investigation of anything as multifarious as the gross-total thing that is Schenectady, Akron, Dallas, or Keokuk?

—Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, Middletown, 1929

What impresses me ... is the readiness and sympathy with which the good people of Middletown entered into this unusual survey ... They answered queries about getting a living, making a home, training the young, the use of leisure, and the nature of their religious and community activities, without resentment or reserve.

—New York Herald Tribune, 1929

“No one who wishes a full understanding of American life today can afford to neglect this impartial, sincerely scientific effort to place it under the microscope slide,” announced a writer for the New York World. A reviewer for the New Republic agreed, calling it “a fascinating and valuable book, one that will give the reader more insight into the social processes of this country than any other I know.” Even the characteristically cynical H. L. Mencken proclaimed: “I commend [it] to all persons who have any genuine interest in the life of the American people ... It reveals, in cold-blooded, scientific terms, the sort of lives millions of Americans are leading.” And Stuart Chase raved in the Nation: “Nothing like it has ever be-
just as cultural values and political attitudes had been in the work of the Lynds and the pollsters.¹

One historian writes that whereas citizens were “bombarded” with information about “the dangers of public sexuality” before World War II, in its aftermath “Americans were eager to learn about the secret world of America’s private life.” Many saw Kinsey as the manufacturer of this desire. He was commonly portrayed as invading and stripping away the mysteries of intimate experience as well as undermining older values and traditions that regulated sexual propriety. A reviewer’s words captured this sense of relentless incursion by the social scientist. Kinsey and his co-researchers, he wrote, “do not hesitate to spend thousands of hours in penitentiaries, until they win the confidence of inmates. No den of prostitution is too low, no gilded palace too high for his patient survey. There is no level of society which he has not penetrated, no state of the union where he or his emissaries have not gathered knowledge.” The Sexual Behavior volumes were unsettling in part because they revealed the seemingly unavoidable tentacles of social science in all aspects of modern life. As one columnist observed after the first Report appeared, “We have been so statisticized in the United States that nothing is sacred anymore.”²

By the late 1940s, Americans had been probed, queried, and surveyed for several decades. In the postwar era, they for the most part regarded as unremarkable their status as potential research subjects. Alfred Kinsey’s inflammatory research would change all that, at least temporarily. It would be too simple to say that the controversy over the Kinsey Reports had only to do with their subject, sexual behavior. Reactions to the surveys concerned the broader issue of social scientific cataloguing and explanation applied to a new domain. Sexual behavior had been dragged out into the light before by Progressive Era purity campaigns as well as vaudeville acts, films, and novels. But here was “normal,” private, everyday sexuality quantified and charted, subjected to the techniques of the expert,
readers understood that quantification and social scientific terminology could impart legitimacy to potentially dubious content.3

Despite robust challenges to Kinsey's methods and claims, the power of aggregate surveys to describe and explain was evident in the tremendous level of public engagement with his findings. There were those who believed that the Reports' brand of knowledge constituted progress and others who believed just the opposite. Some rejected Kinsey's facts and figures altogether. Still others were deeply suspicious about the effects of his statistics, even if they accepted the numbers themselves as valid. As such, the Sexual Behavior surveys stirred up a debate about the place and uses of social scientific facts in American life. Pitched battles over the Reports' representativeness, their accuracy, their potential impact on legal codes and morals, and their explanatory limits speak to the range of issues at stake in individuals' accommodation to expert knowledge about the sexual state of the nation. But perhaps what was most striking in the midst of these debates was the fact that Americans were more eager than ever before to become research subjects—ready to conceive of themselves as case histories in an aggregate bank of survey data. Many citizens were not only willing to trust and use Kinsey's statistics. They were also willing to become statistics themselves.

A Nation of the "Kinsey-Conscious"

A 1952 magazine article on the already famous (or infamous) Dr. Kinsey billed itself as "a frank report on that man who asks thousands of people all those outrageous questions about their private lives." The author hoped, in what must have seemed only fair turn-about, to "throw an intimate light" on the professor who had authored the best-selling study, Sexual Behavior in the Human Male. Kinsey, described as "probably the only entomologist who needs no introduction," was the subject of scores of human interest stories in the late 1940s and early 1950s. His celebrity status at first glance appears strange: his background in zoology, his brusque manner, and his scientific dispassion all would seem to weigh against it. But the public fascination with Kinsey's research eclipsed that for any prior study, and some of that fascination adhered to the scientist himself.4

A rather dry and technical 800-page volume, the 1948 Sexual Behavior in the Human Male was nevertheless a national blockbuster. Its publisher, W. B. Saunders, heeding what it thought to be "a sophisticated market survey," expected the book to sell approximately 10,000 copies. Instead, the Report spent twenty-seven to forty-four weeks on national best-sellers lists, with sales reaching nearly 250,000 copies. As late as mid-1949 the New York Public Library was refusing to take reservations for the Report, its waiting list having grown so long. Publishers knew a good thing when they saw it. Three books about the male survey, racing to capitalize on the prodigious interest in Kinsey's statistics, came out in quick succession in 1948, and a 25-cent condensation summarizing the findings sold three-quarters of a million copies. One reporter observed that "the unseemly effort to muscle in on the fantastic sales of the epochal Kinsey Report on sex has taken on a violently competitive turn."5

Sexual Behavior in the Human Male may have been widely read, but it was much more widely known, via Kinsey's own tireless lecturing schedule as well as unrelenting coverage in the media, from small-town newspapers to national magazines. The Report was even incorporated into the plots of radio programs such as NBC's One Man's Family. Indeed, one writer surmised in 1952 that "the majority of the public has gained its knowledge of Kinsey solely from popular articles, radio, television, bull sessions and back fence gossip." Perhaps Life magazine put it best, opining that "as a phenomenal source of talk and controversy," the Report "virtually has attained the status of a new American institution." It speculated
that "everybody but a few favorably situated hermits must be painfully aware that the Kinsey Report has been a godsend to radio comedians, nightclub jokers, gin mill raconteurs and connoisseurs of the shady quip." To many commentators, Kinsey's research seemed to be a topic that "everybody" was talking about. If this was not strictly true, youth groups, congregations, and professional organizations all over the nation—from the Town Hall Lecture Series in Beaumont, Texas, to the Council of Jewish Women in Birmingham, Alabama, to the Alpha Omega Dental Fraternity in Detroit—were listening to lectures and symposia on the Kinsey Report and "what it means to you." A Gallup Poll taken a month before Sexual Behavior in the Human Male even hit the bookstores found that 20 percent of the people questioned had knowledge of the Report and, furthermore, that the majority deemed it a "good thing." Commenting on an advertising conference devoted to Kinsey's impact on marketing, a columnist asked, "There must be some place where the good doctor's findings aren't being discussed, but where?"

The country, as a Catholic weekly put it, had certainly become "Kinsey-conscious." The surveyor's name recognition was nothing short of remarkable. He was singled out as a greater celebrity than "a flock of Hollywood starlets" by Daily Variety, and his Report was judged to be one of the "10 subjects most likely to be the butt for show-biz humor during 1950" along with flying saucers, the atom bomb, the Trumans, and cold cures. The scientist's fame made him the target of autograph collectors and the subject of an article written by Mae West. It also earned him a ranking in Focus magazine's "10 Sexiest Men in the World," which listed Kinsey, or "Mr. Sex himself," alongside Tyrone Power, Joe DiMaggio, and others. The scientist was recognizable enough to be included in a Look magazine "Photoquiz" and a Quick magazine "Quick Quiz." And Billboard magazine noted in October 1953 that "for the third consecutive week, a new record has been waxed which concerns the co-author of the literary thesis 'Sexual Behavior of the Human Female.'"

The Kinsey Reports themselves quickly became a stock phrase employed to denote any kind of extensive quantitative inquiry. A traffic report comparing male and female fatalities was called a "Kinsey-like statistic," and studies of all manner of entities, from labor meditators to lobsters, were dubbed "Kinsey Reports." In a typical formulation, Charm magazine stated: "No Kinsey report ever has been made on the vital, basic activity of eating." Philadelphia's Kinsey Distilling Corporation, in existence long before the Reports, was grateful to the scientist for "impress[ing] our brand name on the public consciousness," although it was unable to handle all the requests for the study it was receiving.8

Kinsey practically became a brand name himself, useful in selling pajamas and housewares, not to mention magazines. Media outlets that ignored the scientist did so at their peril, given the broad demand for commentary on his surveys—a sign some took to mean that journalistic standards were shifting. The editor of the Cleveland News lamented the fact that as a matter of "economic life or death" newspapers had "to compete for the favor and attention of millions who prefer soap opera to the Met brand; who will discuss the Kinsey Report more enthusiastically (and should I say more understandably?) than the mysteries of Formosa and Indonesia?" Although a scientific study, Kinsey's research was, to the editor, a "pop" topic, the news equivalent of a soap opera. But it sold papers. This kind of news frenzy was itself noted as novel. A CBS radio broadcast about Kinsey mused, "Isn't the real point, perhaps, that no one would have thought of compiling such a book a couple of generations ago? Who would have published it? How many popular magazines would have given its contents a circulation running into the millions?" To such commentators, it was not solely the Reports' facts that were new. So was the unceasing public discussion about them. It was as if the nation's inhabitants were somehow united through mass-mediated gossip about Kinsey. There were precedents for this in the cult of celebrity, the avid appetite for news about movie stars that Robert and Helen Lynd had discovered in
Muncie. Interest in the Reports, as in the Middletown studies themselves, indicated a newer fascination with what the citizenry did but could not have known in the absence of widely available survey data. Kinsey’s critics were well aware of how much publicity he commanded, and they found his ubiquity reprehensible. One woman who was perturbed by the effects of the surveyor’s research on the youth of America was doubly so since, as she wrote to him, “you have a lot of weight as you’re a nationally known person.” Another chastised Look magazine and NBC for their role in disseminating the Reports’ data indiscriminately, and particularly for the impact this would have on “thousands of young people” who would wind up with “mis-givings about their own parents’ pre-marital relationships.” An angry letter-writer, evidently hoping to shame Kinsey, asked him: “Do you know for what your name stands now? . . . It is symbolic of every lewd joke ever told. I have yet to hear or read of it used in any other way.” Neither Kinsey’s fans nor his critics, it seems, could stop talking about him. Whether through jokes, media reports, conversation, or condemnations, news of Kinsey and his statistics made its way to an extremely broad audience. What chance, many wondered, did their own views or teachings about sexual morality stand against a social scientific celebrity? The extent of the discussion surrounding the Reports similarly worried those who were convinced that nonspecialist audiences would buy Kinsey’s conclusions lock, stock, and barrel, unable to sift through methodological flaws and media misrepresentations. Academic and popular reviewers evaluated the Report by different standards, and the former well understood the reach of the latter. Kinsey had presented his knowledge as democratic and even liberatory for ordinary Americans, but many would soon wish that the Sexual Behavior facts had remained in scientists’ or physicians’ hands. Noted a sociologist who authored a critique of the male volume, “The phenomenal sale of the Report is well known. It is highly regrettable that only a negligible fraction of its readers will recognize its limitations.” It was not just scholars who felt this way. A writer for a Catholic journal asserted, for example, “The book is not intended, or suitable or recommended, for the technically untrained general reader. The recent pushing of the volume as a ‘best seller’ is to be deplored.” Social scientific data like Kinsey’s, many realized, quickly escaped the expert’s grip and were not dependent on academic commentators or professional gatekeepers for their interpretation.

Those in the business of attitude measurement, on the other hand, regarded the scientist’s fame opportunistically. “From all this publicity,” wrote two of them, “public opinion research reaps an unexpected reward, for the Kinsey book actually testifies, to a large public previously unaware of surveys, to the magic which is inherent in the research tools of sampling and interviewing.” If the Sexual Behavior researchers had been able to extract valid data “of such a private nature” from thousands of Americans, and “provide in the process a wealth of new and important social data,” their study was of great use in showcasing the potential of survey methods. Pollsters and other researchers, eager for both public acceptance and private information, hoped Kinsey’s celebrity might lend more credence and even glamour to their labors. Provided the criticisms of the Reports were not too damning, the author’s fame might work as a public relations tool for the whole field of survey research.

Kinsey’s relationship with marketers began more anxiously. Sleepwear manufacturers were reportedly alarmed about his finding in the second volume that fully half of married women slept in the nude, prompting them to conduct their own study that counteracted Kinsey’s. But generally speaking, as they did with the facts produced by the Middletown studies and other surveys, business interests quickly sought avenues for profit in the Reports’ charts and percentages. A 1953 conference was devoted to the topic “Will
Kinsey’s New Report Revolutionize Marketing?” The question was whether “scientific sex” could and should be used to sell products, and specifically whether advertisers ought to target older women who were “at their sexual peak.” From the editor of Sales Management to the vice president and director of research at the J. Walter Thompson Company, those responsible for selling urged attention to social research, singling out the Reports as particularly fruitful for their line of work.14

As Kinsey’s facts traveled to diverse audiences, they took on special connotations that revealed much about citizens’ concerns regarding information gathering during the early Cold War years. Middletown’s audiences—as opposed to its subjects—had been more intrigued than appalled by surveyors’ queries. By contrast, a piece on opinion researcher Archibald Crossley, dubbing him the “Kinsey-of-Commerce,” editorialized: “It’s a goldfish life today for the average man. He doesn’t have any secrets anymore. He’s afraid to open his mouth for fear it’ll be taken as a confession.” Kinsey, in turn nicknamed “the Dr. Gallup of sex” by the Los Angeles Times, was synonymous with the intrusiveness of social research, his very name suggesting a modern lack of privacy. “The name ‘Kinsey’ is by now a byword which means to most people sexual revelations, a glimpse into the secret lives of our neighbors,” noted Adult magazine. If the Reports quickly became shorthand for intimate prying, even more illuminating were those instances in which they were invoked apart from any specifically sexual associations. At the conclusion of an article about the monitoring of water consumption in Toledo, Ohio, “and all of its implications concerning activities in the American home becoming public information,” a reporter made the leap to sex surveys: “We are beginning to wonder just what privacy there is left for the average citizen. We had thought Dr. Kinsey had reached the ultimate but this is just too much.”14

Similarly, the newly extensive 1950 census, with its inquiries into the personal income of every fifth household, was frequently identified as a Kinsey-like development. A Republican congressman complained that “if the federal government continues to pry more and more deeply into private affairs, the 1960 or 1970 census questions may read like the Kinsey report.” Likewise, a small-town California newspaper, winking at its readers, assured them that “it’s only an idle rumor that the census department’s next project is an expanded Kinsey Report.” Remarkably on the controversy, a columnist in Petersburg, Virginia, editorialized, “The hard fact is that we are a people inured to questionnaires about anything and everything.” The writer predicted that census takers might “encounter a few tough nuts here and there,” but more telling that “the average every fifth person, having been properly conditioned, will promptly and dutifully reveal his 1949 income. A people who have been answering all kinds of questions for Dr. Gallup, Professor Kinsey, et cetera, will not be greatly upset over the income item.” Like the Lynds, Roper, and Gallup before him, Kinsey was shifting the terms of what could be asked, and what was beyond the bounds of legitimate inquiry. By 1950 many observers concurred that there was not much of a boundary left.15

In an era of vigilant anticommunism and state surveillance, Kinsey’s survey stirred up anxieties about the extent of sanctioned investigation into individuals’ personal lives. At the same time, his research was remaking public understandings of the private. The Sexual Behavior scholarship explicitly challenged censorship codes and sex crime laws; Kinsey was consulted by many lawyers and judges on these issues and testified in legal hearings. The Reports also made heretofore unmentionable sexual topics fodder for the news media. In 1948 the New York Times would not even accept advance advertising for the male volume, given its subject matter. But in a tremendously rapid turnaround in press reticence, once the floodgates opened, details of the first Kinsey Report swamped
media channels. In fact, many newspapers and magazines did not even wait for the Reports to come out before speculating as to their findings. Rumors about the progress of both studies circulated in the national press from the mid-1940s to the early 1950s despite Kinsey’s best efforts to control pre-releases of his data.  

A careful manager of the press and popularizer of his own work, Kinsey has been credited with creating an audience for the sex survey. Partly because of his influence, studies that had once been reading matter for experts “were increasingly directed straight to the public by way of the media.” As John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman write, Kinsey’s studies “propelled sex into the public eye in a way unlike any previous book or event had done.” In the twentieth century, they note, “the strongest assault on sexual reticence in the public realm emerged not from the pornographic fringe, nor from popular culture, but from the respectable domain of science.” Or as one of Kinsey’s correspondents put it, “Our nation is surely over[ly] sex conscious and fast being fed with the stuff of sensious [sic] movies, songs, stories and other derogatory materials and now you under the guise of DOCTOR add your extra bit to further push the self restraint aside.”

Facing Modern Facts

Kinsey’s statistics gained much of their authority from a discourse that trafficked in “facts” and “reality.” This was a potent vocabulary, and academic and popular commentators alike adopted it readily. Remarked one individual who was queried by the Cincinnati Enquirer in a man-in-the-street interview about the first Report, “I don’t see how some people can say there’s anything wrong in the book. It’s all facts.” Another observer simply stated: “These are a few of the facts of our sex lives which we will be learning in the year 1948.” Many such readers treated Kinsey’s figures as if they were inert and timeless truths waiting to be unearthed by the scientist. “By now it is trite to remark that . . . Sexual Behavior in the Human Male is undoubtedly the most important collection of sex facts ever printed,” contended a reviewer for the Journal of General Psychology. It was, in the words of a reporter for the Chicago Uptown News, “one of the most far-reaching, modern, factual reports ever made.” In commentaries on the female survey as well, Kinsey was portrayed as marshaling data that revealed brute reality. One fan, delighted by the uproar Sexual Behavior in the Human Female was causing, sent Kinsey an anonymous postcard. “Looks like most of them don’t like the facts of life, they can’t face the truth,” the writer crowed.

These commentators believed that Kinsey had in effect taken a snapshot of contemporary American behavior, and had come closer than had anyone else to describing social realities rather than cultural ideals. One admirer announced, “The ‘facts’ presented in Dr. Kinsey’s reports are going to stand as the nearest approach to the ‘truth of the matter’ which will ever be available as a description of the sexual manners, modes, and mores of our generation of Americans.” “There has resulted from the analysis of these 6,300 histories,” claimed another reader, “more information about male sex behavior, more new facts, more new relationships made clear than ever existed before.” This theme runs through countless discussions of Kinsey’s research. In perhaps the most grandiose such account, a commentator termed the first Report “a scientific Book of Revelations,” going on to say, “The work of Kinsey and his collaborators should be a powerful factor in freeing human society, from fantastic tribal taboos, from ecclesiastic prejudices, and from the savagery of medieval laws. This may indeed be known as the ‘Alfred C. Kinsey age.’” The writer’s equation of survey data with enlightened refutation of “taboos,” “prejudices,” and “savagery” expressed a common dichotomy—one Kinsey encouraged—between custom and science, tradition and modernity, ideals and reality. As a byproduct, critics of the Reports were sometimes portrayed as simply
backward, not fully in or of the modern age. One scholarly reviewer, for instance, compared Kinsey’s critics to “ primitives,” arguing that their response to the disturbing news he delivered was “more suitable to skinclad savages than to civilized men.” An observer noted, “It [was] as if any adverse criticism [of the Reports] would immediately brand one as Victorian.”

In many accounts, then, the Kinsey Reports were linked with a new way of knowing, one that was “modern” in its willing confrontation with stark, difficult realities. To one expert, the Reports were “a reflection of the public’s new attitude toward a subject which at one time was treated as a mystery.” To another, they revealed “our generation in a cold light, unrelieved by any sentiment.” As a CBS radio broadcaster announced, “In this frank facing of disagreeable facts that our ancestors ducked; there is perhaps the real revolution in contemporary morals that Dr. Kinsey has hastened along.” To some, the fact that Kinsey’s findings were so distressing only confirmed their truth.

Kinsey’s data seemed particularly modern for another reason. They displayed sex in a novel way: in the technical language of social science, and specifically, quantification. Calling the Report an “epoch-making work,” a reviewer proclaimed, “Here for the first time in history a sustained effort has been made to ascertain scientifically and to state statistically what is actually going on in the matter of sex behavior in our American culture.” Whether these numbers were legitimate, however, was subject to debate. Scholarly criticisms of the Reports centered mainly on Kinsey’s sampling technique (both his reliance on volunteers and the device of hundred-percent sampling), although some challenged his statistical methods (in particular, his small or unclear n, or number of subjects, for many of the questions asked), and his acceptance of individual recollections of past events. Few of these specific methodological critiques made their way into public discussions, and in any event they were different from laypeople’s assessments of the Reports’ accuracy. The series of moves between asking intimate questions in lengthy interviews and then recording and tabulating the answers on a punch card machine—the real labor that went into crunching of data—was virtually invisible to readers. What they saw were statistics about who did what and how frequently.

Reactions to this aggregate mode of representing intimate experience revealed deep-seated cultural tensions over numbers and what they could say about “normal” Americans. On the one hand, Kinsey’s statistics fascinated people. His finding that 37 percent of American men experienced some kind of “homosexual contact,” that 52 percent were sexually active by age sixteen, that more than half engaged in extramarital affairs, that nearly all masturbated, and that a sizable fraction participated in behaviors such as bestiality were quickly disseminated through the national media. “Survey data,” sociologists recognize, “is perhaps the most manageable form of data, and this is one reason for its popularity . . . journalists as well as funding bodies tend to like this type of ‘hard’ data which can be easily summarized and quoted.” This was certainly true of Kinsey’s numbers, which easily became social facts, repeated again and again, and were nearly impossible to dislodge once in popular circulation.

The figures Kinsey unleashed carried a great deal of weight because they were numbers: spare, clear, and direct. This was suggested by one observer who remarked, “The statistical tables and graphs speak for themselves.” Quantification worked in the Reports’ favor. Some reactions to the studies exhibited what can only be described as a fetish for numbers and the social scientific instruments that produced them. The reviewer for the Annals of the American Academy pronounced the first volume “powerful” and “one of the most important books of our time” because of the “herculean labor” that had been required to complete it. He went on to call the female Report an equally impressive statistical feat, the product of “fifteen years of labor” and “8,000 interviews”:
Since each subject was asked between 300 and 500 questions, all together more than 3,000,000 answers were recorded. In addition, records were scanned including sexual calendars, diaries, correspondence, scrapbooks, 16,000 works of art, clinical studies, and many thousands of previously published studies. Hundreds of consultants gave advice on the project, and the results in the book are presented in 179 tables and 155 figures.  

Another commentator hypothesized that this “battery of statistics” was at the very heart of Kinsey’s allure for Americans. Statistics’ “very preciseness and absolutism make them all the more attractive to the literate public,” he argued. “Not ‘most’ Americans, not ‘nearly all,’ but precisely 92.2 per cent have premarital intercourse. This is perhaps a prime ingredient of the Report’s popular appeal, and incredible sales.” Numbers, he suggested, even if detached from the reality they were supposed to convey, could awe readers.  

On the other hand, the quantification of human behavior could be deeply threatening, as both the opinion pollster and the sex surveyor knew. Although he defended his strictly quantitative and behavioral approach, Kinsey acknowledged the popular perception of statistics as “cold” and unable to “measure human emotions.” Indeed, if Gallup’s and Roper’s majority percentages were taken as proof of an ever more impersonal “mass” society, numbers like Kinsey’s seemed a challenge to any knowledge or values that were not, or could not be, given the imprimatur of statistical science. Many religious thinkers, social critics, psychoanalysts, and psychiatrists worried about the ramifications of counting up sexual acts. “Whatever else sex may be, it is not, emotionally speaking, in the same class with the multiplication table,” insisted one commentator, concerned about the impact of the first Report on the “human” qualities of sex and Christian ethical teachings. Religious critics in particular balked at the potential of social scientific findings to eclipse other standards of judgment, and they defended aspects of sexual experience that could not be encompassed by Kinsey’s six varieties of “outlet.”  

A multitude of social commentators challenged the first Report’s austere scientific handling of intricate human questions. Anthropologist and psychoanalytically influenced critic Geoffrey Gorer, referring to Kinsey’s entomological past, cautioned that “an act which can consummate love and produce children cannot be measured with the calipers that determine the variation in the wingspan of wasps.” He charged that “until Dr. Kinsey came along, sex had generally been viewed as one of the most complex of all human activities.” Now, instead, “sex has been reduced to statistics.” Gorer bemoaned but was resigned to the “atomization” of sex, seeing it as of a piece with contemporary developments that had fractured knowledge into “discrete and equal facts”: intelligence tests, college exams, quiz shows, crossword puzzles, and public opinion polls. For all the persuasiveness of quantified facts, to label something “mere statistics”—a charge of numbers’ inadequacy to express the whole truth—also minimized its significance. As Margaret Mead, a vocal critic of the Reports, dryly observed: “The major abstraction an anthropologist from Mars would get from reading the Kinsey report is that sex in this country is an important, meaningless physical act which men have to perform fairly often, but often if they have not gone to college.” The idea of studying as fundamental a human activity as sex wholly abstracted from its social context seemed absurd and possibly dangerous to such critics. Even Mae West objected to “any interpretation of sex that looks upon it as a mere ‘biological function.’” She asked, “Is man, then, to weigh all his emotions in test tubes and note down some kind of formula?”  

None, however, were more vehement in their disagreement with Kinsey than the professional psychiatric community, which was nearly unanimous in its assessment that his approach to sexuality was profoundly misguided. Conceding that it was “Kinsey’s privilege to limit his research in a complex behavioral field to the extrac-
tion from it of whatever is countable,” one psychiatrist sharply criticized the scientist’s interpretations of what the data meant. He argued that people’s sexual dilemmas did “not arise mostly, as Kinsey implies, from the individual’s appreciation of his atypicality in relation to rigid legal and social scales,” but instead emerged from multiple “other factors in a total life situation.” This writer argued that “a suffering person is likely to view his designation as normal on grounds of taxonomic objectivity as somewhat beside the point.”

If professional psychiatrists and humanistic commentators cautioned that statistics could not tell a meaningful story of human sexuality, lay critics often focused on the fact that numbers told the wrong tale altogether: one drained of morality or even mystery. One columnist in 1949 jokingly urged women not to participate in Kinsey’s study. “I can’t help but feel that the women are making a mistake in being so obligingly co-operative,” she wrote. “When it comes to love and sex, it has always been an advantage to women to be a little bit mysterious to men.” If this caution was tongue-in-cheek, others worried more seriously about the effects of a stripped-down view of human intimacy. Quantification, some believed, led Kinsey to sidestep the most fundamental aspects of sexual relations. As one individual wrote to the scientist, “These men [in the male volume] have committed crimes . . . and you put it down complacently in statistics instead of in terms of human souls.” The counting and registering of men’s behavior without any attention to motivations or repercussions, this writer suggested, could not get at the truth of that behavior. The social scientist’s emphasis on detachment—just reporting the “facts”—missed the point entirely, which was to judge some acts as good and others bad.

Many associated the absence of moralizing in the Reports with the advance of scientific knowledge. A writer for the Atlanta Constitution pitted “poor informed modern youth,” who were burdened with “choosing their mates scientifically.” A Baltimore Afro-American columnist similarly waxed nostalgic for an era when “each bride included a cook book [rather] than a Kinsey report in her trousseau, and when what sex life she had was adequate, or if it wasn’t she never discovered it by experimenting.” Both argued that, in some matters, ignorance was bliss. But whether or not readers endorsed Kinsey’s tabulation of private life, to many it seemed an inevitable aspect of modern times. Wrote one college journalist critical of the quantitative trend, “America is developing a cult of statistics . . . And modern man is abandoning himself to a worship of statistics.” Much like those who charged the Lynds with not seeing the heart of Muncie for the facts, these observers viewed Kinsey’s passion for “that which can be measured” as symptomatic of an overly rational modernity.

Significantly, by the time Kinsey’s second volume arrived in 1953, the quantification of sexual behavior was not up for debate in the same way that it had been just five years earlier. Commentary on Sexual Behavior in the Human Female, by and large, did not fix on Kinsey’s basic project of collecting intimate material and transforming it into statistics. Instead, critics seized upon the dangers of publicizing Kinsey’s findings. This was partly because the public release of sexual facts about women promised to be more disruptive to social norms than the release of the male figures had been. But it was also because Americans in the brief time between 1948 and 1953 had become accustomed, no matter how grudgingly, to the social scientific takeover of intimate acts—that is, the right to think about sex in the language of numbers.

Not everyone believed that Kinsey’s facts—no matter how much scientific weight they mustered—ought to overturn established mores or could speak for the “normal.” Indeed, the Reports would ignite a furious debate about what social statistics could say about America writ large. Many readers challenged the science of the Sexual
Behavior research. They contended that the studies were simply not accurate: that Kinsey’s subjects could not possibly be representative of “good” Americans, that his sample was corrupted by reliance on the sexually deviant, that his interviews could not detect the wild exaggerations of his volunteers.

"Few, if any, researches depending on volunteer subjects have defined the scope of the universe to which their generalizations were to apply as ambitiously as the Kinsey project," pointed out one social scientist. If they did not articulate it in such technical language, many lay critics agreed with the sentiment: Kinsey had overreached in trying to speak on behalf of ordinary Americans. As one New Yorker complained to the scientist, Kinsey’s questions might have been “answered correctly by the 5900 persons over 15 years but do not apply at all to the remainder of the 150,000,000 population of the country,” adding, “Everyone knows this of course.” The same challenge, reminiscent of Gallup’s and Roper’s struggles to promote scientific sampling, was implied in such headlines as “Sexual Behavior in 7,789 Women,” the title of a skeptical review article. Once again, the question of representativeness would be at the crux of debates over survey research. Arguments sparked by Kinsey’s tables and graphs exposed profound disagreements about how the national community could be known and what the implications of this knowing would be.31

To begin with, many readers of the Reports were not willing to allow a handful of Americans to stand in for them in matters of morality. “You have taken a few crackpots and held them up as the norm and yourself as God,” complained one of Kinsey’s angry correspondents. “Adultery and kindred offenses involving sex are neither tolerated nor secretly practiced by most people in New England,” protested a Boston Daily Record editorial responding to Kinsey’s statistic that 95 percent of American men could be hauled before the courts for their violations of sex laws. These writers, relying on their own imagined statistics about how Americans behaved, were not convinced by Kinsey’s careful descriptions of his sample and statistical technique. To them, “normal” sexual behavior was closely tied to conventional morality, and no social scientific method, no matter how technically impressive, could unthether the two concepts. In this understanding, the normal could never be merely statistical.32

Challenges to the Reports’ representativeness were fueled by the suspicions many harbored about the particular Americans Kinsey had selected for his sample. The investigator, of course, had boasted about his survey reaching the “ne’er-do-well” as well as the “clergyman,” and not discriminating between the sorts of sexual practices each favored. Scrutinizing the categories of subjects included in the Reports, some found outrageous the proposition that sexual or social “deviants” could be included in a study of normal sexual behavior. Apart from “prostitutes, prisons and psychiatric hospital interviewees,” announced the acerbic Dorothy Thompson for the Ladies’ Home Journal, “the Kinsey Report is a study of largely urban, predominantly college-educated, nonreligious and not overly reticent American males under thirty.” Such critics were alert to those absent from the Reports, namely, well-behaved people like themselves. A certified public accountant from Detroit (and likely a Catholic) claimed to have made his own studies on the subject of sexual behavior that had resulted in less morally appalling conclusions than Kinsey’s. He wrote to the scientist, “If more Catholics had been polled . . . your results would have been more correct.” Similarly, the Catholic journal America, eager to exempt its readers from the activities Kinsey catalogued, called the first Report “a rich source of factual information concerning the status of sexual behavior in a small segment of the American, white, non-Catholic, male population.” These observers were unpersuaded of the survey’s comprehensiveness as well as the capacity of aggregate results to reflect their own behavior. Importantly, however, their critiques implied that had Kinsey interviewed the right Americans, his statistics might be legitimate.33

Others were unwilling to make even that concession to the sur-
veyor. Middletowners and large numbers of the unpolled had lodged scattered complaints about the particular sort of individuals surveyors had chosen to question. But this became a leading critique of Kinsey's Reports—and a more sweeping one. Challenges to sexual statistics were often at the same time a challenge to the "normality" of Kinsey's respondents. "No normal moral man or woman would submit to sex research questions," asserted one anonymous critic, casting aspersions on individuals for the very act of talking about their sexual histories with a surveyor. A reviewer of the female Report elaborated on this interpretation. "People who volunteer information about their sex life are not necessarily typical people," he charged. "One would like to know what kind of women these were who were willing to discuss the intimate details of their sex lives with a stranger and how truthful their answers were." By this logic, because only "abnormal" individuals were willing to be interviewed, the entire study was flawed. Some went still further in criticizing Kinsey's subjects and particularly those who populated Sexual Behavior in the Human Female. Given reigning conventions about female modesty, the idea of women submitting to interviews with the all-male research team was especially unsettling, and the women who participated in the study were vigorously criticized. Many concluded that Kinsey's female interviewees must have been prostitutes, or at the very least seriously maladjusted. Others dismissed women of any sort as especially unreliable subjects. Editorialized one popular magazine, "[We think] the professor may have bitten off more than he can chew in trying to compile the behavior of our talkative-silent, ignorant-too knowing, quibbling-forgetful, always unpredictable Women."34

In the end, some were simply unswayed by the claims of social science, preferring to trust their personal knowledge about mainstream sexual behavior and normal Americans over and above Kinsey's hard-won statistics. One of Kinsey's correspondents drew upon his own set of data—his marriage—to counter the Sexual Behavior research. "I have lived with one woman for 46 years and I do not agree with your findings . . . when you show as one magazine reports that 62% of adult women practice masturbation—you're nuts." Although he signed his letter "One Man's Opinion," this writer clearly believed that Kinsey's survey of thousands did not outweigh his own singularly relevant facts. Another reader could not countenance the Reports' statistics for one simple reason: "In all my life; and I have been around some, I never, to my knowledge met a homosexual." Individual experience could still trump social scientific expertise, even if this was becoming more difficult in a culture infused by statistical knowledge.35

Purporting to fashion a "normal" out of prisoners, fringe characters, and many ethnic groups in addition to the "respectable," and claiming to have made a representative survey, Kinsey plainly hit a nerve. The Reports tapped into national ideals and self-image in a way that the Middletown surveys and Gallup Poll had as well. For this reason, those who protested Kinsey's findings could not simply disregard or dismiss them. They instead were compelled to defend their own understanding of representativeness, their own vision of the sexual public.

Calling the subjects of the female study "5,940 sex delinquents," for example, one woman argued that they couldn't possibly represent the mainstream, "the hundreds of thousands of women and mothers . . . who have never engaged in any pre-marital sex relationships." Pointing to Kinsey's finding that 50 percent of the women interviewed were not virgins when they wed, she insisted that the surveyor had utterly failed at "in any way portraying the womanhood of America as a whole" since "no adequate sampling of the women of America can be found among frequenters of 'bars, dance-halls and swimming pools' of the type that lend themselves to 'Socio-Sexual approaches.'" Similarly, one man, sure that wartime conditions had seriously skewed the Sexual Behavior data on marital fidelity, made a plea to Kinsey that he "please publish a
statement to the effect that your figures in this phase of the sex study are not true of what a picture of the normal segment would be.” In the process of arguing with sexual statistics, such critics betrayed both their allegiance to “the normal” and its objective determination through hard facts. Why else this emotionally vested interest in the representativeness of Kinsey’s subjects, “the womanhood of America as a whole,” or the “normal segment”? These responses to Kinsey’s findings indicate widespread cognizance of social statistics’ ability to define and categorize. They also suggest that many Americans’ identification with an abstract and quantitatively conceived national community was strong indeed.36

Statistical Morality

The facts Kinsey’s team issued in 1948, and then again in 1953, were, in an important sense, new. As a biologist at Johns Hopkins University saw it, “Once in a great while a book comes along which marks the commencement . . . of a scientific era. These are the books that virtually begin a new science, that blaze a trail into the unknown. Such a book is Sexual Behavior in the Human Male.” For many, Kinsey’s research was a “discovery” akin to Columbus’s, revealing the terra incognita of normal American sexuality. By interviewing thousands of subjects, by synthesizing and categorizing their answers, and by thus constructing a publicly available compendium of sexual behavior, Kinsey had paved open a new world. Frequent comparisons of his sex research to the atomic bomb—the Reports themselves were sometimes referred to as the “K-bomb”—illuminate the impact of Kinsey’s survey. Prior to the Reports’ release, observed one commentator, Americans had a “collective ignorance of the ways of our fellows.” His sense, that the Reports constituted a revolution in social knowledge, in the facts Americans knew about one another, was cause for celebration as well as condemnation. At the very least, Kinsey’s sexual knowledge could not be ignored. As a minister put it, “It is not possible for Christians to return to a pre-Kinsey sexual era. Having facts about sex behavior, and consequent new insight into existing sex attitudes, there is no possible retreat into an ostrichlike position.” He understood that such knowledge did not exist in the national consciousness in the same way before and after 1948. This is why, for all their hyper-
bolc, those who talked of a radical break between a pre-Kinsey and a post-Kinsey era were correct.\textsuperscript{37}

The Kinsey Reports, like the Gallup Poll, would upset many people's convictions that they knew something of the mores and morals of their neighbors. One observer, pointing to the wide array of practices uncovered in the Reports, perceived this when he wrote that Americans "are rather different from what any one American imagines, seeing the situation, as he must, from his own personal, group, or class viewpoint." This led many to wonder, as did one reviewer, what might be the "effect from the pouring of these masses of laboriously collected data into the stream of public thought." Most concluded that the wide publicity the Reports attracted could not help but impel social change, whether for good or ill. The Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America declared, for instance, that the first Report, by dint of its scientific authority and its popular circulation, had "already become a social document" and was "bound to have an effect upon general attitudes in relation to sex." A journalist for a popular magazine agreed: "Gradually, inevitably, this study will find its way into the stream of literature, lecture, and conversation by which our sex behavior is guided and directed." Each of these commentators intuited that a collection of statistics—or, more precisely, public awareness of those statistics—could have dramatic consequences.\textsuperscript{38}

Others suggested more concretely that Kinsey's facts were already serving to make traditional ways obsolete. Reader's Digest posed the question: "Have our conventions and moralities been outmoded by the findings of modern science?" For those who accepted Kinsey's findings, the answer was obvious: Americans needed to face up to the sexual diversity in their midst. Some broadening of the permissible and "the normal" had to be effected. Sounding much like the Report's author, a writer for the American Journal of Public Health asserted, "Perhaps the most important conclusion from this whole study is that our conception of what is 'normal' sexual behavior must be radically revised." These partisans argued that greater tolerance and a revision of moral codes were the only logical outcomes flowing from new facts. They believed in a kind of social scientific realism: that Kinsey's statistics had turned up "the real," and that this discovery made lies of all the layers of custom and tradition that obscured it. Adopting this stance, one commentator proclaimed, "Obviously, to be of any value at all, a standard of sexual normality must be based on what we, the majority of Americans, do, rather than on what we say." The normal, such writers argued, could and even should be statistically determined.\textsuperscript{39}

Those who called for a change in mindset and a smooth adjustment to Kinsey's findings were in the minority, however. Critics of all stripes disputed not the Reports' facts—although many, of course, did this—but instead their publication. As one angry reader charged, "These filthy books should only be in Dr.'s libraries not for the public." A group of letter writers put it more pithily: "Kinsey calls it realism, a sewer is also realism but for obvious reasons we keep it covered." Kinsey's statistics were especially disruptive in the Cold War context, when national and sexual character were routinely conflated, whether in purges of homosexuals from the State Department or in political oratory that equated national weakness and moral decay.\textsuperscript{40}

In this light, knowledge like Kinsey's was a threat not just to personal values and social norms but to the very health of the nation: its children, marriages, and moral fiber. One woman was inspired to write to Kinsey after hearing her minister mention that "the very first place Communism would attempt to strike in any country was at its moral foundation." She continued, "I wonder if you have not unwittingly lent yourself to this destructive design by your sensational-publicized report on sex behavior (or misbehavior) in the human female." Many letters and editorials charged the professor with an almost criminal irresponsibility in unleashing
data on the high rates of masturbation and extramarital activity among the impressionable. "Turning these sex reports loose upon the public is on a par with the Rosenberg crime in the atomic field," penned one irate reader. "Many young people who are already leading an uninhibited sex life will find their behavior rationalized in this book," charged another, decrying the male Report as "a regrettable influence on youngsters who are hovering on the brink." Yet another incensed reader complained to Life magazine that Kinsey was "certainly not helping to cut down divorce rates by telling 50% of the American wives their husbands are unfaithful!"41

Apprehension about the norms the Reports were establishing, and seeming to hold up for emulation, was widespread. If opinion polls' potential for creating a herd mentality was ominous to some, the idea that Kinsey's facts would usher in a new morality was downright alarming. Gallup and Roper had made the case that the majority will be clearer and louder when conveyed quantitatively through their polls. Statistics of Kinsey's variety—the 50 percent of women who admitted to premarital sex, for example—carried a more worrisome potential, especially if the same equation between majorities and rightness held. A letter to a religious advice column in 1950 certainly confirmed such fears: the writer had been accused of a narrow-minded reaction to a shotgun wedding, and the accusers had "quoted the Kinsey report in defense." To many, a new definition of morality—"no worse than the next one"—seemed imminent in the post-Kinsey era.42

Critics of this bent were most agitated by what some termed "statistical morality," the notion that an action was socially acceptable simply because it was commonplace. Many claimed that Kinsey furthered the radical position that "ethics has only a statistical base." One of the researcher's correspondents, for instance, demanded whether "a wrong should be indulged because a pathetically large group do it." In one of the most gentle incarnations of this critique, a minister charged the first Report with an "unwitting

value judgment affirming the existent as the 'real,' even implying at times that what is is what should be." Such reactions highlight rather strikingly the novel cultural context for social scientific information in the mid-twentieth century. Knowing what the numerical majority did seemed to be enough to encourage or alter behavior, and this was particularly threatening on sexual terrain. What is revealing about these worries is not so much that they predicted how Kinsey's data might operate, but the anxiety itself, which was joined to more general concerns about the imitative character of what commentators increasingly called a "mass society." Believing that family and religious bonds were weakening, many Americans feared that individuals would choose to be guided by statistics—and other people's actions—in the absence of traditional social anchors.43

Kinsey's decision to work with quantitative rather than qualitative data made this prospect much more plausible. Employing the all-purpose measure of outlet, the scientist's numerical charts invited measurements against the mean. To one Cincinnati Enquirer reporter writing of the male survey, "The 'clinical tables' at the end of the book" were "especially dangerous" since they made for easy comparisons and self-evaluation. Geoffrey Gorer, a sharp critic of Kinsey's "justification by numbers," complained that "self-rating" has become so emotionally important for so many Americans that the greater number of popular papers have scoring cards by which one can rate oneself for knowledge or for the possession of certain qualities." He continued, "Now Dr. Kinsey has supplied a great number of tables by which one can rate oneself; and, in an appendix, has thoughtfully broken them down by age, education, marital status, etc. With a little trouble one can find out how one stacks up in frequency of 'outlet,' variety of 'outlet,' and even more intimate anatomical details, with one's peers." Gorer concluded that, in the Kinsey era, "keeping up with the Joneses' acquires a new, and perhaps slightly ribald, significance." Sure enough, Charm magazine,
in a year-end roundup that designated 1948 "the year of the Kinsey Report," reported that "an incredible lot of armchair lovers apparently found entertainment in scoring themselves off against the statistical sex behavior of their neighbors." Such breezy accounts surely only made for more worry among those wary of a culture in which moral standards were determined not by tradition but by sheer popularity.

A fan of the Reports gleefully reported that "the latest saying along Broadway is: 'If it's all right with Kinsey, it's all right with me!'" A phalanx of psychologists and sociologists set out to test just this proposition on undergraduates at Princeton and UCLA, among other universities, their question being: Did mere familiarity with Kinsey's survey change students' sexual attitudes and activities? As these investigators well understood, social scientific data had a life and force of their own that extended far beyond the mere aggregation of facts. This knowledge could cause people to act in different ways, imagine their relationships in new lights, and reevaluate their beliefs. Margaret Mead was among those who believed in the potency of Kinsey's facts. "In our rapidly changing culture, we rely upon knowledge of what is 'done,' on what the majority of the people of our own age, sex, and class are doing," she explained. "Until the Kinsey report was published, people hadn't known whether they should have more sex or less. Now many are rushing to buy the book just to look themselves up." Indeed, at a 1948 forum on the male Report at Louisiana State University, an expert felt it necessary to offer what might have seemed an absurd piece of advice: that "no person should feel compelled to consult tables in the Kinsey report before deciding on his type of activity." In a society constantly seeking information about itself, in other words, statistical means could themselves become normative.

Expectations about the permissive impact of the Reports were not mere fantasies of alarmists or traditionalists. Experts, pop and otherwise, described the cultural assimilation of sex research in similar but much more laudatory terms. Data, they agreed, could be therapeutic. A commentator for the Nation believed that this fact explained psychiatrists' strong criticisms of Kinsey. "One important and highly gratifying effect" of the male Report, he believed, was its "mass psychotherapeutic function . . . People work with touching eagerness through the appalling mass of boring charts and statistics in order to discover with relief that they are not outcasts, not psychopaths, not criminals." He argued, "If this relief from tension and guilt can be bought for $6.50, it is a most happy social accomplishment. But everybody in the guilt business is bound to feel at least a little angry." Others made a similar case regarding religious outcries against Kinsey's research, one writer that "the Report has been . . . bitterly assailed by authoritarian groups, particularly clerical ones, which have a vested interest in human insecurity and ignorance."

The liberating effect of the Reports—their ability to free individuals from the "experts" (ironically enough) and the tyranny of hypocritical social codes—was their chief benefit according to this vein of analysis. Testifying to the sway of aggregates and employing majoritarian language, one commentator observed, "The trouble was that up to now nobody who belonged to this majority [who broke sexual taboos] could know that he did belong to a majority; hence people felt abnormal and guilty." This writer compared the silence around sexual behavior prior to the Reports to "a state of mind in the modern political dictatorship" where "the actual normal, average man is unaware of the fact that his neighbors, and ordinary men throughout the country, are equally discontented and critical." By putting a Cold War spin on Kinsey's research and praising the democratic potential of survey data, he was borrowing some of the scientist's own rhetoric. He was also countering those critics who believed that the Sexual Behavior statistics were a sign of American decline. Instead, the sexual knowledge of the Reports was proof of the freedom of thought in a liberal society.
Kinsey’s champions, no less than his detractors, swore by the power of numbers. “Whatever your weakness,” explained a popular magazine to its female readership regarding the Sexual Behavior data, “you will find that you share it with countless American women.” One expert, pleased about the rethinking of moral codes that Kinsey was causing, believed that “the Report has the psychological effect of lifting a large weight of guilt from the shoulders of the individual, divides the guilt, so to speak, among millions.” Asserted another, “Good or bad, if you know that your sex life coincides with that of most of your fellow Americans, you will be freed of an oppressive sense of guilt.” Being part of a statistical majority—even if the company one kept was in conventional terms misbehaving—was thought to convey great psychological rewards. A writer for the New Yorker reflected, “To be sure, people might still regret their actions, even after coming into possession of the Kinsey facts, but there is a substantial difference between remorse over having acted as a member of one per cent of the population and remorse over having acted as a member of ninety per cent.” Implicit in commentators’ analyses was the assumption that information about strangers’ behaviors and national norms could have personal consequences. The statistical community and the individual’s psychological well-being were thus tightly bound together.  

Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest that individuals were using Kinsey’s data as a new, and more forgiving, standard by which to classify their own behavior. “The unexpected financial success of Dr. Kinsey’s report,” observed one writer, “has made evident the eager interest of a public starved for facts relative to the sexual conduct of its members.” Access to such facts would help individuals determine whether and where they fit into an expanded category of the “normal.” Again, the sexual accounting scheme of the Reports made this relatively easy. A West Point graduate who wrote to Kinsey, for example, found solace in the numbers the professor had compiled. “I know now that I’m not nor ever was a homo-sexual, but there were times when some of my actions as a small boy weighed heavily on my conscience,” he acknowledged.

It seems so ridiculous now that I ever worried as a little logical reasoning then would have proven I couldn’t be abnormal since I did no more than all the other boys in my group, in fact in many cases not so much . . . What interested me was your statements on the prevalence of homosexuality in young boys, and the fact that one poor fellow just as normal as any may be branded and ruined for life first because he was caught doing what thousands and thousands of others are doing and have done.

For this writer, the Sexual Behavior data were a source of relief. Although he drew a different lesson from the facts and figures than did many of the outraged readers of the Reports, he too was suggesting that the researcher had created a standard of statistical morality that broke radically with the purportedly shared norms of the past. Kinsey applauded this reading of his data. Replying to a letter from a sixteen-year-old living in rural North Carolina who confessed his “abnormal” attraction for men and described himself as a “lost boy,” the scientist was sympathetic, with an evident desire to reassure. To do so, he invoked the comfort of numbers: “You must not worry about your problem. It is one that a great many people run into.” He continued, “One of the worst things that can happen to a person is to have them feel that they are abnormal and different from other persons. You must not feel that for that probably is not true.” Kinsey’s interest in broadening the category of the normal comes through clearly in such statements. His columns and charts engendered the same hope in many individuals who came into contact with the Reports’ findings.

Within Kinsey’s vast correspondence can be found thousands of individuals seeking and finding statistical reassurance. A man from New York, for example, inquired in 1944 as to how frequently married men typically masturbated, since he knew it was often seen
as an adolescent activity. He noted, “I have suffered somewhat from the feeling that it meant I was to some extent abnormal.” In another instance, a woman wrote to Kinsey regarding her and her partner’s enjoyment of the “queer” practice of oral sex: “Please, in some way, let us know if this is right or if this is condoned . . . surely others are like this too. Are we to be condemned? Are we normal?” she begged to know. One African American woman who wrote up her interview experience with Kinsey for Ebony magazine, expressed her relief at hearing of the survey’s findings:

I learned quickly that as a social science researcher with a college degree, I had a sex life not unlike upper class women of any color. According to Dr. Kinsey, I and these women got more mental satisfaction and less physical gratification from sexual intercourse than persons with lower class standards . . . I was happy to learn that I am neither abnormal nor unusual since Dr. Kinsey’s research for his next book about U.S. women found that a third are so-called ‘cold’ women.

Framing her own history against others like her—professional, upper-class, and well educated—this woman could easily find herself in Kinsey’s masses of data on white females similarly situated, even if subjects like her would be eliminated from the Report’s pages. Indeed, the format of the survey carefully structured her identification with these anonymous others. By lining up her sexual experience against Kinsey’s categories, this woman could be satisfied that she was “normal.” Her expectations about her own sexual fulfillment were, however, delimitied by Kinsey’s classificatory regime. “This does not mean that I am a ‘nicer’ woman,” she wrote. “It does not mean that I am happier than women with other standards. As a matter of fact, I have less chance of sexual adjustment in marriage because I do hold these ideas which make it hard for me to relax when behaving sexually.” As a certain kind of woman she inevitably encountered certain kinds of problems, and all of this was made transparent by the magic of social statistics. In this way, numbers about those one didn’t know could become personally meaningful. In the responses of surveys’ audiences, we can perceive a community, not of neighbors but of knowledge, taking shape. Indeed, Kinsey noted in the first Report that the most frequent queries interviewees had for the researchers involved “comparisons of the individual’s activities with averages for the group to which he belongs” and the question “Am I normal?.”

Stand Up and Be Counted

Kinsey’s success at securing the cooperation of thousands of strangers to answer his intimate questions was a tribute to his persuasive faculties. But it also revealed the peculiar attraction of social surveys for midcentury Americans. The pull of an emerging statistical community was most evident in the willingness and even enthusiasm with which individuals volunteered to be part of the Sexual Behavior research.

The popular media seized upon the fact that, following the publication of Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, individuals were volunteering in droves to take part in the survey. Life magazine observed, “It has become quite fashionable to be interviewed by Kinsey, and consequently there has been a waiting list.” The 1949 Christmas shopping rush in Atlanta was said to outstrip even “the prospect of an interview with Kinsey,” and the Miami Daily News reported that the scientist planned to “steer clear of the extroverts who clamor to be interviewed” while doing research in the city. “Such people have become so serious a problem,” it related, “that Dr. Kinsey and his staff travel incognito and in groups of not more than three.” Even accounting for media exaggeration, the amount of interest in participating in the Sexual Behavior research was extraordinary. And as the first Report attracted more and more publicity, requests for interviews increased. One Vermont
newspaper let its readers know in 1952, "It's still not too late to sit down with the original Kinsey researchers and take one of the same kind of interviews that went into the book," but it noted that there was a good deal of competition for slots. The popular song "Oh! Dr. Kinsey (Why Don't You Question Me?)" hit close to the mark. A journalist for Cosmopolitan magazine interviewing Kinsey was able to "report at first-hand" that the telephone in the scientist's office rang regularly with calls from those hoping to volunteer.52

Hundreds of other individuals contacted Kinsey with the aim of serving as research subjects. These offers could be extended in a rather businesslike way. A fairly typical letter read: "Dr. Kinsey, Sir: I should like to volunteer to be interviewed for your records on the forthcoming sequel to Sexual Behavior in the Human Male. For classification purposes I will mention that I am an actress, married eight years, no children. Please notify me at the address below at any time I can be of service in your research." This woman's offer—and her attendant self-classification—were not at all unusual. Kinsey often acquiesced to such requests, especially if the individual fit a category for which he needed more histories. His courteous reply to this volunteer first thanked her for her interest. "It is very good of you to offer to help," he continued. "We should be glad to get your history. Your background is one which we need better represented in our study." In this fashion, Kinsey encouraged individuals to feel like active participants in his research.53

Revealing one's deepest secrets to a stranger, instead of causing shame or embarrassment, proved satisfying to some who gave their sexual histories. As did many who corresponded with Kinsey, individuals could find confirmations of their normality in a session with one of the Sexual Behavior team. One such man wanted Kinsey to know "that I found our visit enjoyable and helpful—most helpful, indeed. The confidence gained from your advice and experience has given me the assurance I was seeking." Similar testimonies from others help explain why Kinsey's research subjects were so loyal to the scientist. One woman responded to a perceived attack on his interview method in the pages of Newsweek by standing up for the "courageous Dr. Kinsey," as well as "the women who offered themselves so generously in the name of humanity as guinea pigs" for his study.54

What did it mean to become a guinea pig, one among thousands of other subjects and millions of accumulated facts? Accounts of those who revealed their role in Kinsey's research suggest that it was something of a thrill. A Canadian reporter who agreed to give her history disclosed that she had been "disturbed at the prospect of revealing the most intimate details of my life . . . But in very short order I was taking a completely objective view and finding the interview as clinical and impersonal as an examination by a doctor." She described her participation in the survey rather proudly: "I was an infinitesimal cog in one of the greatest fact-finding projects ever undertaken . . . Day by day, month by month, they [the interviews] add up to the first great mass of facts, and figures drawn from a cross-section of all social and educational groups, from which charts, curves and finally conclusions may be drawn." Kinsey's subjects who left public traces often commented both on their feelings of anonymity and their sense of importance in contributing survey data. Interviewees recalled this process in strikingly similar ways. One wrote for Cosmopolitan magazine, "Dr. Kinsey sits about six feet away, facing you. He marks checks, crosses and other symbols on a chart. It is no ordeal; you know that you are not making an impression—only a statistic." Another volunteer remarked, "My sex life now belongs to science . . . I am just a case number in the large collection in the files of the Kinsey research." Still another stated, "I have been Kinsey-ized. I have become a statistic, number umpty-ump in the record of 100,000 men
and women that will make up Dr. A. C. Kinsey’s study of human sex behavior.” She went on to describe her transformation in some detail:

When we were through, I looked at my sex history... My whole life was spread out in... dozens of little checks and crosses placed on the paper to tell a story to Dr. Kinsey, but meaningless to an outsider. And when I went out of that room, my identity would vanish as if a wave had washed over the sand. My anonymity would be complete. Later the sheet of paper would be run through a fabulous machine to break the answers down into their proper categories... No longer was I an individual; only a statistic to form a pattern along with thousands of other case histories. I felt about as significant in the scale of life as a star a million miles away.

This woman’s words summarized not a complaint, but a fascination. Somehow, the merging of her life history with thousands of others through the “fabulous” technology of the Hollerith card puncher linked her to something almost cosmic in significance. As such, the Kinsey interview stood as a telling symbol of both the anonymity and the connectedness of the modern public.55

Just as finding one’s place in a battery of statistics brought a welcome sense of comfort to many individuals, standing up and being counted had its own satisfactions, linking private, individual behaviors to a larger, if diffuse, community. The eagerness to take part in Kinsey’s research was not restricted to those who underwent interviews. Many who never served as subjects sought to take part in the research and make their mark on the Reports. And plenty of information from volunteers arrived unbidden at Kinsey’s Indiana University offices. One man who had read the male volume, but who had no prior contact with the surveyor, wrote: “I am making an offer to help out in the work. If it will be of any value to you, I am willing to give you a detailed history of my sex life; the inside story revealing my thoughts, aims, motives and mental picture, in regard to various phases of sex.” A helpful, even eager, volunteer, he merely required from Kinsey the headings and topics he ought to structure his sexual history around. This man could give the scientist “typical instances and cases,” as well as “particular cases (army experience) and instances.” He added, “I am a touch typist and qualified to explain anything and everything for you.” Attaching only a few conditions—that no one call on him in person, that his revelations be kept confidential, and that he be given a reasonable amount of time to write up the history (“I work on a night shift, am tired many times, must wait on myself” he wrote in explanation)—this correspondent believed his history would be “a valuable addition” to the Sexual Behavior research. Demonstrating a familiarity with the techniques of the social scientist for sifting experience into standardized categories, he noted, “You can punch out the facts and details on your card system or whatever you have.”56

Others did much the same. One man sent his “frequency record” to Kinsey anonymously, with his annual number of dreams and climaxes recorded for the years 1942 to 1953. Another man, a Vermonter, kept records of his and his wife’s sexual activity for years, sending regular installments to Bloomington. Both men may have taken a cue from Kinsey, who, in bold type in the 1948 Report, had urged “persons who have kept records or who are willing to begin keeping day by day calendars showing the frequencies and the sources of their sexual outlet... to place the accumulated data at our disposal.” Although these particular individuals most likely never met Kinsey, they certainly exhibited an investment in his project. They also showed themselves to be thoroughly comfortable with a social scientific mode of reporting. On Kinsey’s part, he never turned down offers from individuals to send in their sexual histories, but instead thanked them for adding valuable data to his files. He wrote to the Vermont man, for example, “This is excellent of you to keep such a record. It is out of this sort of specific material
that we can get information which [is] not available in our interviews.” These volunteered data often made their way into the narrative sections of the Reports, giving their authors a small role in structuring the knowledge contained therein.57

Embedded in these offers to help with the research was a subtle conversion of individual experiences into social scientific data. If volunteers were eager to share their stories, they were also fairly certain their histories were useful to science. Some who offered sexual data saw it as a practical transaction, where, in exchange for providing Kinsey valuable information, they could ask him for advice, counseling, or even money. In this vein, a woman from Roseburg, Oregon, wrote, “I would be willing to answer your questions, truthfully & to the best of my knowledge and it is true, I want something in return, I want you to tell me if you can, why my marriage has not worked out successfully.” This woman wanted Kinsey’s advice on her marriage, but “only after you had questioned me, so you would, perhaps, be better able to explain, for then you would know more about me.” She thought the surveyor would be interested in her history in its own right. But she also expected that her own experiences might help “straighten out” other people’s marriages. Individuals like these calculated their sex histories as commodities, believing they were worth the expert’s attention and deserved repayment. Another writer, detailing her flagging interest in her marriage, asked for Kinsey’s help, reasoning that “there must be others you have interviewed who have the same trouble as mine.” She emphasized, “If at any time I can be a service to you I would appreciate it—it might help me at the same time, to live a happy & useful life—which I am not doing at the present time.” In this woman’s estimation, adding her life history to the survey might yield her some of its accumulated wisdom, and she saw this as a fair trade for her service to Kinsey. Similarly, a woman offered to be “interviewed for your new book as it might help me to understand my husband.”58

Explicit bargaining over personal data was even more apparent in an Illinois woman’s letter to Kinsey, which began, “I may be of help to you and you could help me out.” Aware that the researcher was working on the female volume, she offered to share her experience “with the female side of sex,” including her work as a “Madam” in several houses of prostitution in the West and her acquaintance with many lesbians. “You can see,” she wrote, “I’ve known both sides of life in reality.” Wearing her life history as a badge of authenticity, she offered to give Kinsey an interview, not as a way to gain expert knowledge, but as a means of getting out of debt. In a follow-up letter she reiterated her point, highlighting the advantages the scientist would gain from her own “expert” disclosures. “I do think I could give you some interesting data,” she urged. “I am in dire need of money at present, so if you think it would be worthwhile and you could use information, such as I have, I would certainly like an interview.” Traffic in knowledge moved in two directions. Individuals could barter their histories to get something out of social research, just as the social scientist employed individuals’ experiences to compile aggregate data. The facts revealed in the Sexual Behavior volumes were thus very much a joint production.59

What stands out in all this offering up of sexual diaries, histories, and logs as “cases” for Kinsey’s research is how readily many individuals were coming to understand their private lives through the social scientific categories he and others had made available. The Reports inspired record-keeping and a technical perspective on sex, readers and correspondents often adopting the surveyor’s dry scientific language in writing of their own problems and questions. One of the men who regularly sent reports on his sexual activity to Kinsey, for example, pressed the scientist for more data on “the relationship of masturbation after marriage to orgasmic success in
marital coitus.” This was no social scientist, but an individual interested in improving sexual relations with his wife. He noted that he “would appreciate any rough data you could send me . . . I no doubt could use it to advantage in the calendars my wife and I are keeping.”

In the same vein, a California woman volunteered to send the professor her brother’s notebooks containing his “early emotional history.” Kinsey took her up on her offer, and after examining the notebooks remarked that he had “had a chance to go over them in detail and extract the material that was pertinent to our study of his case.” Both Kinsey and this woman were able to understand her brother’s emotional history as data. It was something extractable and separable from him—a “case history” to be analyzed against others—and this is what made it scientifically valuable. In a similar transmutation of intimate activities into raw data, one of Kinsey’s recruiters wrote to ask him if male histories were still desired for the survey. The writer noted that the ex-husband of a former subject had expressed interest in an interview and wondered if “you might want him as a cross-check on Joan’s history.” For both Kinsey and this writer, the two histories could be considered discrete sets of information to be compared against each other to ensure scientific validity. More importantly, sexual data could be verified, corrected, or disproved—not by the subjects of that data but by the scientist.

This is not to say that Kinsey’s subjects and correspondents were not active participants in shaping their sexual narratives. Wrote a resident of a mental hospital who had interviewed with Kinsey, “It was a rare pleasure to be of some little assistance in your research work,” work he believed would “push aside the cobweb of social ignorance.” He was writing not simply to praise the scientist, however, but in order to elaborate on his record, “being denied—because of time—the chance to tell all.” Many others fell into this category. A woman from Chicago wrote to Kinsey explaining that she and her husband “both certainly want to talk to you some more. I’ve thought of many things to add to my history.” Divulged another interviewee, “Since you have gone there have been many things remembered that eluded me while in your room, forgotten details . . . Well, perhaps soon you will have more time and we shall sit again and they will come back.” Many subjects were eager to share, to maintain their connection with Kinsey, and to remain involved in the research venture. Typical of this vein of correspondence was a New York man who contacted Kinsey to follow up on his interview. Recalling additional details about his childhood awareness of sexuality, he wrote: “You asked regarding situations that arouse sexual feeling. I forgot to mention reading about tortures & cruel acts, especially if in considerable detail. This may be a somewhat ‘abnormal’ response. However I have already made admissions which I have made to no other person so you may as well have it all.”

This urge to “tell all,” to complete the record, and to contribute an accurate history, surfaces again and again in the letters subjects wrote to Kinsey. With a fastidious attention to detail, they contacted the scientist to correct and update their sexual narratives—an impulse at least as interesting as their histories themselves. Certainly, some of these individuals simply wanted to reflect further on what their interview had unleashed, responding to Kinsey or one of his colleagues as they would a therapist or confessor. But some subjects, it seems, also wanted to add to and expand upon their interview because it had become their “real” history as well as a trove of scientific data. A concern with correcting the record could thus indicate a profound acceptance of social scientific ways of thinking.

Playing the scientist with the aid of Kinsey’s statistics, many aimed to classify their own sexual lives through a schema of typicality or normality. One such man contacted Kinsey after having read the female volume. “Of particular interest,” he wrote, “was your indication that a new study of transvestism is being undertaken. I
would like to stand up and be counted, if I'm not too late.” In his
desire to “stand up and be counted,” this correspondent evinced
something of the participatory desire that surveys stoked. Jeffrey
Weeks has argued that “anonymous people whose sexual feelings
were denied or defined out of existence were able to use sexological
descriptions to achieve a sense of self, even of affirmation.” This
particular man, wanting to be counted as a transvestite, enclosed a
thumbnail sketch of his sexual autobiography, adding, “You will
find my case history somewhat typical.” His hope for inclusion in
the Sexual Behavior research carried with it the implicit agreement
to take on its social scientific terminology and rules—so much so
that he rendered his own, presumably highly individual, story as a
“case history,” classifiable by a scientist as “typical.”

Sexual statistics did not only affect understandings of how others behaved; they could also color how people conceived of their
own experiences. Thus did individuals find it possible to objectify
their sexual histories, as did the woman who wrote of Kinsey’s “scientific approach” in the interview, “It seems, after awhile, like you’re talking about someone else instead of yourself.” Or another,
who explained that her reaction to being interviewed “was not at
all what I had expected.” She wrote, “Never before had I realized
that sex is the theme song that ties a life together.” This equation
of an individual’s sexual history as recounted to Kinsey and that
which “ties a life together” is a telling instance of the novel power
of social scientific techniques to construct modern selves.

Kinsey’s subjects possessed a certain latitude to tell their stories
as they wished, but their interviews, strained through surveyors’ categories, were never pure exercises of self-creation. Through
studies like the Sexual Behavior reports, citizens were learning to
take the same “objective” stance toward their own lives that the
Lynds had taken toward Middletown. Cultivating a distance from
their own intimate histories, some Americans placed their experi-
ences like specimens, using the social scientist’s words instead of
their own to tell themselves who they were.

It is perhaps not surprising that Americans read so avidly about
others’ extramarital affairs and “homosexual contacts.” But why
did they so willingly donate to Kinsey their own sexual histories?
Some claimed only to want to help science and humanity. For most,
the motivations were undoubtedly more complex. One can imagine the multiple rewards for a volunteer: the possibility of gaining
counseling and help, the ability to share secrets heretofore private,
and the contribution of one’s life experience to a grandiose research project. There was, however, a further benefit: membership in a
community of potentially similar, although anonymous, others.

Soon after Sexual Behavior in the Human Male was published,
literary critic Lionel Trilling commented on what he judged to be
the significance of the study. Unlike many other observers, who emphasized Kinsey’s shocking findings, Trilling delved into the root
causes of the Report as a phenomenon, and specifically into what it
revealed about contemporary American culture. He contended that
the Kinsey Report was “an event of great importance in our cul-
ture,” both “as symptom and as therapy.” “The therapy lies in the
large permissive effect the Report is likely to have, the long way it
goes toward establishing the community of sexuality. The sympt-
omatic significance lies in the fact that the Report was felt to be
needed at all, that the community of sexuality requires now to be established in explicit quantitative terms.” As Trilling saw it in
1948, sexual statistics were functioning as a form of solace and of
community. Linking this trend to what he saw as the fragmentation
of modern American society, he reflected, “We must assure our-

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some citizens sought in surveyors' statistics a new sort of companionship, a new way of belonging.65

What Trilling perceived was that, by the middle of the century, social scientific knowledge was fulfilling a peculiar function in the culture. It was not merely that Americans were being studied in a more intrusive fashion—in Kinsey's case, through detailed interviews about the most intimate aspects of their lives. It was that individuals were using the knowledge that accrued from such techniques in new ways: to place themselves in a spectrum of others, to evaluate themselves via social scientific categories, and even to discover a community in the numbers. If those who fell on the wrong side of the polls' flat percentages could find themselves newly in a minority, Kinsey's facts beckoned everyone in, from the "cold woman" to the transvestite. By reading the Report, one magazine claimed, "You are looking into the lives of your friends and acquaintances, your wives, your husbands, your own children. What's more important, you are learning much about yourself." Even Kinsey's most vociferous critics seemed to understand his survey's appeal. This was evident in their accusations that the scientist had crafted a statistical morality—and in their sense of inevitability that Kinsey's proliferating normal curves were the coming mode, perhaps the only mode, by which the nation's inhabitants could be known.66

The Sexual Behavior studies represented the fruition of several decades of social surveyors' attempts to speak for the nation, but they also signaled a departure. For Kinsey himself, but perhaps also for his readers, there was a certain strain simply in attempting to fit a singular container like "normal sexual behavior" around the statistical abundance of the Reports. Kinsey's research, after all, virtually exploded the idea of a national "average." No matter how often reporters and critics of the Reports talked in broad aggregates—"American womanhood" or the "normal man"—many readers wanted to know what the typical working-class Catholic man did in his bedroom, or what the average college-educated woman could expect from her marriage. In the end, Kinsey was able to loosen up the normal curve, making more room—and visibility—for those along its spectrum. As the sheer number of his correspondents discovering and declaring themselves "normal" made clear, though, they still sought expert assurances about where they fit in an expanded mainstream.

By exposing the range of sexual behavior, Kinsey and his team might have believed that they were liberating individuals from the tyranny of social codes. But their statistics, tirelessly repeated and argued over, encouraged a new understanding of what it meant to be normal. Out of thousands of personal, emotional conversations, the surveyors had manufactured an authoritative batch of medians and modes. The possibility of using these data to monitor or regulate was always just under the surface. The research it had sponsored, noted the Committee for Research in Problems of Sex, "offers the hope of greatly increasing our understanding of the typical and the aberrant types of human sex behavior and of factors which condition or control them." Similarly, referring to the charts supplied at the end of the male Report, a clinician noted that one could "easily determine how the sex history of a given subject compares with averages for others of the same age group, educational level, and religious or rural-urban background," and furthermore that "attempts to appraise, re-direct, or punish the behavior of individuals should be materially aided by the use of these tables."67

But the most important users of Kinsey's data were not social scientists or clinicians. They were the individuals whose own case histories mingled in the Reports. Subjects—actual or vicarious—of the Sexual Behavior research seized upon Kinsey's statistics, embracing new gauges by which they could judge themselves. In publishing the Reports, the taxonomist had meant to undermine the concept of normality, even to remove that category from the scientific vocabu-
lary. Instead, a broad swath of Americans looked back at him, and his masses of data, to affirm that they belonged to it. Even, or perhaps especially, in the post-Kinsey era, citizens willingly positioned themselves along a sexual–behavioral spectrum, assessing themselves not against an average "total outlet" but against specific norms for their age, class, religion, or gender. The result was a more finely grained scale along which nearly everyone could at least aspire to be normal. Undoing this desire for a clear place among the whole was one revolution Alfred Kinsey was unable to effect.

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**EPILOGUE**

**Statistical Citizens**

The reader may be puzzled at first glance by the fact that two seemingly independent lines of thought are developed in this book: the one an appraisal of the present characteristics of American culture... and the other a critique of current focus and methods in social science research. They are here included together because they so inescapably do belong together.

—Robert Lynd, *Knowledge for What?* 1939

The project of American social science has been America.

—Kenneth Prewitt, former director of the U.S. Census Bureau, 2002

A society saturated by facts about its members—"knowable" through the aggregated answers to surveys—was a curious one, and one first imaginable in the twentieth century. Modern surveys were built out of private information told to a stranger. Yet they permitted citizens to know what their metaphorical, if not their actual, neighbors were thinking and doing. More oddly still, they permitted some individuals a flicker of recognition or communion with statistics displayed in charts and graphs—even when they themselves had been excluded from the making of those numbers. The kind of public created by the dissemination of such knowledge about itself was at once highly intrusive and completely anony-