Women’s Sexualities. Generations of Women Share Intimate Secrets of Sexual Self-Acceptance

By Carol Rinkleib Ellison, Ph.D.


Reviewed by Annette Fuglsang Owens, M.D., Ph.D.

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The Author
Carol Rinkleib Ellison, Ph.D., is a psychologist in private practice, an assistant clinical professor with the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California San Francisco, and an adjunct faculty member at the Institute of Imaginal Studies in Petaluma, California. A fellow with the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, Dr. Ellison is an esteemed researcher and regular instructor of human sexuality courses for mental health professionals. She is the co-author of Understanding Sexual Interaction and Understanding Human Sexuality.

About the Foreword
Who would have been better suited to provide the foreword to this extensive study of female sexuality than Beverly Whipple, Ph.D., R.N.? Dr. Whipple herself has conducted much research on female sexuality, and over the past two decades she has contributed to the field with over eighty research articles, many interviews and presentations, and several books, including the world-wide best seller The G Spot.

Female Sexuality Research Pioneers
Few large-scale surveys on women’s sexualities precede this book. Dr. Ellison pays tribute to two female pioneers in the field of human sexuality research, Clelia Mosher (1863-1940) and Katherine Bement Davis (1860-1935).

Mosher interviewed 45 married women about their sexuality in the beginning of the 20th Century, but her findings were not published until 1980 (6). In 1929, Davis published the book Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty-Two Hundred Women (2). Her sample was split about equally into married and unmarried women, and the age span of respondents in Davis' study ranged from twenty-one to eighty-three years.

Mosher and Davis may have received little lifetime recognition for their research, but their contributions to the field of human sexuality research have recently been publicly acknowledged also in Dr. Vern L. Bullough's speech to the European Federation of Sexology (EFS) in Berlin (1). In his presentation titled "The History of Sex Research in the USA," Dr. Bullough included Mosher and Davis in the list of the ten most important pioneers in American sexuality research. Interestingly, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. also was included in this list, primarily for his financial support and facilitation of early sex research, including Katherine Bement Davis's work. Rockefeller, who along with his parents had been involved in Christian programs to help young people maintain high moral standards, in 1911 established the Bureau of Social Hygiene to conduct studies on prostitution in the United States and Europe. Davis, one of the first female Ph.D.'s in the country, was appointed to the advisory board of the Bureau and this position allowed her to gradually move into researching other areas of sexual behavior. Under continued sponsorship by Rockefeller, she became involved in her own study on the sex lives of 2,200 women, (1, 2). As it is today, funding for sexuality research was generally difficult to obtain, and without Rockefeller's financial support few studies may have been conducted at that time.

Another early researcher of female sexuality, not mentioned in Ellison's book, was the gynecologist Robert Latou Dickinson (1861-1950). His research began in the 1890's, but his study on 4,000 married and 1,200 single women was not published until after his retirement four decades later (1, 3, 4). And then there was Alfred C. Kinsey (1894-1956), whose publication Sexual Behavior in the Human Female (5) is well known.

Dr. Ellison's Survey
Dr. Ellison and colleagues, family and friends distributed approximately 6,000 questionnaires. 2,632 anonymously completed forms were returned and provide the foundation for this study. Many women added personal comments, some of which are included in the book. The respondents were 83% Caucasian, relatively well educated American women, born between 1905 and 1977.

Contents
Most aspects of female sexuality are covered in this book, resulting in a colorful picture of how women differ with respect to past
experiences, evolving values and morals, and expectations for their partners and relationships. With her gentle style, Dr. Ellison takes the reader on a fascinating journey through the sexual lives of women of all ages. Her examples are enlightening and educational. She invites the reader to think actively and to reflect on her own sexual life as she progresses through the book. In an appendix, Dr. Ellison presents outlines for various discussion topics relevant to each chapter of the book. She suggests that women gather in Sexual Self-Acceptance (SEXSA) Circles in order to share their own unique sexual development, and possibly to enable each other to reach a state of sexual self-acceptance.

I often have women come to my sex therapy clinic with the expectation that they and/or their partners are doing something wrong. Dr. Ellison offers a refreshing perspective on intimacy and her strong message to all of us is that a couple is "... sexually successful when they create mutual erotic pleasure, to whatever level and in whatever form they desire on any particular occasion, so that each ends up feeling good about herself or himself and the other, experiencing a good time and enhancing their relationship (page 217)."

Two chapters are devoted to women's orgasms, and the chapter on sexual choreography contains an outstanding description of the physiological changes taking place during women's sexual arousal. Dr. Ellison educates the reader with an "...intergenerational smorgasbord of suggestions (page 253)" for increasing erotic pleasure and enhancing orgasms (page 245).

Conclusion
I can highly recommend this substantial book. It contains considerable, educational material beyond what I have mentioned in this review. Dr. Ellison's focus is away from sexual performance and achievements and towards the creation of intimate moments, whatever form they might take. Men may benefit as much as women from reading Women's Sexualities.


References
1) Bullough, Vern L. (Oral presentation) The History of Sex Research in the USA, European Federation of Sexology (EFS) meeting, Berlin; June 29th, 2000
5) Kinsey et al. (1953) Sexual Behavior in the Human Female, Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders

The tendency for women to define their sexuality within the context of the intimate relationship, or as secondary to that of their male partners, means that the quality of interpersonal functioning within the relationship may directly serve to strengthen or undermine women's sexual self-perceptions. Thus, an intimate relationship characterized by abuse and a lack of mutual respect might be expected to impact women's sexual self-perceptions negatively. The research on women's sexual self-perceptions is sparse, and studies of sexual self-perceptions in relation to experiences of a Problem/Condition: Sexual violence, stalking, and intimate partner violence are public health problems known to have a negative impact on millions of persons in the United States each year, not only by way of immediate harm but also through negative long-term health impacts. Before implementation of the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) in 2010, the most recent detailed national data on the public health burden from these forms of violence were obtained from the National Violence against Women Survey conducted during 1995â€“1996. This report examines sexual violence, s