

## Removing the Stigma

Fifteen Years of Progress

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The articles in this Psychology in the Public Forum section were commissioned to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the American Psychological Association's (APA's) adoption of an official policy statement that "Homosexuality per se implies no impairment in judgement, stability, reliability, or general social or vocational capabilities" (Conger, 1975, p. 633). Similar resolutions supporting the removal of "homosexuality" from the official list of oriental disorders and deplorable discrimination based on sexual orientation had been passed before that time by the American Sociological Association, the National Association for Mental Health, the National Association of Social Workers, and the American Psychiatric Association (Adam, 1987).

However, the APA resolution went further than most earlier resolutions by urging psychologists and all mental health professionals to "take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual orientations" (Conger, 1975, p. 633). The articles that follow demonstrate APA's efforts over the last 15 years to remove that stigma and to advance an affirmative psychology for lesbians and gay men.

The relationship between the social sciences and the lesbian and gay male civil rights movement has been a close one. The pioneering work of Alfred Kinsey documented that same-gender sexual orientation and behavior were far more common than was generally thought (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953). Social scientists have shown that same-gender sexual orientation has been expressed in some form throughout history and has been reported in all cultures, as well as in most nonhuman species (Ford & Beach, 1951). Thus, social science research has established that same-gender sexual orientation is neither unnatural nor unnatural.

In the early part of this century, the prevailing view of same-gender sexual orientation changed from one of sin to one of illness, specifically mental illness (Morin, 1977). The psychological research of Evelyn Hooker established that trained clinicians could not differentiate between projective test data from gay and heterosexual men (Hooker, 1957). Subsequent research demonstrated that lesbians and gay men were similar to heterosexual

men and women on measures of psychological adjustment and self-esteem (Thompson, McCandless, & Strickland, 1971). Thus, psychological researchers established that same-gender sexual orientation was not in itself, a sign of poor psychological adjustment. These research findings have been instrumental in bringing about a reconsideration of same-gender sexual orientation as a valid developmental outcome for many adults.---

Much of the lesbian and gay male advocacy in the mental health professions has focused on removing "homosexuality" from the list of mental disorders. On December 15, 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed *homosexuality* from its official list of mental disorders (Adam, 1987). However, a residual category of *ego-dystonic homosexuality* was retained to categorize distress experienced by individuals who wished to change their sexual orientation. In 1987, APA urged its members not to use this diagnosis (Fox, 1988, p. 529) and joined a coalition that eventually succeeded in getting this diagnosis dropped in the revised edition of the manual (American Psychiatric Association, 1987). These actions have helped to counteract the previous association of same-gender sexual orientation with mental illness.

Lesbian and gay male activism in the APA became organized in 1973 with the formation of the Association of Lesbian and Gay Psychologists. This advocacy group moved for APA to adopt its sweeping policy statement on lesbian and gay male civil rights. At the same time the Council of Representatives set in motion a mechanism to implement the policy statement. The Task Force on the Status of Lesbian and Gay Psychologists was formed to address a number of fundamental issues facing lesbian and gay male members of the association. This group was succeeded by the Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns, which continues to monitor the association's involvement in the broader agenda of advancing the civil rights of lesbians and gay men.

Much of the association's early advocacy focused on legal issues, specifically custody cases involving lesbian and gay male parents. Psychologists have been active in

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research on lesbian and gay male parenting and as expert witnesses in custody cases. Among the amicus curiae briefs that APA has written over the past 15 years, five have addressed lesbian and gay male civil rights. These APA efforts to affect social policy decisions regarding lesbians and gay men are described in detail by Bersoff and Ogden (1991) in this issue.

Before 1975, the vast majority of psychological research on lesbians and gay men was directed at diagnosing same-gender sexual tendencies through psychological tests or **finding** the causes of "homosexuality," which was assumed to be a pathological condition (Morin, 1977). Since **that time** the psychological literature on lesbian and gay male concerns has become much more positive, and an **APA division**, the Society for the Psychological Study of **Lesbian and Gay Issues** (SPSLGI), has been **formed to promote lesbian and gay male affirmative research and practice** (Abeles, 1985). The work of an APA task force on avoiding heterosexist bias in psychological research is presented in the article by Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, and Melton (1991) in this issue.

For the past decade, mental health providers have struggled with ways of defining a lesbian and gay male affirmative psychotherapy (Moriti & Charles, 1983; Rothblum & Cole, 1989). The challenge to lesbians and gay men to develop a positive identity despite the many societal barriers that exist to prevent this is a central concern of affirmative psychotherapy. Again, APA has taken an active role in addressing this concern through a Task Force on Heterosexual Bias in Psychotherapy, which has extensively surveyed psychologists. The results of this survey and recommendations for psychology providers are presented in the article by Garnets, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds, and Peplau (1991) in this issue.

Attitudes are shaped by language (Hyde, 1985) and the APA Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns (1991) has devised recommendations for avoiding heterosexual bias in language that are also included in this issue. Guidelines for language that avoids heterosexual bias will appear in the next edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.

The APA has for some time participated in a coalition of groups working successfully on federal advocacy for the rights of lesbians and gay men. In 1990, Congress passed the Hate Crimes Statistics Act, which recognized lesbians and gay men as having special status, like members of ethnic minority communities, necessitating protection from hate-motivated crimes. This is the first positive status recognition in a federal statute. In another success later in 1990, Congress acted to remove a long-standing prohibition against lesbians and gay men entering the United States, either as permanent immigrants or as short-term visitors. Besides being of practical significance, the removal of the exclusion of "sexual deviates" from the immigration statute was a great symbolic victory.

Also during the 101st Congress, the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed into law. Debate on this legislation made clear that same-gender sexual orientation would not be covered under the act because it did not

constitute a disability. Debate on the legislation included references to the APA position statement that same-gender sexual orientation did not imply impairment in "general social or vocational capabilities" (Conger, 1975, p. 633). The passage of this important civil rights legislation has set the stage for active consideration of the civil rights protection for lesbians and gay men.

This year is also the 15th anniversary of the first introduction of the Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights Act, a bill to amend the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to include **prohibitions** of discrimination **against lesbians and gay men**: Over the years, the **legislation** on **has** steadily gained support, as shown by the increasing number of cosponsors of the legislation each year. Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Hawaii have already **enacted such civil rights legislation at the state level**. **The arguments are** in place and **the time has come for federal legislation** to protect lesbians and gay men from **wrongful discrimination** in employment, housing, and access to **public accommodations**.

The articles in this *Psychology in the Public Forum* section are timely and reflect the significant progress that has been made in the **15 years** since APA began to actively work for the **rights of** lesbians and gay men. Changing the attitudes of **an entire society**, is a major undertaking, and there is **much reason to be proud** of psychology's contribution to this effort.

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