

Book Reviews

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American Psychiatry and Homosexuality: An Oral History, Edited by Jack Drescher, M.D. and Joseph P. Merlino, M.D., Harrington Park Press, New York & London, 2007, 299 pp., \$49.95.

Rarely is a psychiatric book described as captivating and inspiring, but *American Psychiatry and Homosexuality: An Oral History* is definitely both. In this wonderful collection of verbatim interviews with seventeen courageous individuals who contributed to the 1973 APA decision to de-classify homosexuality as a psychiatric illness, the editors Jack Drescher and Joseph Merlino have provided a glimpse into a struggle for civil rights that has been largely unappreciated. As Barbara Gittings stated in her Preface to the book:

It's difficult to explain to anyone who didn't live through that time how much homosexuality was under the thumb of psychiatry. The sickness label was an albatross around the neck of our early gay rights groups—it infected all our work on the other issues. Anything we said on our behalf could be dismissed as "That's your sickness talking." The sickness label was used to justify discrimination, especially in employment, and especially by our own government.

Some brutal methods for curing us in vogue at one time included incarceration in mental hospitals, lobotomies, and aversion therapy. The latter is where they show you pictures of the "wrong" kind of sexual partner and give you an electric shock, and then show you pictures of a person you *should* like and play nice music to persuade you to change your choice of sexual partner. (p. xv)

Gittings was part of a group of gay rights activists who in 1970 disrupted a panel on aversive therapy for homosexuality at the APA meeting, seized the microphone, and demanded that the APA "Stop talking about us and start talking with us" (p. xvii). This led to the creation of a panel at the next APA meeting in 1971 entitled "Lifestyles of Non-Patient Homosexuals," which was followed by an invitation for Gittings and Frank Kameny, another gay rights activist, to participate on a panel entitled "Psychiatry: Friend or Foe to Homosexuals: A Dialogue." Since they, as laymen, were going to debate two psychiatrists, they felt that what they really needed to represent their cause on the panel was a gay psychiatrist. After much searching, they found John Fryer, M.D., who agreed to participate if he could appear in disguise, since openly acknowledging that he was gay at that time could have resulted in damage to his professional career. Fryer appeared on the panel as Dr. H. Anonymous in an oversized tuxedo, a mask, and a fright wig, and had his voice disguised. He explained the following to the audience:

As psychiatrists who are homosexual, we must know our place and what we must do to be successful. If our goal is academic appointment, a level of earning capacity equal to our fellows, or admission to a psychoanalytic institute, we must make certain that no one in a position of power is aware of our sexual orientation or gender identity. Much like the black man with the light skin who chooses to live as a white man, we cannot be seen with our real friends—our real homosexual family—lest our secret be known and our dooms sealed. (pp. 2–3)

The persistent efforts of the gay activists moved the APA to examine the scientific data on the psychological health of homosexuals through its Nomenclature Committee, under the leadership of Robert Spitzer, M.D. The Committee concluded that homosexuality was not an illness and recommended that it be removed from the diagnostic manual. In December of 1973, the APA's Board of Trustees voted in favor of this recommendation. This decision marked the turning point in gay rights and has led to the nondiscrimination we take for granted today and a professional climate in which the book's editors, Drs. Drescher and Merlino, both openly gay psychoanalysts and psychiatrists, have respectively run for the Presidency of the APA and been the President of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry. What a difference the seventeen subjects of this book have helped make!

The interviews for this book were previously published individually in *The Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy*. The editors have grouped them into three sections. The first, entitled "The 1973 APA Decision," includes interviews with six individuals, some of whom are not psychiatrists or are not gay, who were instrumental in bringing about the APA's decision to declassify homosexuality as an illness. These individuals are John E. Fryer, M.D. (Dr. H. Anonymous), Charles Silverstein, Ph.D., Lawrence Hartmann, M.D., Robert Jean Campbell III, M.D., Judd Marmor, M.D., and Robert Spitzer, M.D.. The second section is entitled "The Early Founders of AGLP (Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists)" and includes interviews with five psychiatrists who brought homosexual psychiatrists into the mainstream of the APA. These individuals are Frank Rundle, M.D., David R. Kessler, M.D., Nanette Gartrelle, M.D., Stuart E. Nichols, MD, and Emery Hetrick, MD. The third section is entitled "Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists of Note" and includes interviews with six individuals who have contributed significantly to the field as well as the gay rights movement. These psychiatrists are Bertram H. Schaffner, M.D., Martha J. Kirkpatrick, M.D., Richard A. Isay, M.D., Richard C. Pillard, M.D., Edward Hanin, M.D., and Ralph E. Roughton, M.D.

This book brings us into the lives of individuals who had the courage to stand up and speak out for what they believed in at significant risk to themselves professionally and socially. It is certainly time to recognize their struggle and their achievements.

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