

Virginia Johnson—human sexuality pioneer

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While Virginia Johnson, was born as Virginia Eshleman on February 11, 1925 in Springfield, Missouri, she came to be known as the research assistant, wife, and former wife of William H. Masters, M.D. (1,2). She was the “soft” side of the “Masters and Johnson sexual research team”. Dr. Masters was a gynecologist on faculty at George Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. He had a plan to do sexuality research and had the funding, yet needed an assistant to help him in the process. Mrs. Johnson, had been married twice previously and responded to an ad by Dr. Masters for a research assistant in 1957 (1,2). After she had a career in music and singing, she was pursuing a degree in sociology, which was never completed. Once she applied for a research assistant position with Dr. Masters, her educational aspirations were over (1). It was said that after Dr. Masters hired Ms. Johnson as his assistant, it didn’t take long for their professional relationship to become personal (3), and they married in 1971 (1). While some sources stated she was a “sexologist and psychologist”, she actually never completed a bachelor’s degree (1,2,4).

The team of Masters and Johnson helped change the way human sexuality was perceived in America and the world. They quickly rose to national prominence because of the type of research, which they conducted and presented. Their research was more scientific than previous human sexuality research done by the biologist, Alfred Kinsey. The work of Dr. Kinsey focused primarily on interviews about human sexuality, done in the 1940s and 1950s in Indiana (2,5). The human sexuality research of Masters and Johnson was quite legendary as it was the first open discussion, with some scientific data, about human sexual behavior at the time (3). They decided to make their research more scientific to allow for more professional recognition of their practice. Their research focused on the physiology of human sexual response, which they published in their initial book, “Human

Sexual Response” in 1966 (2,6). Dr. Masters focused more on the physiological aspects of human sexual response, and Virginia Johnson’s bedside manner allowed for more recruitment from friends, family, and faculty in the St. Louis area for their human sexuality research (4). This was especially beneficial because they realized that each had a complementary contribution to their personal and professional relationship (4). They worked together at this institute even after their divorce in 1993 (2).

The hallmark of their legacy was the term “sexual response cycle (SRC)” which included specific phases of human sexual response (SRC) (2,3). Their definition of the SRC depicted the Excitement, Plateau, Orgasm, and the Resolution Phases. In their initial book, they described in graphic detail the exact physiological changes associated with each phase of the SRC (6). They promoted the field of “sex therapy” by training clinicians in this area of specialty at the Masters and Johnson Institute, which was initially affiliated with the George Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. They later established their own non-profit institute called the Reproductive Biology Research Foundation, in 1964, which was renamed the Masters and Johnson Institute, in 1978 (1,2). Their position of the SRC gained favor and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) included their SRC as the foundation for nomenclature of the sexuality disorders (7). During their prominence, especially during the 1960s to the 1980s, the field of sex therapy evolved and many other clinicians gained recognition for their work in the research of human sexuality. Some of the notable clinicians during this time include: Stanley Altof (8), Lonnie Barbach (8), Len Derogatis (9), Helen Singer Kaplan (10), Sandra Leiblum (9), Joseph LoPiccolo (11), Ray Rosen (8,9), and Bernie Zilbergeld (12). Additionally, there were various professional

organizations formed to “study human sexuality”: American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT), Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality (SSSS), and the International Society for the Study of Impotence Research (ISSIR later named the International Society for Sexual Medicine-ISSM). The ISSM gained prominence because of the multidisciplinary approach to understanding, diagnosing, and treating male and female sexuality disorders (13).

Dr. Masters developed scientific instruments, such as the vaginal photoplethysmograph (VPP), to measure human sexual response, which he reported on in their initial book (6). Their second book, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, focused on the treatment of various sexual disorders, as a guide for clinicians (14). The VPP was in use for clinical research until the turn of the century and then in 2008 the vaginal pulse amplitude (VPA) gained more prominence for female sexual arousal research (15). However, in the 1990s, the National Institute of Health (NIH) convened an impotence conference to establish research methods for sexuality diagnosis and treatment (16). The outcome of this conference was the promotion of a multidisciplinary approach to the diagnosis and treatment of male and female sexuality disorders. Hence, with the turn of the century, there was an increased awareness and collaboration in the diagnostic and treatment options for male and female sexual disorders. Additionally, with the multidisciplinary approach, the pharmaceutical companies were motivated to develop medical treatments for human sexuality research and the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) gave approval to three oral medications for the treatment of what was known as impotence, and now called erectile dysfunction (ED) (12). I remember attending a conference where Dr. Masters was giving the keynote address and Dr. Zilbergeld asked him about the use of Viagra, and Dr. Masters replied that “he didn’t know anything about it and he couldn’t comment on it” (17).

Dr. Bernie Zilbergeld, was a clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at the University of California at Berkeley and later at the University of California at San Francisco. In 1980, Zilbergeld and a colleague, Michael Evans, gained national recognition for challenging the research methods of the Masters and Johnson sexual treatment data (18). In their challenge, they claimed that the research findings of Masters and Johnson were nonreplicable, and virtually worthless (19). However, the research, writings, and training of Masters and Johnson in the field of human sexuality have lasted for decades. They

were truly pioneers in the field of human sexual behavior (20). It has been on their foundation for understanding human sexuality that the field of sexual medicine has evolved into a robust and vital field of study for the comprehensive understanding of human sexual behavior domestically and internationally. Additionally, the evolution of the diagnosis and treatment options have expanded exponentially to the point where even Dr. Masters had to admit that he was lost in the shuffle (17). While these two pioneers in the field of human sexuality have passed on, as several before them, their seminal work will remain and their legacy lives on. Thank you, Virginia Johnson!

Acknowledgements

None.

Footnote

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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