

Hidden from History?

The treatment of female homosexuality

Helen Spandler,
Professor of Mental Health Studies, UCLan
Editor, Asylum magazine

Our Research (Spandler and Carr)

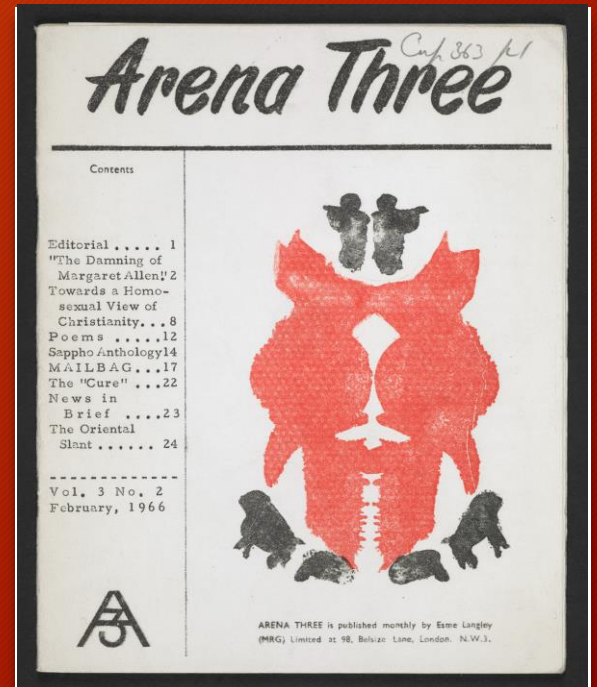
- What happened to women in the UK mental health system in when homosexuality was seen as a mental disorder?
- We conducted a 'bottom up' archive study (LGBT+ archives and anthologies)
- We looked at how lesbian sexuality was 'treated' and how its pathologisation was resisted by lesbian activists and professionals



LESBIAN.



Supported by
wellcometrust



Summary of findings:

- Some women were hospitalised with ‘sexual deviation’ (i.e. homosexuality) as their ‘primary diagnosis’.
- No standard ‘treatment’ but some women were subjected to various experimental treatments and therapies
- We found ten examples of women being subject to aversion therapy (both chemical and electric) including ‘anticipatory avoidance treatment’.
- These ‘treatments’ were not common or widespread, but still significant to the lives of LGBT people.
- Several notable examples of mental health professionals resisting pathologisation and offered support to women to come out

1 Women's experience of Aversion Therapy



Lessons for today

- ❖ Medical and psychiatric profession can enact or challenge wider societal prejudices.
- ❖ We need to be mindful that current practices may be seen as unethical in the future
- ❖ Importance of wider context and negative impact of prevailing societal prejudices - homophobia (and transphobia)
- ❖ More research needed about other sexual and gender minorities experiences of conversion therapies (some trans women were subject to aversion therapies)
- ❖ We need to question how 'success' and 'evidence' is defined, and by whom.
- ❖ Need for truth and reconciliation & restorative justice to heal the harm experienced by sexual and gender minorities.

References (all open access)

‘Hidden from history? A brief modern history of the psychiatric “treatment” of lesbian and bisexual women in England’ *Lancet Psychiatry*

‘The shocking ‘treatment’ to make lesbians straight’ *Wellcome Collection Stories*

“A history of lesbian politics and the psy professions” *Feminism and Psychology*

‘Lesbian and bisexual women’s experiences of aversion therapy in England’ *History of the Human Sciences* (forthcoming)