

Psychology (Yesterday and) Today: Evelyn Hooker

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In the 1950s, when McCarthyism was at its height and suspected homosexuals were being purged from government employment, Evelyn Hooker had the insight and courage to scientifically test the then-prevalent assumption that homosexuality was indicative of pathology. As she explained in her 1975 *Psychology Today* interview with Paul Chance, she administered projective tests to matched pairs of homosexual and heterosexual men (none of them psychiatric patients) and asked internationally recognized testing experts to rate each man's adjustment without knowing his sexual orientation.

The experts judged most of the men in both groups to be functioning well — a finding incompatible with the classification of homosexuality as a mental illness. Moreover, using the men's Rorschach responses — which were then believed to permit "diagnosis" of homosexuality — the judges couldn't distinguish between heterosexual and homosexual men at levels better than chance. (Hooker also analyzed the protocols herself using then-popular scoring systems and found a few statistically significant differences, but they didn't permit reliable differentiation of the two groups.)

Hooker's research was subsequently replicated by other scientists, creating an empirical foundation for the removal of homosexuality from the DSM in 1973. She continued to conduct pioneering research on the gay community and chaired a NIMH Task Force on homosexuality. (Historian John D'Emilio characterized its 1969 final report as "without doubt the most enlightened statement on homosexuality ever to have emerged from our government" in his 1996 eulogy for Hooker.) Eventually she established a private psychotherapy practice with many lesbian and gay patients.

I had the honor and pleasure of working closely with Evelyn Hooker during the last years of her life to establish the American Psychological Foundation's Wayne F. Placek Awards. Funded by a bequest from its namesake, a gay man living in Los Angeles in the 1950s who developed an admiration for Hooker and her work, the Placek Awards have provided more than \$1 million for empirical research on a variety of topics related to sexual orientation.

Despite her historical importance, Evelyn Hooker's work probably isn't well known to many contemporary psychologists. Thus, it is fitting that her 1975 interview is one of the first to be featured in this *Observer* series.

The interview is informative not only for the details it provides about Hooker's research and insights but also for what it reveals about societal attitudes and assumptions related to homosexuality and heterosexuality in the 1970s. In selecting material from his hours-long conversation with Hooker, Paul Chance undoubtedly tried to highlight issues that were on the minds of *Psychology Today* readers at the time. I encountered many of the same questions when I first began studying antigay prejudice a few years after this interview was published. Indeed, many of them are still often asked today.

For example, people continue to ask what "causes" homosexuality but rarely pose the same question

about heterosexuality. Hooker's response — that “there are lots of ways to get to Pittsburgh” — is consistent with much current thinking that people probably arrive at their adult sexual orientation through a variety of developmental routes.

We also continue to see “homosexuality” often equated with men (note the question about whether homosexuals “are more effeminate than straights”) and sexual-minority individuals perceived mainly in terms of what they do during sex rather than during the rest of their lives (note the question early in the article about “actives” and “passives”).

Concern is still often expressed about homosexuals and children. The idea that a child will grow up to be gay or lesbian is still a source of considerable anxiety for many heterosexuals — a fear we've seen exploited in recent media campaigns opposing marriage equality for same-sex couples.

Hooker's responses stand the test of time. Her core message remains true: Considerable variation exists within both heterosexual and homosexual populations, and the two groups don't fundamentally differ from each other except for the latter's stigmatized sexual orientation.

As in 1975, heterosexuality continues today to be the “gold standard” — equivalent to normalcy — against which sexual minority individuals are judged. Differences observed between sexual-orientation groups are routinely assumed to indicate deficiencies on the part of sexual minorities. In this regard, it's instructive to notice that Hooker's heterosexuality is explicitly affirmed in the interview's first paragraph and again in the sidebar. If Hooker hadn't been heterosexual, many readers would have discounted her comments.

During her lifetime, Hooker was likened to Eleanor Roosevelt and Rosa Parks. She was a hero to many sexual-minority men and women and to her colleagues of all sexual orientations.

She continues to be a source of inspiration. In my course on sexual orientation and prejudice, we discuss Hooker's research and watch the award-winning documentary based on her life, *Changing Our Minds*. I sometimes ask students to write a brief essay at the end of the academic term about the aspect of the class that made the most lasting impression on them. Invariably, many of them write about Hooker. Learning about her life and research inspires them to think that they too may someday be able to devote their knowledge and energy to making the world a better place.

Note: A biographical sketch of Evelyn Hooker can be found in the 1992 *American Psychologist* (pp. 499–501). More information about the historical context of her work can be found in my 2010 article, “Sexual orientation differences as deficits: Science and stigma in the history of American psychology” (*Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5, 693–699). The 1991 documentary, *Changing Our Minds: The Story of Dr. Evelyn Hooker*, is available from Frameline.