

Virginia E. Johnson: Pioneer of Sexual Medicine in Saint Louis and the Conservative Midwest

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Introduction: Virginia E. Johnson was the well-known partner of William Masters and an undisputed pioneer in sexual medicine. We sought to understand her contributions to the field and her relationship with St. Louis, Missouri, where she did her research.

Methods: Using personal interviews and clippings from the Becker Medical Library's Archives and Rare Books Department, we reviewed interviews, commentaries, and editorials about Virginia E. Johnson from January 1966 to the present.

Results: Virginia Johnson was a college dropout, who regardless was able to become a major contributor to sexual medicine. She helped to write "Human Sexual Response", published in 1966, the first textbook to look at the sexual response from a physiologic basis. The research done for this book took place at a lab furnished by Washington University in St. Louis, MO, where William Masters was a professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and later moved to a center adjacent to the hospital. Originally, they used prostitutes for their research, due to fear of being criticized by the conservative area, but were later able to recruit a wide variety of local volunteers, the majority being the academic community and the upper socioeconomic and intellectual strata of St. Louis. Virginia Johnson's warmth and non-judgmental persona helped her to make patients comfortable and additionally made her a good spokesperson for the duo. Numerous national women's magazines in the 1960's wrote about their controversial work, often talking about her "accents of pure middle America". Virginia Johnson's entire sexual medicine career, including writing 10 books, took place here in Saint Louis, where she feels to be a part of the community.

Conclusion: There is a strong history of sexual research that has taken place in the Midwest, beginning with Alfred Kinsey in Indiana in the 1940's, and later with Virginia Johnson and William Masters in Saint Louis, Missouri. While many would assume that the conservative Midwest would reject this research, Virginia E. Johnson was able to gain respect and support in the community.

Introduction:

Virginia E. Johnson was the well-known partner of William H. Masters and an undisputed pioneer in sexual medicine. Masters and Johnson did all of their groundbreaking work in Saint Louis, Missouri, where they worked both at Washington University School of Medicine and in their own private research foundation and treatment institute. We sought to understand both her extensive contributions to the field and her relationship with the community of Saint Louis.

Methods:

Personal interviews with Virginia Johnson and archival references were used for this study. Using clippings from the Becker Medical Library's Archives and Rare Books Department, we reviewed interviews, commentaries, and editorials about Virginia Johnson from January 1954 to the present.

Results:

Virginia Eshelman Johnson (Picture 1) began her career far from scientific research, with original academic interests in music and sociology.¹ Ms. Johnson dropped out of college after she married, but divorced shortly after and decided to return to school. Ms. Johnson sought out to study sociology at Washington University in Saint Louis and in an effort to make money, took a job working for William H. Masters, MD, in the university's OB/Gyn department doing infertility research.² Originally, the job description was for a 2-year position, but once Dr. Masters told her his true intentions (after 6 months of work, Dr. Masters changed the subject of his studies to sexual function) and they ended up being lifelong scientific partners (becoming one unit, taking on the moniker "Masters and Johnson") and become the world experts on sexual function and dysfunction.

Prior to their research studies, no other scientifically based work had been done. Although Alfred Kinsey, at Indiana University, had "opened the door for (their) work"², his work was all via questionnaires and didn't have the physiological basis that was lacking from the literature (Picture 2). Additionally, during their career, no other scientist was doing parallel work.³ "The research [was] the only work of its kind," William H. Masters.⁴ They were true pioneers and were thought to have done "the boldest human experiment of the decade [1960's]"⁵, if not the century.

When they began their sexual function research, they were worried about how they would recruit study subjects. In the beginning, they hired prostitutes to be subjects in fear that they wouldn't be able to recruit participants, but were pleasantly surprised when they were quite successful at recruiting volunteers from their own colleagues, medical students, undergraduates, and members of the community.⁵ Additionally, Dr. Masters went to the major religious leaders and civic leaders in St. Louis to tell them about the studies that he and Ms. Johnson were undertaking. Ms. Johnson felt that this certainly helped to gain acceptance in the community and more importantly to prevent public opposition from these leaders.

Masters and Johnson contributed some of their success to Washington University, and particularly the chancellor at the time, for supporting the work that they did. Prior to the global acceptance of their research, they had difficulty getting articles published, difficulty getting government funding (a mentor of their's used to change the titles of

their grants to make them seem more innocuous), and even received frosty treatment from other scientists.³ But Ms. Johnson felt that St. Louis was the optimal place to do their research, as the east coast was too “stuffy” and they would have been considered “just another set of kooks” on the west coast.²

While many scientists and lay people alike were excited to learn more, the duo also got a lot of resistance of their work. Ms. Johnson said that a neurology professor at Washington University once approached them and criticized them for “encroaching on God’s territory,” to which the duo responded that this professor was doing the same. “In medical research, there has always been a forbidden territory. Once it was the brain, then it was the heart. Today, the forbidden territory is sex,” William H. Masters said in response to critics questioning the focus of their research.⁶

Following their initial studies, Masters and Johnson published the textbook “Human Sexual Response” in 1966, the first textbook to look at the sexual response from a physiologic basis. This incorporated 11 years of research involving 694 participants. This textbook was so novel in the scientific community that five different publishing houses bid to print the book.⁴ In its initial printing, this textbook sold out its original copies in only 3 days.⁷ By 1970, over 300,000 copies of the book had been sold, with versions printed in 10 languages.⁸ Notably, the Russian language was pirated.

Following their original research, the couple continued their research, aiming to treat sexual dysfunction. Masters and Johnson left Washington University in 1964 to begin the Reproductive Biology Research Foundation, still in their hometown of St. Louis, Missouri. As their research into the treatment of sexual dysfunction grew, they published their second textbook in 1970, “Human Sexual Inadequacy,” and expanded their practice and opened the Masters and Johnson Institute. The center was the only of its kind and 90% of the patients that came for the two-week treatment were from cities outside of St. Louis.

Virginia Johnson’s warmth and non-judgmental persona helped her to make patients comfortable and additionally made her a good spokesperson for the duo. A self-proclaimed “people person”, she enjoyed translating William Master’s scientific vocabulary into non-technical language that patients could understand. She was a brilliant history-taker and was easily able to get patient’s to tell her their very private issues. Ms. Johnson described her style as “peeling an onion” in which she would “remove the layers slowly until she got to the center”.

“Masters and Johnson” became a household term and the pair became national icons. They were featured on the cover of Time Magazine on May 25, 1970 (which Ms. Johnson joking called “a dreadful photo”) and they became a regular fixture in Johnny Carson’s monologues.⁹ (Picture 3) The duo were recognized everywhere they went, and became celebrities. In her personal collection, Ms. Johnson has over 30 framed cartoons that were printed involving the duo; a classic cartoon even had a couple exiting a plane in St. Louis wondering in people ever came to the city for a reason other than visiting the famed sex therapy clinic.² The duo became an indelible part of our culture.

By the completion of her academic career, Virginia E. Johnson had helped publish 10 books (8 textbooks and 2 aimed at the general public), had become a household name, and became an undisputed pioneer of sexual research. Ms. Johnson still resides in St. Louis, Missouri, as she also established herself as one of the most distinguished members of the community.

Conclusion:

There is a strong history of sexual research that has taken place in the Midwest, beginning with Alfred Kinsey in Indiana in the 1940's, and later with Virginia E. Johnson and William H. Masters in Saint Louis, Missouri. While many would assume that the conservative Midwest would reject this research, Virginia E. Johnson was able to gain respect and support in both the local community and the nation.

References:

1. MacPherson M. The world of Masters and Johnson. Boston Globe 1973 July 22.
2. Personal interviews with Virginia E. Johnson, St. Louis, MO, April 2007.
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6. You patients may be reading....about S*cr*ts of S*x. Medical Tribune 1965 May 26.
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9. Cover. Time Magazine 1970 May 25.

Picture Legends:

1. Virginia E. Johnson, 1966.
2. Virginia E. Johnson and Genoa G. Ferguson, April 2007.
3. Virginia E. Johnson and William H. Masters, Time Magazine, May 25, 1970.