

LGB guidelines: What Evelyn Hooker's science has wrought

Introduction

I would like to begin by thanking Drs. Werth and Baker, their team of colleagues, the Archives of the History of Psychology, and the University of Akron for planning this conference and for the invitation to be here. I want to thank you, too, for being here. Most of us on this podium are old enough to remember what such symposia used to be like. I attended one such conference in 1973. It changed my life. The ink on my diploma had not yet dried when I went to my first APA convention in Montreal to find my first job. The symposium presented a video of aversive conditioning of homosexuals. The video demonstrated the effects of electrocuting the genitals of homosexual men to redirect their sexual feelings toward women. It was 1973, 16 years after Evelyn Hooker had empirically demonstrated that the men in that video did not need that abuse. It was the same year that the American Psychiatric Association also said that these men were not sick. No one mentioned her study or the declassification or their implications for treatment of homosexuals. A group of rowdy psychologists stormed the podium, commandeered the mikes and decried the symposium for what it was: torture in the name of heterosexuality.

Ten years earlier I had begun my own conversion therapy for my unwanted desires. In 1963 that was the only form of therapy available. Six years

later, when I had my first sex with a woman, my psychoanalytically trained psychiatrist rose from his seat where he customarily sat in silence taking notes, crossed the interviewing room, shook my hand and said he considered me one of his successes. I think that was the only time we touched in six years. The question why it took six years to get to behave in a way that was considered natural and normal for men of my age was never raised...all the testosterone of a 27- year-old man notwithstanding.

I mention these stories because we are here to reflect on what has been wrought in the years since Evelyn Hooker applied empirical methods to discredit the beliefs about homosexuals, beliefs that underlay what we now regard as institutionally supported physical and psychological torture of fellow human beings. We are here also to remember and honor this woman who did something extraordinary.

Let me my say at the outset that while my discussion of the APA's *Guidelines for psychotherapy with lesbian, gay and bisexual clients* touches on the 16 years it took to develop them and the effects they may have had on the psychological treatment of lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients, my talk is directed more closely to something larger; that is, the meaning and contributions of empirical science that is the fundamental reason we can speak this morning about what used to be called "the love that dare not speak its name." It is also to recognize that we are fifty years into what I believe is a radical movement to

change humankind's understanding of human sexuality. If you take anything away from this talk, I hope it is this: it is science that has brought us to this place; it is science that will redefine forever the very ways we think and behave about human sexuality, not just sexual orientation. And, finally, it is to remember and honor the woman scientist who first challenged prevailing beliefs about queers and faggots.

At this point I must acknowledge the contributions of the many gay activists of the 40's and 50's, who lived and labored under impossible conditions, and those of the late 60's and beyond who pressed for the right to live without shame. We live in their debt. I must also say thank you, a deep thank you, to the psychologist activists who have picked up the torch Evelyn ignited and continue to do the research that informs our work to eliminate discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

In 1957 Evelyn Hooker may not have imagined any more than the gay people she studied what would be built on the ground she broke. She did what psychologists do: they observe and they test their observations with empirical methods against empirically derived evidence. She observed that the gay men she knew lived meaningful and productive lives despite everything that was believed about them. She tested her hypothesis that these men were not sick and proved it empirically. And while no one could have imagined in 1957 that 50 years later there would be empirically validated guidelines for psychotherapy with

lesbian, gay and bisexual clients, one can easily trace the line from her study to the practice guidelines that are now APA policy. That line documents the normalization of LGB sexual orientation as variant forms of human sexuality and leads, consequently, to the normalization of same-sex relationships. To wit, in the summer of 2004, the summer George Bush and Karl Rove were whipping up a frenzy of right-wing fears of having our government and churches honor same-sex relationships as marriages, the APA adopted two policies, each based on empirical research, one that states that sexual orientation has no bearing per se on parenting and the other that argues there is no empirical reason for denying the access of same-sex couples to marriage and its legal and social benefits other than discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

In addition to aiding psychologists who treat LGB clients with practical information, the APA guidelines summarize the progress science has made in providing an accurate picture of the lives of lesbians, gays and bisexuals. Further still, the guidelines document the effects of stigma and discrimination on the lives of LGBT. Finally, the guidelines provide empirical evidence for psychology's opposition to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Normalizing variant sexual orientations has also led logically to the investigation of gender identity and gender variance, for all same sex behavior crosses traditional gender boundaries. This is, in fact, a very recent focus of attention in psychological practice and a growing one in research. The APA

Council of Representatives has established a task force to review current knowledge about gender identity, gender variance and intersex conditions and to make recommendations to the APA for research, education and psychological practice. The Council expects to receive the task force's report sometime next year. At present the guidelines APA adopted as policy in 2000 are undergoing a revision, a revision required by the APA to keep practice guidelines current with the field. The revision will be completed by 2009 or 2010 when the Council of Representatives must re-authorize or sunset the guidelines. Recently published research will allow for the expansion of some guidelines, the revision of others, and the addition of a few others. At present the research on transgender issues may not be sufficient to support the addition of a stand-alone guideline on transgender, but a discussion of transgender issues in the revised document is planned. That discussion will undoubtedly be informed with the task force's recommendations.

At this point I want to expand on the importance of empiricism to my discussion of the guidelines and sexual orientation.

The APA adopted *Guidelines for psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients* in 2000 to help psychologists provide competent psychological services to these people and to eliminate discrimination against LGB persons in assessment and treatment and also in training that remained despite the declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973. Concurrent with

the development of the LGB guidelines, the APA was developing criteria for the development of guidelines to insure that all guidelines are based on empirical research, an empirically demonstrated need for guidelines, and their applicability to psychological practice. (In fact, APA resists adopting any policy on psychological practice that does not have empirical support.) The LGB guidelines were the first set of guidelines to be adopted by the Council of Representatives under an early iteration of these criteria.

There was initial resistance to the development of any guidelines as an encroachment on the independent judgment of psychologists. Acknowledging the need for practice guidelines suggested that psychologists were not trained adequately or appropriately. There was also fear that the guidelines would make psychologists more vulnerable to disciplinary or legal action. It is interesting to note that these objections and fears were very similar to the resistance expressed by psychologists to the development of the DSM decades before. APA did choose to adopt the guidelines, not because it was the right thing to do, but because it could not withstand the science behind them. 16 years of research demonstrated that psychologists needed the information in the guidelines and that the guidelines recommended (they do not compel) useful applications of science to practice.

I would like to examine this resistance as a stereotypical instance of what Thomas Kuhn has described in his book, *The structure of scientific revolutions* as

a radical shift in our paradigms of human sexuality. Kuhn argues that science can precipitate radical paradigm shifts that he characterizes as revolutions because these shifts upend the way we think about our experience of the most familiar phenomena. The findings of new research, he argues, that contradict a prevailing paradigm are initially resisted and marginalized, no matter how correct or sound the methodology. The increasing accumulation of similar findings undermines the dominant paradigm and introduces a period of ambiguity and of intellectual and political ferment. Ultimately, the paradigm crumbles under the weight of evidence and yields to a radically different paradigm, much as Ptolemy yielded to Copernicus, and Genesis to Darwin. After this shift it is impossible to imagine experience according to the earlier paradigm. In the interim between the two paradigms, there regins an ambiguity that wreaks havoc in human relations, because without consensual categories humans differ radically in their understanding of fundamental phenomena like what is gender, what is family, and when does life begin, or end, for that matter.

Thus, in my judgment, the resistance to the LGB guidelines had more than concern for the profession at its base and was more than an expression of homophobia, as some of us who were writing the guidelines wondered. I think the resistance may be more firmly rooted in the challenge that the guidelines and Hooker's research before it present to an understanding of human sexuality that is deeply embedded in our minds and psyches. Because the guidelines were empirically based, the APA, as a scientific organization, could not resist them.

More importantly for our discussion here, adoption of the LGB guidelines implied that our understanding of human sexuality itself was deeply flawed and needed revision.

Science, and that includes psychological science, continues to assault cherished beliefs we have long held about sexuality. The scientific demonstration that homosexuality and bisexuality are normal has destabilized our paradigms about human sexuality. What we have thought was absolutely true about sex is now ambiguous. And human beings have little tolerance for ambiguity. How are we to think about sex? Not knowing how to think, how do we behave?

History and Thomas Kuhn teach us that when normative beliefs are challenged, people experience anxiety. Psychology teaches us that anxious people will do most anything, often unreasonable and sometimes destructive, to allay their anxieties. It is my contention that this is what we are witnessing in this country and much of the Western world today. Conservative elements in contemporary America are defending beliefs about sexuality with a vehemence and vitriol that continue to damage lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and our allies. Unfortunately, this is particularly true of those women and men aligned with organized religions that, with the intent of defending doctrine, compromise or block the psychosexual development of other men and women solely because of their variant sexual orientations and/or gender identities. In

this regard I do not mean to demonize men and women of faith or their faiths. To the contrary, I wish to contextual their denigration of LGBT persons as a defensive reaction to the impingement of science on articles of their faith.

It was partly in recognition of such a misuse of faith that the APA adopted just two months ago a resolution opposing the misuse of religion to discriminate or oppress. That includes discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation among others. At the heart of the resolution is the acknowledgement of the fundamentally different epistemologies of science and faith-based systems.

Bear with me here. I need to explain some principles of philosophy to illuminate my central argument.

We all need to know what we experience is real and we need to know what that thing is that is experienced. This is what the classical Greek philosophers called *ontology*, the study of what things are. We also need assurance that what we know is so. This is what the Greeks called *epistemology*. Epistemology is the study of ways of knowing. And it is here that science and faith part company. The epistemology of science requires that every hypothesis be subject to empirical validation, i.e., every experience and every experience of a thing or phenomenon must undergo an analysis applying rigorous and consensual methods of analysis. Orthodoxy in science is in its methodology. Authority lies in empirical validity and reliability.

Faith, however, does not so much determine the ontology of a thing as to reason and debate its nature and value based on its understanding of a supreme being who is responsible for the creation of that thing or on the exegesis of texts believed to be the will or word of that supreme being. Its epistemological rigor is reflected in adherence to a set of beliefs; that is also its orthodoxy. Therein lies the major difference. Beliefs are neither dependent on nor subject to empirical investigation. For, as history teaches us, when empirical findings challenge doctrine, faith will appeal to a higher authority than empirical methods. The problem inevitably exacerbates, because that higher authority is not subject to empirical validation. I need only refer to Copernicus vs. Ptolemy or Darwin vs. creationism as cases in point. It should be noted that in each of these cases science ultimately trumped faith and yet god and faith seemed to have survived just fine. (As an aside, APA has also adopted a resolution in February opposing the teaching of creationism in schools.)

It is not too difficult to understand the appeal of faith systems. Faith offers a belief system that organizes those very experiences that science cannot yet explain or direct, even if faith adheres to principles that are contrary to reason. Without these belief systems people are faced with a world they do not understand and do not control. Ambiguity is abhorrent to the human mind for it generates doubt and anxiety about matters critical to the ordering of human experience and intercourse. Though they are helpful and allay anxiety, belief

systems are essentially speculations that remain useful and helpful only until science proves them accurate or inaccurate. Note I did not say right or wrong. Conflict between science and faith occurs when belief systems will not yield or adapt to the findings of science.

But a more insidious problem can occur that widens the gap between science and faith-based systems. Here I must return again to the Greeks. There are two more questions that the Greeks asked, in addition to what is the thing I experience and how do I know that thing. Each of these questions follows naturally from the first two. The third question is, now that I know what I am experiencing and I can trust that I know it accurately, of what use or value is that thing and of what use or value is that knowledge. This is what the Greeks called *ethics*. Ethics is also the province of priorities, law, religion, tradition or customs and politics. Ethics is not as we tend to think of it: what is good or bad, but more properly about value and use. The fourth question follows from the third. It addresses the experience one has when one has adequately answered the previous three. It is the “Ah” experience when all the answers hang together in perfect harmony. This is what the Greeks called *aesthetics*. Aesthetics, then, is not what’s beautiful or ugly, but what creates *harmony*.

The insidious problem occurs we people are confronted with the intolerable ambiguity left by incomplete knowledge or knowledge effectively challenged by new research. Anxiety and unrest ensue. To resolve the anxiety,

we arbitrarily decide what a thing is and its usefulness...that is, the ethics of it...to provide or to preserve the experience of harmony. We have, in fact, reversed the order of the original four questions. Aesthetics determines ontology or reality. Harmony is the goal, not knowledge. To the contrary, knowledge is dangerous and must be strictly controlled because it threatens harmony. To insure an aesthetic experience of harmony, we accept only those facts of experience that support the aesthetic experience; we restrict or deny access even to ways of knowing that challenge our aesthetic; and finally we construe reality or ontology to conform to our aesthetic. Thus, faith-based systems may persist in holding to beliefs about sexual orientation and gender identity that are anathema to science. Is this not what we are witnessing in the great debates in most of our states about gay adoptions and gay marriage?

The APA resolution on religious prejudice and/or religion-derived prejudice respects the faith-based beliefs that people may hold, while at the same time acknowledging that as a professional and scientific organization, the APA has a right and responsibility to research, to report the findings of that research and to advocate for the welfare of human beings without undue reference to the religious beliefs of others. In the meantime, we await the findings of new research that will tell us how to think and behave regarding human sexuality. Until then we cope as we can with the resistance borne of ambiguity, while we live and labor within a “pre-Copernican” paradigm of sexuality.

Here I believe the LGBT guidelines can be helpful. They guide our professional behavior so that we do no harm during this shift from one paradigm of sexuality to another. We know enough not to trust what we used to believe but not enough to abandon the comfort of the old paradigm, no matter how inadequate.

But the guidelines may do more. They remind us that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are not the problem. Nor are their lives or the choices they make. The problem is ignorance and a deteriorating paradigm of human sexuality. The problem is coping with flawed beliefs and laws based more on belief and less on data. This was a problem that Evelyn Hooker understood intuitively if not explicitly. This was the problem she set out to correct. In so doing, she recast our understanding of sexual orientation and broke a path toward a more accurate and adequate paradigm of human sexuality.