
Reflections of a 40-Year Exploration

A Scientific View on Homosexuality

Evelyn Hooker

In 1953, when I applied for a six-month grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) to study nonpatient, nonprisoner homosexuals, I had no intention of starting a new career. What I did not fully anticipate was the wealth of research demands and opportunities, the lively interest and cooperation of the gay community, and the continued interest and offers of assistance from the Grants Division of NIMH.

After I applied for the NIMH grant, the late John Eberhart came to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) to spend a day with me. It was clear that he wanted to see what and who I was. It was the height of the McCarthy era: Communists and homosexuals were the objects of destructive witch hunts. At the end of the day, Dr. Eberhart said "We are prepared to make you the grant, but you may not receive it. Everyone is being investigated. If you don't receive it, you won't know why and we won't know why."

I can only assume that either I was not investigated or that it was a slipshod investigation. In either case, why? My husband was a very distinguished professor of English at UCLA. In every way, he presented the characteristics of traditional values, but he fought very hard against the University of California loyalty oath, as had I. If the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had dug more deeply into my history, they would have found a first husband who drove an ambulance in the Spanish Civil War. If the question came to the FBI's attention at all, how did they interpret my interest in gay men? I will never know. If it was investigated, I did not know it.

Under the direction of Philip Sapir (who became chief of extramural grants when Dr. Eberhart left NIMH), I received a series of specific research grants until 1961, when I received a Research Career Award. During this time, Philip Sapir took a personal interest in my research, making the resources of his position available in incredible ways. For example, he invited me to give a lecture at NIMH especially for the research scientists, and afterward to spend three days in a seminar with a handpicked group of them. Because I worked alone, his moral, financial, and intellectual assistance became of the utmost importance. When I expressed my gratitude, he said that, in his position, he had general knowledge of many research projects and that it was very gratifying to know one in

detail. It is highly probable that, without his interest and help, I would have stopped after the first major paper, and would not be here today.

The Role of Serendipity

As I reflect on the adverse conditions potentially threatening the successful pursuit of the goals of my research, I am impressed by the many serendipitous conditions that made the research possible. For example, a site visitor stressed the "fact" that members of the study committee would consider that I was working with psychopathology and that I must have a psychiatric consultant. With many reservations, I went to see the chair of the Psychiatry Department. When he asked about the research, I told him I was studying "normal male homosexuals." He rose from his chair and said, "What do you think you are doing? There is no such person." He then referred me to Frederic Worden, who had just come to the department. I let Dr. Worden read my application. He, then, turned to me and said, "I have never seen such persons, but I sure would like to." He became a valuable consultant.

A second perennially recurring situation was the demand of university officials that the research be conducted at the university. I resisted this demand because to have yielded would have meant the end. Not a single person would have come. The first absolute condition was secrecy and confidentiality. By great good fortune, our home was a very spacious estate of an acre of ground with a garden study separate from the house. It was there that the re-

Editor's note. These comments were originally presented as part of a Distinguished Contribution in the Public Interest award address at the 100th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in Washington, DC, in August 1992. Ruby Takanishi delivered the address for Dr. Hooker, who was unable to travel to the convention.

Author's note. I was especially proud to receive this Distinguished Contribution award because it was in the public interest, and I wish to share the award with the gay and lesbian community—whose achievements are equal to, if not greater than, my own. It pleased me enormously that my research and my long advocacy of a scientific view of homosexuality have not only contributed to the well-being of gay men and lesbian women, but have contributed to their extended families and to the general public as well.

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search was conducted. Once a person opened the garden gate, he was invisible to the neighbors. Without this superb place in which to conduct the research, I would never have attempted it.

The Imperative of Confidentiality

It will be obvious to you that the absolute *sine qua non* of research into behavior thought to be “a sin, a crime, and a disease” is confidentiality. Before I began the research, my friend Christopher Isherwood lived in the study for a while. If I asked him for a favor, he would often reply, “Yes, if you will keep me out of Norwalk.” Norwalk is a California mental institution. The triple stigma was never far from the minds of the men whom I came to know nor was it far from mine.

The ramifications of confidentiality in this project were very extensive. A young gay man recently asked, “How did they know they could trust you?” The answer is, I don’t know. Every testing and life history session was tape recorded. I assured each person that only my secretary would listen to them and after transcribing them would erase the tapes. Did they believe me? Yes, apparently so. One man who was nationally known by his books called me long distance at frequent intervals to ask whether his tapes had been erased.

One of my objectives was to understand each life as fully as possible, and thus to keep all of the personally identifying data for each man. This meant, in my view, that it would be impossible to share this highly confidential material with a co-worker. Building confidentiality with the gay community at that time was not an easy task. I could not lightly, if at all, share these confidences with another. Informal applications to be a coinvestigator were numerous, but I continued to work alone until the data gathering phase was complete.

Working alone in such a stress- and trauma-laden field inevitably entails high psychological costs. Without a colleague with whom to share the sympathetic knowledge of human suffering, sometimes one’s own vicarious suffering becomes almost unbearable. This was especially true for me after my husband’s death. I hasten to make clear that, when I characterize conducting research with gay men as stressful, I am only referring to the McCarthy era when the penalties were barbaric.

Even then, had I chosen just to remain in my study and let the gay men come to me, perhaps the stress would have been less. I could not settle for less. Instead, I accepted invitations to gay parties, gay organizations, gay after-hours clubs, and gay bars. I was convinced that, because of the secrecy imposed on gay men whose occupations and very lives were at risk if their identity became known, it was essential to know and understand everything I could about the gay social milieu that they created.

How it came to be known as the “gay world” remains a mystery to me. As I know it, however, the term in its generic meaning is, in part, justified. Camping, for example, is a dramatic form of behavior in both its high and low comic and tragic aspects. Perhaps an illustration will convey something of both. One evening at a dinner

party attended by a number of distinguished writers and myself as the only woman, attention turned to how the guests could enhance my knowledge of gay institutions, for example, gay baths. My friend, Christopher Isherwood, then began a very dramatic story about how he would take me to the Crystal Baths on the Santa Monica beach, and what we would see, beginning on Level 1—nude men in various sexual activities—complete with hilarious descriptions of the activities on each of the various levels until we reached the top. And then, he said, I would be killed, because no woman is allowed to know the secrets of the gay world and live.

The issue of confidentiality became acute in what I shall refer to later as “the Year of the Trial.” Meanwhile, my adversarial position vis-à-vis the Los Angeles police force needs some clarification. I was pressured by a psychiatrist friend to seek an appointment with the chief of police. My friend said, “Of course he knows about your research activities and it would be helpful if he met you in person.” How would the chief of police know about my research activities? In an invited paper entitled “The Gay Community,” given in Copenhagen in 1961, I have described my research activities in gay bars. The police would have been aware of these activities, in part because I was usually the only woman in a bar. I hasten to add that I always went to a gay bar with a gay friend.

I was advised by my psychiatrist friend not to go alone for the appointment with the chief. Why? Because I was a woman. Dr. Worden accompanied me, biting his nails and saying that he had watched too many police films. Chief Parker did not understand why I was doing the research, “because a man from Pasadena proved it was all glandular.” When I objected, he said “Well, it’s like the smog. It doesn’t matter how it got here. We just have to deal with it.” He then wanted to introduce me to the Central Vice detail. I avoided that because I knew that if I did, the news would be all over the gay community within hours. I asked whether the police would ever try to subpoena my confidential files. “No,” he replied, “If you should ever have information about a homosexual murder, I hope you would voluntarily give us the information.”

I turn now to the Year of the Trial, 1961. Briefly, the facts are that five people were arrested and charged with conspiracy to obtain a criminal abortion. The five were two psychiatrists, an obstetrician, a young man, and myself. I had referred the young man (a friend) and his girlfriend to one psychiatrist, who had recommended a therapeutic abortion and who had sent the pair to a second psychiatrist, who made the same recommendation and sent them to an obstetrician. He performed the surgery in his office without a nurse present and sent the woman home. Complications developed. Her boyfriend insisted on hospitalization. Her father moved her to another hospital and declared charges to the police.

When two men, identifying themselves as with the state board of quality assurance visited me in my university office, I became alarmed when they asked “On what do you do research?” and “Do you accept fees for

referrals?" It did not occur to me that I was personally in danger. However, waves of anxiety swept over me as I thought about the perils to my research data riddled with identifying names, places, and dates. I knew, as did many, of the unscrupulous surveillance practices of the Los Angeles Police Department at that time. My secretary and I spent the better part of the year in removing identifying data from the records. A judge, six months after the grand jury indictment, ruled that the jury had insufficient grounds to indict me. The anxiety did not diminish until both psychiatrists and the young man were declared innocent. Many of my friends believe that the police acted in my case only because of my research on homosexuality. It cannot be proved, but I believe it is so.

Incidentally, I carried a letter signed by the Chancellor at UCLA which identified me in case my activities were ever brought to the attention of law enforcement authorities. I never needed it, and felt I never would unless the university was involved.

The NIMH Task Force

In 1969, I was called by Stanley Yolles, then director of NIMH, asking me to come to Washington and "tell him what we ought to be doing about homosexuality." He added that "we want to sweep it out from beneath the rug." I suggested that we needed a group of thoughtful people who were social scientists or were in law, religion, or psychiatry and who could bring their knowledge to bear on this question. The director replied that if I would give him a list, he would make the appointments for a "blue ribbon task force." I looked forward to it with high expectations.

The agenda that I proposed was both a comprehensive outline of research and of social policy issues, including the possible endorsement of a model penal code and the establishment at NIMH of a center for the study of sexuality. Many members of the task force said at the outset that they knew nothing about homosexuality. I thought that should not exclude them because they were needed to bring social science to bear on the issues. The discussions were lively and gave promise of a good final report, with two exceptions.

The stumbling blocks were viewing homosexuality as not necessarily synonymous with psychopathology, and endorsing a model penal code in which homosexuality was no longer viewed as a crime. Thus, three task force members wrote dissenting opinions on the basis that (a) NIMH was not a policymaking, but solely a research institution, and (b) that there were not enough data to support the "normal" position. Within three years, however, the American Psychiatric Association voted to delete homosexuality from its diagnostic handbook, and the American Psychological Association (APA) followed.

Our task force report was not published for two years, an indication of what some officials thought of it. Judd Marmor, a distinguished and indispensable member of the task force, when asked why we did not accomplish more, said that one possible reason might be that I was too optimistic. That may be true. After all, in 1963, Dr.

Marmor asked me to write a chapter for his first book on homosexuality, titled *Inversion*. He said that I must write it, "because you are the only person to hold your point of view."

Highlights and Satisfactions

I have spoken of some of the problems related to my research in the repressive milieu of the 1950s and 1960s. I would like now to mention some highlights of my satisfaction and delight.

First, can you imagine what it was like when I examined the results of the three judges of the adjustment ratings from the projective techniques? I knew the men for whom the ratings were made, and I was certain as a clinician that they were relatively free of psychopathology. But what would these superb clinicians find? You know now that the two groups, homosexuals and heterosexuals, did not differ in adjustment of psychopathology. When I saw that, I wept with joy. I knew that the psychiatrists would not accept it then. But sometime!

A second event came in 1972 when a psychologist, Dr. Siegelman, using large numbers of gay men and heterosexual men and objective measures of neuroticism, duplicated my original research with identical results. I wrote to him when I had read his article, saying that I wished I had done it. What Dr. Siegelman had demonstrated was that the results of my research were not dependent on projective tests. The results were not artifacts: They were *true*.

A third event came in 1975, when our APA not only endorsed the decision of the American Psychiatric Association, but spelled out the meaning of "absence of psychopathology." If I remember correctly, the Gay and Lesbian Committee had a lot to do with it. "No impaired identity": It made me very proud to be a psychologist.

Another, earlier event was back in 1961, when I was invited to give a paper at the International Congress of Psychology. I learned that a young Norwegian, Finn Carling, was beginning a study of homosexuals and that it would be worth my while to see him. When I called him, he said that he was just beginning and that it would not be worth my while. I persisted, and he agreed to meet me at the airport. "You will know me because I have a big dog," he said. And so he did. Friends told me he was a spastic. Don't ask me how he drove his car, because he had the use of two forefingers only. He said, "If you don't mind not talking about science for awhile, I will show you where I grew up." He pointed to a stream running through a meadow where his parents had put him, having been told he would never walk. But he did—at 15.

After we had tea, he turned to me and said, "I want you to know that I am on their side." I think I said, "Me too." And then he said an astonishing thing: "I am not only studying homosexuals, but I am studying refugees, because they teach me the meaning of *movement*. I am studying the blind, because they will teach me the meaning of *sight*, of *vision*. I am studying homosexuals, because they will teach me the meaning of *love*."

That was 30 years ago, but Finn Carling's radiant face, his enormous physical and psychological courage, and what he wanted to learn from gay and lesbian folk have never faded in intensity. In an age when the scourge of AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) continues relentlessly, there are many images of love in the gay world. I have the conviction that without love, the gay world would perish.

In the summer of 1937, at the height of the Spanish Civil War, I was in London. I attended a Spanish Republican rally. It was at fever pitch, so to speak, and the crowd was demanding that Paul Robeson, that great man and great voice, sing the Spanish National Anthem. From time to time, he would say "I'm saving the best to the last." Finally, with sounds that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, he sang the Spanish National Anthem.

I have one more event to note, and I have saved the most extraordinary to the last. About four years ago, I received a letter from a trustee officer at a bank in Lincoln, Nebraska. In it he stated that Wayne Placek had designated me to select a committee to decide how the trust fund he was establishing should distribute funds for the purpose of research to increase "the general public's understanding of gay men and lesbians, and reduce the stress experienced by those people in this and future civilizations." I remember that I had interviewed Wayne Placek in the late 1950s, but nothing unusual came to mind. I did remember that, along with many others, he hated being gay because of society's treatment.

After a period of three years, the final settlement of the fund was announced—approximately a half million dollars! Through the valiant and imaginative work of Steve Morin and Douglas Kimmel, the money now is in the American Psychological Foundation, earmarked for research under the control of Dr. Morin and selected officers of Division 44, and the guidance of the Foundation.

Was there ever a cause more just or so well funded? The future of research on homophobia seems assured, at least financially. I would hope also that some effort would be made to present positive but accurate pictures of gay and lesbian life-styles. I hope I may not be in error if I think of this magnificent legacy as not only that of Wayne Placek, but also in the spirit of Evelyn Hooker.

Epilogue

I received this letter following the February 1992 showing of the film *Changing Our Minds: The Story of Evelyn Hooker* in Berlin, Germany.

Dear Dr. Evelyn Hooker,

My boyfriend and I just saw the documentary about you at the Berlin Film Festival. We want to say thank you for all the work you did. We're pretty sure that life would have been a lot different, and a lot worse for us, if you hadn't done your research.

I asked a close, straight friend of mine, who is a medical student at Berlin, why you wanted to do this work. I mean, it just didn't make sense. Why did this straight lady care about gays? My friend replied that it was probably because you felt that it had to be done by somebody, sooner or later. He said that you must have thought that the studies you undertook would help people in some way. He called it scientific altruism.

Well, whatever the real reason is, I think that your work was more than just doing a good turn for man. I think you did it because you knew what love was when you saw it and you knew that gay love was like all other love. No better, no worse.

So I guess if we are thanking you, we should thank you not for the work itself, but for your desire to show to the world what you had already understood, or at least suspected, on your own. With much respect and admiration.