From Illness to Action: Conceptions of Homosexuality in The Ladder, 1956-1965

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The views of medical and psychiatric professionals had an important effect on lesbians' conceptions of themselves and their sexuality in the 1950s and 1960s. This article traces the depiction of professional discourse on homosexuality in The Ladder, the first widely circulated lesbian publication in the United States. Published by the Daughters of Bilitis, a group of largely white, middle-class lesbians, The Ladder shows evidence of changes in lesbians' acceptance of negative conceptions of homosexuality during the period 1956 to 1965. These changes are in part attributed to the increasing militancy of the homophile movement during the 1960s.

KEY WORDS: lesbian, homosexual, Daughters of Bilitis, The Ladder, homophile movement.

By the end of World War II, the psychiatric profession played an important role in public discussions of homosexuality (D'Emilio, 1983). Traditional psychoanalytic views, based on the concepts of arrested development and family pathology, depicted homosexuality as an illness that should be cured. Although the Kinsey reports of 1948 and 1953 challenged these conceptions, offering instead a view of homosexual behavior as a natural variation (and a far more prevalent one than had previously been considered), Kinsey's work did not seem to bring about a more positive depiction of homosexuality among the heterosexual American public (D'Emilio, 1983, pp. 33-39). The 1950s saw increasing public hostility toward lesbians and gay men.

If the views of medical and psychiatric professionals had seeped into public consciousness about homosexuality, they clearly entered into lesbians' own conceptions of themselves and their sexuality. This paper examines these views through an analysis of The Ladder, the

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first national publication for "female homophiles" in the United States. The study focuses on how a group of largely white, middle-class lesbians in the 1950s and early 1960s perceived professionals' views of homosexuality—and how the perceptions of these lesbians changed over time.

The Ladder was first published in San Francisco in October 1956 by the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), one of the first organized lesbian political and social groups in the United States. Begun as a small, mimeographed monthly newsletter, The Ladder advertised local DOB events (such as "Gab 'n Java" nights for coffee and conversation, panel discussions, bowling nights, and picnics) and published short fiction, poetry, book reviews, essays, news clippings of interest to female homophiles, and letters to readers. The first issue was sent to approximately 100 friends, acquaintances, and professionals such as ministers, physicians, psychologists, and psychiatrists whom DOB members either knew personally or found in the local phone book—in short, to anyone The Ladder staff could think of who might be interested in issues pertaining to female homosexuality. By the time of its last issue in August/September 1972, The Ladder was no longer a small chapter newsletter but a slick 44-page publication sent to approximately 3,800 people, including DOB members in several chapters nationwide and in seven countries.

The Beginnings

From its inception in 1955, the Daughters of Bilitis emphasized the importance of professional research and the need for educating both the members and the general public about homosexuality. Ladder staff and readers clearly were familiar with psychiatric and medical opinions about homosexuality, and in the early years of publication, they reported on radio shows, public lectures, and panel discussions.

1In keeping with language used by the Daughters of Bilitis during the time period considered here, I use the terms lesbian or female homosexual/homophile to refer to the women involved.

2Although other homophile organizations predated DOB (The Mattachine Society, for example, was founded in California by Harry Hay in 1950, and One, Inc., began publishing a magazine for homosexuals in 1952), these organizations were predominantly male. Private social clubs exclusively for lesbians have been recorded as early as the 1920s and 1930s [see Bullough and Bullough's (1977) discussion of such a group in Salt Lake City]. In the 1950s, one of DOB's co-founders left the group to form a more private group, Quatrefoil (see Martin and Lyon, 1972, p. 242). DOB was the first large-scale open membership organization for lesbians in the United States.
and reviewed books by psychiatrists and other “experts” with very little editorializing.

Some of the reports focused on whether or not homosexuality was a form of mental illness per se, or whether homosexuals tended to be neurotic or mentally ill because of the social pressures of living in a heterosexual world. Psychotherapist Basil Vaerlen was of the latter view. Yet in a very early lecture to a group of Daughters, he claimed that, in what *The Ladder* primly called “a provocative comment,” “the true biological function of the female is to have children, and that by denying themselves this function, the Lesbian is unfulfilled and is hampering her health and happiness” (“Third Discussion on Fear,” 1956, p. 5). *Ladder* staff did not print a rebuttal.

Others claimed that homosexuality was a crime. At a conference for law enforcement officials reported in the January 1959 issue of *The Ladder*, psychiatrist Ralph Banay warned that homosexuality often leads to other, more violent crimes—including homicide (“Officials urge compulsory care of sexual deviates,” 1959, p. 14). Dr. Benjamin Karpman explained why at the 1959 convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Science: “Because our normal sexual drives are not allowed normal expression, the sexual energy overflows into all sorts of channels creating social disorganization and psychopathology.” According to Karpman, “the homosexual” represents a form of social pathology akin to that represented by “the prostitute, the alcoholic, . . . the neurotic, the psychotic, the psychopath, the gambler, and those involved in desertion, divorce, suicide, migration, the problem of the foreign born and child labor” (“Attitudes on sex cause crimes,” 1959, p. 15).

Some mental health professionals were clearly accepting of homosexuality—if not wholeheartedly, at least for some individuals—and it was to these that *Ladder* staff and the Daughters turned for support. In an early lecture, for example, psychotherapist Alice LeVere told the Daughters that there was no evidence to support the theory that homosexuals are mentally ill and that so-called “treatments” for homosexuality have instead “left many emotionally crippled. . . . The Lesbian suffers more from the feeling of being unwanted and shunned than from any illness” (“Psychotherapy vs. public opinion,” 1956, pp. 8-9). And Blanche Baker, trained as both a psychiatrist and doctoral-level psychologist, was a long-time supporter of DOB who exhorted the lesbian to “ACCEPT yourself” (“Dr. Baker challenges ACCEPT yourself,” 1956, p. 6).

Yet self-acceptance for lesbian women in the 1950s clearly did not
come easily. This was a time of postwar affluence, a rising birthrate, and particularly restrictive roles for women. As Betty Friedan (1963) commented in _The Feminine Mystique_, her now-classic critique of postwar heterosexual women's roles:

> In the first fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture. Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife... Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. (p. 14)

For women to dream of a life with another woman, to nurture ambitions of work and career, and to fight for the cause of a homophile minority must have felt deviant indeed. And in the face of police harassment of lesbian and gay bars, the massive purges of homosexual women and men from the federal government and military (see D'Emilio, 1983, pp. 43-45), and what D'Emilio and Freedman (1988, p. 284) call the "purity campaigns" against popular representations of sexuality in the 1950s, it was no wonder that the women of DOB called upon outside "experts," even sometimes hostile ones, to legitimize their cause.

In retrospect, Barbara Gittings, founder of DOB’s New York chapter and editor of _The Ladder_ from 1963 to 1966, felt that this appeal to outside authorities was a necessary stage for the organization. In an interview conducted in the early 1970s, she commented that "We looked for 'sympathetic' psychiatrists and lawyers and clergymen who would say things that would make us feel a bit better about ourselves. In retrospect, I think this was a very necessary stage to go through. The movement we have today could not have developed if there hadn’t been this earlier effort to get over the really severe feelings of inadequacy about being gay that most of our people had" (Tobin & Wicker, 1972, p. 212). Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, two of the founders of the original chapter of DOB in San Francisco, claimed that "We zeroed in on fear, trying to reassure our audiences with speeches by attorneys and psychologists" (Tobin & Wicker, 1972, p. 51).

If DOB leaders in the late 1950s were not entirely comfortable with their homosexual identities, then clearly many _Ladder_ readers were not either. Some accepted variations of psychoanalytic explanations of their homosexuality. In a letter dated July 1957, science fiction writer Marion Zimmer Bradley, defending the situation of the (heterosexually) married lesbian, wrote that "one of the primary causes of
Lesbianism appears to be a failure—as I say, either real or fancied—in the quality of maternal love” (Bradley, 1957, p. 14). And in 1958, a reader lamented that “true adjustment” was “not to be found anywhere” (F.L., 1958, p. 24).

A more common attitude found in The Ladder during this period, however, was expressed by Del Martin. In a September 1958 open letter to San Francisco assemblyman John O’Connell, Martin wrote that “it is generally accepted by the experts in the field that the cause of homosexuality is still an unknown quantity” (Martin, 1958, p. 5). Because the causes were unknown, attempts to cure or punish homosexuals were essentially misguided. Instead, homosexuals should be judged on an individual basis. Most are neither child molesters nor rapists but instead are good, law-abiding citizens, Martin wrote.

The Beginnings of a Challenge

By 1959, criticism of experts’ negative views of homosexuality began to appear in The Ladder, and a review of the first piece of research focusing specifically on lesbians (and not male homosexuals)—Virginia Armon’s study of personality differences between lesbians and heterosexual women—appeared (Russell, 1959; see also Armon, 1960). (No significant differences were found.) At least some DOB members began to challenge openly the conception of homosexuals as either potentially or actually mentally ill. Vickie Martin, for example, asserted in a radio broadcast that focused on heterosexual marriage as a cure for homosexuality: “I don’t believe there is such a thing as a cure for homosexuality—since it is not a disease” (Brown, 1959, p. 22). And one month later, Florence Conrad, later to become research director of DOB and a relatively conservative voice of the homophile movement, criticized psychoanalytic conceptions of homosexuals as inherently immature and irresponsible. Not all homosexuals behave responsibly, she argued, but then neither do all heterosexuals (Conrad, 1959, pp. 4-7).

Still, much that was critical of lesbianism appeared in The Ladder’s pages in the late 1950s and early 1960s, an editorial strategy that was challenged by one reader in June 1963. “Too often THE LADDER is largely a forum for views hostile to Lesbians—with no rebuttal from persons trained to detect the fallacies involved. Many psychologists and psychiatrists, consciously or unconsciously reflecting the prejudices of society, distort data in the socially approved direction. That is, they manage to conclude that homosexuality is ‘an illness.’ Make no mistake about it. It is more destructive to homosexuals to be con-
sidered 'sick' than simply 'bad.' To be pitied is weakening; to be disliked often rallies defenses" (Well-wisher, 1963, p. 25).

While not all readers were so critical of The Ladder’s policy in the early 1960s, they clearly were aware of the psychiatric discourse about lesbianism. One reader, Robin Mitchell, went so far as to write a poem entitled “Abnormal,” published in August 1962. In it, she declared:

When you refer to me, dear,
don’t ever call me “queer,”
For there are many like me
who roam the hemisphere.
Don’t ever let me hear you
use the word “psychiatrist,”
For then you condemn me,
and believe as all the rest.

(Mitchell, 1962, p. 14)

Whatever its literary merit, the poem makes clear the writer’s sense of psychiatry as hostile to lesbians.

Ladder readers also had strong opinions about why they were lesbian and what caused homosexuality. Some of their letters in the Readers Respond column focused on the concepts of masculinity and femininity, echoing statements made by Dr. Blanche Baker, who in January 1959 claimed, “All people have a certain amount of maleness and femaleness in their constitution, and child experiences tend to throw us to one side of the scale or the other” (Martin, 1959, p. 7). A British woman, heterosexually married and the mother of two children, told her story thus: “Physically, I am capable of motherhood, yes. . . . That proves me to be physically a woman, and a wife, too. But I belong to the twilight world—the world of the ‘third sex,’ neither normal woman or normal man. . . . I have as normal a love for my two children as any other mother. . . . But I have never been able to cure myself of being what I am—a masculine soul, with masculine desires, in a feminine body” (Spoczynska, 1960, pp. 7, 13).

Another reader, while rejecting scientific explanations, claimed that “true” lesbians were actually male souls that had been reincarnated into female bodies (R.J.R.W., 1963). In response, an “East Coast Reader” wrote that although she did not believe in reincarnation, the “belief that some lesbians are born lesbians interests me because I consider myself one of them. Now 48, I can still remember the name and general appearance (brunette) of the first girl I loved. I was 3 and she was about 11” (East Coast Reader, 1963, p. 24).

Still another reader, while unsure of the causes of lesbianism, wrote that in her case, she could rule out parental rejection or desire for a boy
child, seduction by an older lesbian, or having been sheltered from boys. She suggested that, indirectly, genetic influences might be at work "through my having been born with a temperament ... more like that of men" ("Why am I a lesbian?" 1960a, pp. 21-22).

A 1960 call for essays and statements on the topic "Why Am I a Lesbian?" sparked a number of responses that clearly showed evidence of readers' familiarity with the more popular scientific theories of the day. Several relied on Kinsey's concept of sexuality as a continuum, with heterosexual and homosexual behaviors as opposing poles. One reader, for example, wrote that she was "inclined to agree with a wise, travelled and psychologically subtle man I know who once said in a lecture: 'There is no such thing, basically, as homosexuality ... only sexuality. How it will be expressed is a complex matter of mores, accident, social pressures and attitudes, convenience, habit, glandular activity, and much more..." ("Why am I a lesbian?" 1960a, p. 20).

Another reader quoted extensively from Kinsey's * Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* on the psychological ability of all mammals to respond to sexual stimuli. She claimed that although she had been a wife and mother, she was now a lesbian by choice. The reason she gave for her choice is remarkable: "the freedom of expression... As a Lesbian I may be myself" ("Why am I a lesbian?" 1960a, pp. 22-23).

Another woman answered the question: "Because that is what I want to be. Perhaps it is due to a trick of Mother Nature or the result of childhood environment, but I do not think of it that way. Medical doctors or psychiatrists may someday prove that one or both of these conditions contribute to lesbianism, and this will doubtless bring great comfort to those who seek to point resentful feelings of blame at fate or their parents. For myself, I am not in the least embittered by the fact that I prefer physical relationships with one of my own sex."

In the most open rejection of traditional theories about homosexuality, an anonymous reader, after listing several of the more common "causes," asked "why heterosexual women (whose backgrounds also have included many of the above factors) did not develop into Lesbians." Remarkably, she argued that "a more likely factor leading to Lesbianism would be the protest against domination by the male and the inability of the Lesbian to emulate the female role as set forth by society. There would seem to be a withdrawal from the heterosexual market-place of glamour and emphasis placed rather upon the independence of the individual and the development of the full personality" ("Why am I a lesbian?" 1960a, pp. 23-24).
These writers’ claims to have chosen lesbianism was a source of puzzlement and concern for some Ladder readers. N.Y. reader Jay Wallace wrote, in amazement, “I admit, along with many authorities, that there are unfortunately, various imitations, many so-called ‘acquired’ homosexuals, both male and female. However, there is a type of Lesbian who cannot be anything but homosexual; and this is the type who, in my opinion, was either born an invert, or was so conditioned very early in life” (Wallace, 1960, p. 22).

The variety of responses may have pointed toward tensions within DOB—or, at least, a gap between DOB leadership, who spoke out in public and published The Ladder, and rank-and-file members and readers. For at the same time that some readers were declaring lesbianism a choice, DOB leader Sten Russell wrote in The Ladder, in response to a debate between psychologist Evelyn Hooker, long a friend of the homophile movement and the first to conduct research on nonclinical samples of gay males, and Don Slater of One, Inc., the most radical homophile organization of the time: “It was indeed interesting to hear the representative of a homophile organization taking the reactionary and ancient heterosexual viewpoint that homosexuality is simply a matter of choice, as easily changed as an old shirt, or moving across the street, if the person but desired it. On the other hand, it was fascinating to hear the scientist, Dr. Hooker, defend the usual homosexual plea that change is well-nigh impossible in the vast majority of cases, even with the most compelling of motivation” (Russell, 1962, p. 6).

The question of choice, still a matter of some debate today (see, for example, Kitzinger, 1987, for contemporary British lesbians’ accounts) is clearly a political question as much as a scientific one. To declare that homosexuality is not a choice, the strategy favored by DOB leadership, reduces the possibility of change in sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. This strategy, in effect, preserves lesbianism as a viable option and allows criticism of the often cruel attempts of medical practitioners to change homosexuals’ orientation (see Katz, 1976, for examples). Lesbians may not choose to be so, according to this position, but must make the best of what they have been given and with no blame attached. The danger of this strategy is that homosexuality may be seen not simply as a natural variation —akin to having red hair instead of brown or black—but as a variation that is inferior or pathological.

On the other hand, the position that homosexuality is a choice was associated with religious conceptions of the homosexual as sinner.
Just as any other sinner, the homosexual not only could—but had the moral obligation to—alter his or her ways. This was the position that at least some DOB leaders were trying to avoid. That homosexuality could be a positive choice—perhaps even more highly valued than heterosexuality—was clearly a radical notion indeed.

Yet the focus on choice and on etiology lent legitimacy to mental health professionals' claims to expertise in the area of homosexuality. Furthermore, by focusing on homosexuality as a psychological issue, lesbianism became privatized. For if lesbianism is purely an individual phenomenon, an issue of mental health, then the answer to the "problem" of homosexuality is to focus on individual lesbians' mental health needs and integration into heterosexual society—just what the Daughters had been attempting to do.

From the beginning, one of DOB's stated goals, printed on the inside front cover of every issue, was to educate "the variant," "with particular emphasis on the psychological, physiological, and sociological aspects, to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society." Although "investigation of the penal code as it pertains to the homosexual" was also an overt goal, DOB in fact focused far more attention on integration of lesbians into heterosexual society. And this focus on individual adjustment often veered dangerously close to self-blame. This becomes apparent in an unsigned June 1962 article intended "to clarify the philosophy of DOB as a member of the San Francisco Chapter might view it" ("The Philosophy of DOB," 1962, p. 4).

If homosexuality is a disease, as some claim, certainly it is not contagious; nor need it be crippling. While it is true that if there were less public pressure there would be less crippling effects, it is also true that the homosexual's "affliction" stems more from self—self-pity, self-consciousness, self-abasement. If this self were redirected toward another self—self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-observation—then the homosexual would find that much of the rejection he [sic] feels is self-imposed ("The Philosophy of DOB," p. 6).

A Militant Challenge

By the mid 1960s, this stand was increasingly being challenged by the more radical arm of the homophile movement developing on the East Coast. In 1963, Barbara Gittings, founder of DOB's New York chapter, became editor of The Ladder. Under her leadership, The Ladder began to shift its position, and more and more began to report news of the militant wing of the homophile movement and their challenges to outsiders' claims to expertise about homosexuality.
One of the first of these challenges came at a speech by psychologist Albert Ellis, known for his vicious anti-homosexual views, at the 1963 conference of the East Coast Homophile Organization or ECHO (an umbrella group consisting at that time of DOB, Mattachine Societies of New York and Washington, and the Janus Society of Philadelphia). In response to Ellis’s remark that “the exclusive homosexual is a psychopath,” an audience member returned, “Any homosexual who would come to you for treatment, Dr. Ellis, would need to be a psychopath!” As Jody Shotwell reported in The Ladder, “The applause which supported this remark might indicate the feelings of most of the group” (Shotwell, 1963, pp. 9-10).

In August 1964, Barbara Gittings published an editorial harshly criticizing the New York Academy of Medicine Public Health Committee’s report on homosexuality. The skimpy report, intended for a lay audience, proclaimed that homosexuality was an illness that should be treated or prevented and provided little factual information. Gittings commented, “The doctors of this medical group, in prescribing heterosexuality simply because it is ‘normal,’ are practicing moral manipulation in the guise of scientific healing” (Gittings, 1964, p. 5). DOB sent a polite but firm letter in an attempt to correct the committee’s “quite misleading statements” (Daughters of Bilitis, 1964, p. 5).

Although by 1964, members of the homophile movement, including DOB, were clearly challenging the traditional authorities on homosexuality, nonetheless homophile organizations were still providing forums for them to speak at [see, for example, descriptions of the 1963 (Shotwell, 1963) and the 1964 ECHO conventions (Tobin, 1964; Hansen & Gittings, 1964)]. At a DOB national convention in 1964, for example, psychoanalyst Gerald Sabath told his audience of lesbians that “homosexuality itself is based upon unconscious conflict” (Tobin, 1964, p. 16). And at the same conference, Ernest van den Haag said that although homosexuality per se isn’t an illness, homosexuals are “more likely to be sick because of pressure and hostility make them so”; “disturbed persons who are basically inclined to seek punishment would be attracted to homosexuality” (Coopersmith & Polak, 1964, p. 11).

The contradiction between criticizing psychiatric views, on the one hand, and inviting their proponents to speak, on the other, may have reflected a split growing within DOB and in the homophile movement more generally during this time. Within DOB, the more conservative viewpoint was held by Florence Conrad, DOB’s research director, and, more generally, by the San Francisco chapter. Gittings and the New
York chapter represented the more militant homophile stance. To buttress their views, these militants were seizing on radical critiques of psychiatry by Thomas Szasz, who argued that the medical profession used diagnoses of illness as a form of social control [see, for example, L.E.E.'s review of Szasz's *Law, Liberty, and Psychiatry* (L.E.E., 1964)].

The militant position was clearly expressed at ECHO's 1964 convention, which DOB did not help sponsor, and which was reported in *The Ladder* in January 1965. According to a description of the conference by Lily Hansen and Barbara Gittings, the goal of the conference was "practical assessment of what to do, not ingestion of a menu of psychological speculations. Recognizing that many homosexuals now insist on standing up for their rights, the speakers at ECHO uniformly started from the premise that discriminations [sic] against the homosexual are unjust and should be systematically fought" (Hansen & Gittings, 1965, p. 7). Capturing the mood of the conference, one self-proclaimed "activist" stated, "I've read nearly 75 books in the New York Mattachine Society library, and I'm fed up with reading" (Adkins & Tobin, 1965, p. 4).

The shift in stance from fostering individual understanding and accommodation to heterosexual society to a demand for civil rights activism necessitated a basis on which to organize, and some now began to set forth the view that homosexuals were a minority group, just like American Blacks and Jews. An essay in the April 1965 edition of *The Ladder* makes explicit this analogy. In this essay, L.E.E. argued that the attempt by psychiatrists to "cure" homosexuals in the United States was akin to South African doctors' attempts to bleach the skin of Chinese patients so that they could use the medical facilities allotted for whites only. She harshly criticized those homophile organizations who "have mistakenly and masochistically permitted themselves to be used as a platform from which psychotherapists could proclaim the 'moral disease of homosexuality' ... and drum up business for themselves." She argued, "It's time to stop concurring in the 'sick' stigma with which some of those in the psychological professions pollute the general climate of opinion as they promote heterosexual 'cures' designed to sell books or procure patients."

Although many in the mental health professions still clearly favored a "sickness" approach to homosexuality (homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association up until 1974 and was only changed after much protest by the gay liberation movement), some began to ally themselves with the militant homo-
phile positions being expressed. Psychologist George Weinberg spoke at the 1965 ECHO convention on the dangers of psychoanalysis, discussing why psychoanalysts condemn homosexuals, how they damage their patients, and how they could help instead (Hastings, 1966a, pp. 9-11). At the same conference, psychotherapist Paul Goodman urged homosexuals to join up in protest with other oppressed groups; and psychoanalyst Ernest van den Haag, while advising homosexuals not to ally with other groups, still restricted his talk primarily to issues of civil rights (Hastings, 1966b, pp. 7-13).

Meanwhile, the rifts between more and less militant segments of the homophile movement and within DOB were growing (see D’Emilio, 1983, chapter 9, for an excellent discussion of the rifts; see also Martin & Lyon, 1972, especially pp. 274-275). In 1965, Barbara Gittings published a debate between Florence Conrad, DOB’s research director, and Franklin E. Kameny, founder of the Mattachine Society and an indefatigable crusader for homosexuals’ civil rights. Kameny, determined to shake the homophile movement into a more aggressive position, argued the controversial position that research into homosexuality did not matter. In large part, the debate focused on the controversial anti-sickness resolution that the Mattachine Society of Washington had just passed. The resolution read, in part: “In the absence of valid evidence to the contrary, homosexuality is not a sickness, disturbance, or pathological in any sense, but is merely a preference, orientation, or propensity, on par with, and not different in kind from, heterosexuality” (Kameny, 1965a, p. 14).

While from the vantage point of the late 1980s this statement may seem self-evident and certainly not likely to stir heated debate, in 1965, these were fighting words and a call to action. In his essay, Kameny declared that homosexuals must take an offensive stance. Instead of accepting the labels that “authorities” have placed on them, homosexuals must declare themselves the experts in their own lives. Calling the question of sickness “probably THE most important single issue facing the homophile movement today,” he attacked the individualist position that DOB had been espousing: “There are those who say that the label appended really doesn’t matter. Let the homosexual be defined as sick, they say, but just get it granted that even if sick, he can function effectively and should therefore be judged only on his individual record and qualifications.” Calling this a “woefully impractical, unrealistic, ivory-tower approach,” he argued that once homosexuals became labelled sick, “we will then have two battles to fight—that to combat prejudice against homosexuals per se, and that
to combat prejudice against the mentally ill—and we will be pariahs and outcasts twice over" (Kameny, 1965a, pp. 15-17). He ended his letter with a call to homophile organizations to “move away from the comfortingly detached respectability of research into the often less pleasant rough-and-tumble of political and social activism” (Kameny, 1965a, p. 20).

Conrad responded by calling Mattachine-Washington’s anti-sickness stance “foolish.” In her rebuttal, she argued that the question of sickness was not “capable of being decided by vote” (Conrad, 1965, p. 17). The homophile movement’s taking an anti-sickness stance would not impress anyone in a position to make a difference. What was needed, instead, was a more careful delineation of what was meant by “sickness.” Notably, Conrad was not willing to take a stand on at least one application of the term: the use of the word sick to refer to homosexuals with “the implication being that this type of sexual adjustment always carries with it some form, mild or serious, of personality disorder or malfunctioning in nonsexual areas” (Conrad, 1965, p. 18). Instead, she argued that this application of the term should not be discussed by those without “a solid background in the literature” (p. 19). The homophile movement would be better off, she argued, by focusing on the issue of forced “cures” without taking a stand on the sickness issue itself. In a final section, she made a plea for the effectiveness of research in advancing the goals of the homophile movement, rightfully pointing out that if homophile organizations are not interested in research, others are, and the research others conduct will be far more distorted if homophile organizations fail to take part. Kameny had the last word. In an essay printed shortly afterward, he reiterated his support for the anti-sickness position and renewed his call for action (Kameny, 1965b).

The Conrad-Kameny debate is important for several reasons. First, it demonstrates the political nature of the sickness debates and highlights tensions between the radical and conservative sectors of the homophile movement and DOB in the mid-to-late-1960s. During this period, the Philadelphia chapter of DOB withdrew from the national organization to form the militant Homophile Action League, and a group of women from the San Francisco chapter left to form a less political, more social group (Martin & Lyon, 1972, p. 274). In the short run, the debate between Conrad and Kameny in The Ladder signified a victory for the militant sector. The Ladder, after all, was DOB’s own publication, and it certainly may have seemed unusual to publish an attack on its own research director’s viewpoints. In retrospect, it also
marked one of the last times that the "sickness" position was taken seriously in The Ladder's pages.

After 1965, mental health professionals no longer controlled the terms of the debates about homosexuality—at least as it appeared in The Ladder. The alliance of DOB with the militant sector of the homophile movement, however, did not last long. In 1966, Barbara Gittings was removed from the editorship of The Ladder in what historian John D'Emilio (1983, p. 171) called "a nasty debacle" (see also Tobin & Wicker, 1972, p. 215). After her removal, the editorial focus of the magazine changed dramatically. No longer allied squarely with the homophile movement, The Ladder began to affiliate itself with the burgeoning women's liberation movement and to focus on the lesbian's identity "as a woman in our society" ("Another rung," 1966, p. 24). Yet the change in editorial policy did not entail a reversion to earlier conceptualizations of homosexuality as—at least potentially—illness. Although news of mental health professionals' statements about homosexuality continued to appear in The Ladder's pages and DOB continued to assist researchers, homophobia—not homosexuality—was now the problem. [See Dr. Ruth McGuire's (1968) story, "The Intake Interview," in which a mother is treated by a psychotherapist so that she can fully accept her lesbian daughter and Rita LaPorte's (1967) satire, "The Causes and Cures of Heterosexuality."]

The period 1956 to 1965 showed enormous changes in The Ladder and the women who wrote for it. From its earliest years, when proclamations that lesbians were mentally ill or unnatural went virtually unchallenged, The Ladder grew into a forum for lesbians who wished to replace those conceptions with more positive images. From its earliest years, The Ladder shows the power of the psychiatric and medical professions to control the terms of the debate around homosexuality and their ability to cause enormous harm to many lesbian women.

Yet The Ladder reached a very specialized group of women. DOB was the only homophile organization devoted exclusively to women. Largely white, educated, and middle class, the women of DOB may have been more receptive to medical views about homosexuality than less-educated women, who may have been less likely to read medical and psychiatric literature or to attend lectures or panel discussions by practitioners. In addition, poor and working-class lesbians may have had fewer illusions about the attainability of the middle-class respectability sought by the women of DOB. Doubly deviant in a society that rewarded white men and doled out privileges to women in accordance
to the men with which they were attached, the women of DOB may have been more keenly aware of the loss of the perquisites accorded middle-class heterosexual women. How this shaped their willingness to accept traditional psychiatric views, we can only speculate.

At the same time, the bravery of these women in openly organizing as lesbians in the 1950s cannot be overestimated. While to outsiders they may have appeared "like a middle-class women's club having a meeting to decide how to run the next charity bazaar," as sociologist Howard Becker described them (1965, reprinted in D'Emilio, 1983, p. 143), they tenaciously pushed at the boundaries, with a curious mix of boldness and timidity, of traditional conceptions of lesbianism. By taking risks during a period in which it was clearly dangerous to be lesbian, they increased the possibilities for lesbian organization and acceptance today.

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