



UNHEARD VOICES

Stories of LGBT History



Charles Silverstein and the Declassification of Homosexuality as a Mental Illness

Introduction to the Interview (Running Time: 2:11)

Between 1952 and 1973, homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association. Gay men and women across the country were subjected to a variety of treatments aimed at curing their “condition.”

During that era, Dr. Charles Silverstein was in graduate school training to become a psychologist. Here, he talks about his role in changing the medical community’s ideas about homosexuality.

Questions to Discuss with Students Following the Interview

- Dr. Silverstein shares that during the early 1970s—when he was in his 30s—none of his closest friends knew that he was gay. How do you think it would feel to keep a major part of your identity a secret well into your adulthood? Why do you think it was necessary for many LGBT people to do so during this time? Why do some LGBT people still feel the need to hide their identity from others today?
- Dr. Silverstein decided to come out, or disclose his sexual orientation, by joining the Gay Activist Alliance, an organization working for gay rights. Why do you think he might have chosen activism as a way to come out? In what other ways do people come out? How can you be an ally to people in your life who might decide to come out?
- In 1972 Dr. Silverstein helped to organize a demonstration against the use of aversion therapy on gay men. What is aversion therapy (*the use of unpleasant stimuli to eliminate undesirable behavior*)? Why did Dr. Silverstein and his peers believe it was wrong to use electric shock therapy and other methods aimed at “curing” LGBT people?
- Dr. Silverstein, the Gay Activist Alliance and others were working to have homosexuality removed from the list of recognized mental disorders. What do you think of when you hear the term “mental illness”? How are people categorized as “mentally ill” thought of in the U.S.?
- Why does Dr. Silverstein say that the declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder was “the single most important success of the gay liberation movement”? Once it was accepted that gay people do not suffer from a mental defect, what types of opportunities opened up for LGBT people? What do you think is the next “most important success” needed by the LGBT rights movement? Why?
- Dr. Silverstein challenges the notion that “you can’t fight City Hall” and asserts that “when you see something wrong, you should say something.” Do you think it’s possible to change government/laws on important issues facing society? Why or why not? What changes do you think are most important to stand up for today? What strategies do you think would be most effective to achieve those changes?

Suggested Activities and Assignments for Extended Learning

- Dr. Silverstein speaks of multiple forms of communication and activism that the Gay Activist Alliance used to get homosexuality removed from the *DSM*. Assign each student (or group of students) to create and present their own historical item representing the work of Silverstein and others. This could be a protest sign, one-page flier, speech to colleagues, formal speech to the APA Nomenclature Committee, etc.
- Homosexuality and same-sex attraction were categorized in various ways in the first few versions of the *DSM*. Assign students to research and display the changes of language and the history of removal of homosexuality from the *DSM* by creating a timeline, chart, collage, etc.
- Following the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, many new gay rights groups emerged to fight for LGBT equality. Divide students into small groups and either assign or have each group select an LGBT rights organization from the post-Stonewall era. Have each group research the organization and create a poster that visually depicts the organization's mission/goals, slogan, major accomplishments, notable members, etc. Examples of groups include Gay Liberation Front, Gay Activist Alliance, ActUp, Queer Nation, Human Rights Campaign, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and Lambda Legal.
- Dr. Silverstein and his colleagues raised awareness about anti-gay discrimination through a “zap”—a public demonstration designed to confront a public figure and secure media coverage and other forms of attention on important issues. The Gay Activist Alliance and other activist groups commonly used zaps during the 1960s and '70s. Have students research and report back on some of the noteworthy or successful zaps of that time. Assign small groups to plan a zap that they think would effectively address a current issue. Have groups role play or share their idea with the class and encourage feedback that helps students to refine their ideas about how to successfully work toward social change.
- The research of psychologist Evelyn Hooker in the 1950s was instrumental in establishing that gay people are as socially well adjusted as others, and contributed to the ultimate declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness. Likewise, modern-day research is helping to demonstrate that same-sex parenting poses no mental health risks to children, thereby paving the way for fairer marriage and family laws. Have students research and discuss Hooker's original findings (see, for example, <http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/hooker.html>). Then either assign or have them identify and report back on a current newspaper/magazine article that discusses the research on same-sex parenting. Make sure only reputable sources are consulted (see, for example, “The Gay Science: What Do We Know about the Effects of Same-Sex Parenting?” in *Slate* or “Study: Same-Sex Parents Raise Well-Adjusted Kids” on *WebMD*).
- While homosexuality has been removed from the *DSM*, Gender Identity Disorder is listed in the current edition. There is great controversy in the LGBT and medical communities as to the appropriateness of this addition. Assign students to research the current language and the different community responses. Ask students to present the potential benefits and challenges of inclusion in the *DSM* for transgender and gender non-conforming people.



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Student Handout



Charles Silverstein

“It became the single most important success of the gay liberation movement,” says Dr. Charles Silverstein, a psychologist and founding editor of The Journal of Homosexuality, who helped to convince the American Psychiatric Association (APA) that homosexuality was not a mental disorder.

Throughout history, in every culture, there have been lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. In some societies LGBT people have been accepted and in many they have been misunderstood and persecuted. When same-sex attraction was first discussed in western medical books, it was widely believed to be a mental illness. This view, based more on morality than science, was written into the first edition of the APA’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* in 1952. The *DSM* was created to define and organize the list of known mental disorders, and to give mental health professionals guidelines to treat such illnesses. The first *DSM* labeled homosexuality a “sociopathic personality disorder.”

During the 1950s and ’60s, some psychiatrists subjected LGBT people to cruel treatments designed to “cure” them, including castration, brain surgery and electric shock therapy. Colin Fox, for example, was 19 when he “volunteered” for a treatment called “aversion therapy” in 1964 because his family, religion and community persuaded him that homosexuality was a sickness. “I thought I was a bad person and lived in fear of going to jail,” remembers Colin.

During therapy sessions, electrodes were fixed to Colin’s arm and leg. He was shown photos of attractive men and jolted with shocks after each. By linking homosexual desire with pain, Colin’s doctors thought they could “cure” him of his attraction to men. At the end of each session, he was “rewarded” with a picture of an attractive woman without getting electrocuted. “The electric shocks were very, very painful,” recalls Colin. “The comparison would be if I was about to be electrocuted, because it was such a sharp bolt of pain shooting through my body.”

In addition to administering inhumane treatments, many psychiatrists also served as medical experts in legal cases, branding LGBT people as unfit to care for their own children, to teach or work with children or to hold jobs that dealt with security and intelligence.

However, there were also doctors and advocates who challenged the idea that LGBT people were “sick”. For example, research conducted by psychologist Evelyn Hooker beginning in the 1940s demonstrated that gay people were as psychologically sound as heterosexuals. In addition, activist groups such as Daughters

of Bilitis and Mattachine Society worked for years to educate the public about LGBT people and to fight discriminatory laws.

Although research was proving wrong the idea that LGBT people needed to be “cured,” the medical and mental health communities were slow to update their practices. In 1972, Charles Silverstein, a graduate student studying psychology, decided to do something about this form of discrimination, which he considered torture against gay people.

Silverstein knew that a big meeting of psychologists was taking place in New York that fall, and he asked the leaders of the Gay Activist Alliance (of which he was a member) for permission to “zap” the convention. “Zaps”—commonly used by activists of that era—were public demonstrations designed to confront a public figure, get media coverage and generate attention on an important issue.

Silverstein and his peers decided to “zap” a lecture about the use of aversion therapy on gay people. About a dozen people from Gay Activist Alliance walked into the room and sat down. Silverstein remembers approaching the lecturer and saying something like, “Dr. Quinn, the room is filled with radical gay liberationists and we are here to fight against aversion therapy used against our people. You can talk for 15 minutes, then we’re going to take over the room and tell the audience how gay people are being tortured.”

The audience erupted into fury, but a lot of important ideas were exchanged during the meeting. As a result of the action, Silverstein and others were invited to submit a report to the APA’s Nomenclature Committee, the group in charge of making changes to the *DSM*. When they presented their report, Silverstein criticized the committee for the large role that psychiatry had played in discrimination against gay people. “What we hope to convey to you,” he warned, “is that we have paid the price for your past mistake. Don’t make it again.”

In 1973 the board of the APA recommended the removal of homosexuality as a mental disorder. Fifty-eight percent of the ten thousand psychiatrists who voted on the issue supported the board’s action while thirty-seven percent voted against it. To calm opponents, the board didn’t actually remove “Homosexuality” at first, but rather changed the wording in the *DSM* to “Sexual Orientation Disturbance.” It took two more changes—one in 1980 and another in 1994—until homosexuality was completely removed from the *DSM*.

Today the American Psychological Association states that, “Psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals agree that homosexuality is not an illness, a mental disorder, or an emotional problem. Homosexuality was once thought to be a mental illness because mental health professionals and society had biased information.”

We all rely on researchers and health professionals to help us understand the world. When the information they provide is based on outdated ideas or prejudice, many people may be subject to discrimination and violence. While institutions like the American Psychiatric Association may seem huge and immovable, ordinary people have the power to change them. Activists like Dr. Charles Silverstein helped to transform the belief system of the entire mental health community in the U.S., and paved the way for more equal treatment of LGBT people in their jobs, homes, relationships and families.