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Liberation and Restigmatization

Abstract: In Chapter 2, the discussion to the 1970s and 1980s, a time when queer identity was de-pathologized by the medical community but then re-pathologized by terrified and opportunistic politicians, jurists and school officials because of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Thanks to the removal of “homosexuality” and “bi-sexuality” from the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual” (DSM) by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973, the 1970s and 1980s were a period in which queer identity was de-pathologized by the medical community. The new highly visible and vocal “gay rights” movement was also generating change by overturning sodomy bans, challenging homophobic reporting and media portrayals, and everyday stereotypes. In many ways, queers went from being invisible to literally being “everywhere,” at least in large metro areas and a televised viewing audience. Nevertheless, conditions remained dismal for most queer public school educators, although in some locales, queer students fared better. This chapter moves the focus to the 1970s and 1980s, a time when queer identity was de-pathologized by the medical community, but then was re-pathologized by terrified and opportunistic politicians, political activists and school officials because of the advent of the HIV/AIDS crisis. For the US general public, queer identity quickly went from being highly contagious to potentially lethally contagious.

No longer sick? Normalizing non-heterosexuality in the medical profession

We are fighting for our lives…. You are wanting to burn our brains out because you don’t like the way we live.—Lee Hefflin, at the APA conference in 1970.¹

By the time the APA removed homosexuality and bisexuality from the DSM’s list of mental disorders, these diagnoses had long been used to institutionalize queer individuals who refused to lie about or hide about their identities, as well as to strip them of any state-issued professional licenses, including teachers of their licenses to teach. Prior to this change, all queers supposedly suffered from a profound mental illness—an illness that required long-term psychotherapy (at best) and electro-shock therapy, lobotomy and castration (at worst). But long before APA reversed itself, growing numbers of psychiatrists and psychologists had doubted the “pathology” of homosexuality. Also, queer political activists who were suspicious of the supposed scientific rigor of the medical studies that pathologized queers—since only queers who were psychiatric patients were studied—began to theorize and organize.²