

ABCT Apology for Behavior Therapy’s Contribution to the Development and Practice of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression Change Efforts: History and Next Steps

On behalf of the field of behavior therapy and cognitive behavior therapy, the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies apologizes for our historic role in the development and use of so-called “conversion therapies,” practices that have caused untold harm to members of the sexual and gender minority (SGM) community for over 50 years. To this day, publications written by ABCT members – including members in prominent leadership roles – are used by anti-SGM activists to justify their ongoing use of these damaging so-called “therapies.” ABCT deeply regrets behavior therapists’ role in the creation, study, and use of these practices, and recognizes and accepts responsibility for the ways in which both our actions and inactions have harmed SGM people. ABCT recognizes it is time for us to document our history and legacy and say that we are truly sorry.

ABCT also unequivocally denounces the ongoing use of so-called “conversion therapies” given (a) the lack of empirical support regarding for such interventions, (b) existing evidence regarding the significant risks associated with these practices, and (c) the fact that SGM identities are normal expressions of human diversity and not a type of psychopathology that needs to be “treated” (AABT, 1974; APA, 2009; Kinitz et al., 2021). More specifically, research indicates that so-called “conversion therapies” and attempts to change sexual orientation and/or gender identity are associated with increased internalized stigma and discrimination, self-harm and -hatred, decreased self-esteem, depression, anxiety, isolation from social support, and suicide attempts (see Kinitz et al. for review).

ABCT further reaffirms its May 11, 1974, resolution that homosexuality is not “a sign of behavioral pathology” and extends this to all SGM identities. ABCT also wants to explicitly state that it fully supports the 2009 resolution by the American Psychological Association (APA) on appropriate affirmative responses to sexual orientation distress and change efforts; the 2020 APA resolution on sexual

orientation, gender identity, parents and children; and the 2021 APA resolution on appropriate affirmative responses to sexual orientation distress and change efforts.

ABCT also wishes to acknowledge the courageous and historic role that some of our members have played in advancing SGM rights and mental health (e.g., Drs. Charles Silverstein and Gerald Davison). We appreciate the scientific efforts of ABCT members aimed at improving the mental health of SGM people (e.g., Cohen et al., 2016; Feinstein et al., 2022; Fox et al., 2018; Holt et al., 2019; Pachankis et al., 2022; also see Capriotti & Donaldson, 2022, for further discussion), and encourage our membership to continue to advance and accelerate this work. Below we outline the complex history that ABCT and the behavior therapy/cognitive behavior therapy field (hereafter referred to as BT/CBT field) have with SGM mental health and so-called “conversion therapy” (hereafter referred to as sexual orientation and gender identity and expression change efforts [SOGIECEs]). Because of the historic nature of the BT/CBT field’s role in the development and practice of SOGIECEs, all living past presidents of ABCT (including those who studied, practiced, and/or promoted SOGIECEs in the past) were invited to endorse this document to demonstrate the change that has occurred in our field with regards to support for SGM people and their mental health. This document also outlines a series of initiatives approved by the current ABCT Board of Directors as next steps to be taken on SGM issues.

In recent decades, SOGIECEs have largely been sidelined to primarily conservative religious organizations and the “scientific margins” (Waidzunus, 2010). However, 50 years ago, SOGIECEs were not only mainstream in psychology generally, they were mainstream in the field of BT. Indeed, it was in the 1970’s that behavior therapists published much of their formative research in this area (reviewed by Capriotti & Donaldson). Importantly, in part because of the successful sidelining of these harmful practices, this history and our legacy is relatively unknown to many clinicians and researchers who currently consider themselves members of the BT/CBT field. This history is also unknown to many SGM people. ABCT believes that we must acknowledge and own our history, both good and bad, and make sure that contemporary members of our field understand what has transpired. We cannot address and move forward from that which we do not acknowledge.

As noted above, the relationship between the BT/CBT field (including ABCT, formerly the Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy: AABT) and SOGIECEs is complex. On the one hand, many early behavior therapists, including those who would go on to be leaders in the BT/CBT field and in ABCT, wrongly and regularly sought to change so-called “deviant” sexual behaviors, which were broadly viewed at the time as being anything other than cisgender and heterosexual (see Capriotti & Donaldson, 2022,

for review). Such efforts were often focused on men who were sexually attracted to men, although other SGM people were subjected to so-called “therapy” as well. It is important to acknowledge the fact that behavior therapists benefitted from the development and practice of SOGIECEs financially, and that engagement in SOGIECEs was commonplace. To provide context, 50 years ago, such “therapies” were legal in all 50 states and utilized by therapists of many different orientations, ranging from psychoanalysis to behavior therapy. As of 1972, no major professional organization (including ABCT) had expressed any disapproval regarding these so-called “therapies” (Capriotti & Donaldson).

On the other hand, in 1972, Dr. Charles Silverstein (then a psychology graduate student at Rutgers University, member of AABT, and gay rights activist) gave a seminal talk at the annual AABT convention in New York City. In this talk, he highlighted the extensive oppression and marginalization faced by SGM people and associated harms, which contributed to a desire among many to change or “convert” to being heterosexual. As covered in the recent documentary *Conversion*, by director/producer Gregory Caruso (2022), that talk served as a critical event for Dr. Gerald Davison, who was a practicing conversion therapist and the developer of “Playboy Therapy.” During the next 2 years, Dr. Silverstein’s and Dr. Davison’s developing friendship and discussions culminated in Dr. Davison’s landmark 1974 AABT presidential address in which he challenged the use of SOGIECEs, noting that the question was not whether behavior therapists *could* change sexual orientation, but whether behavior therapists *should* change sexual orientation. Dr. Davison clearly stated that he did not think behavior therapists should engage in such practices. Dr. Davison went on to restate and elaborate on his perspective in subsequent essays (Davison, 1976; 1978), explaining that the existence of so-called “therapies” for gay and lesbian people implied that homosexuality was a disorder and that the practice of these approaches should, therefore, cease. Also, during Dr. Davison’s term as president, the AABT Board of Directors unanimously passed a 1974 resolution stating that homosexuality was not an indicator of mental disorder and called on all mental health professionals to “take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been attributed to these patterns of emotion and behavior.”

It is important to note that Dr. Silverstein’s role in advancing SGM rights and interests was not limited to his talk at AABT. For instance, Dr. Silverstein presented to the American Psychiatric Association’s Nomenclature Committee in February 1973 to make that case that the diagnosis of homosexuality rested on bias, not science; he also testified regarding the psychological burden of being labeled as mentally ill based on a diagnosis of homosexuality (Bayer, 1987; Waidzun, 2010). In December 1973 the American Psychiatric Association issued a resolution stating that homosexuality by itself was not a mental disorder

and removed homosexuality from the DSM the following year. Dr. Silverstein played a critical role in the adoption of this resolution, and was also the founding editor of the *Journal of Homosexuality*. He has spent his career advancing SGM mental health.

ABCT must also acknowledge that the practice of SOGIECEs in the BT/CBT field did not disappear after 1974. For instance, some behavior therapists argued against Davison's position, proposing that behavior therapists could "treat" homosexuality without implying it was abnormal. Moreover, although research endeavors among ABCT members in this area largely ceased within a few years, some researchers, including some who would go on to serve as ABCT leaders, continued to publish on SOGIECEs into the early 1980's (see Capriotti & Donaldson, 2022, for review). Nonetheless, over time, the Silverstein and Davison view became dominant and SOGIECEs were excluded from mainstream practice of BT/CBT.

The Board of Directors of ABCT encourages all members to educate themselves about the history of SOGIECEs within the BT/CBT field. Members are encouraged to watch the newly released documentary *Conversion* (Caruso, 2022) and to engage in local advocacy to help end the practice of SOGIECEs in states/jurisdictions that still do not ban these practices. Further, the ABCT Board of Directors announces that it has voted on the following next steps:

1. The Publications Committee of ABCT has been tasked with the creation of disclaimers that will be added to articles previously published in ABCT journals on SOGIECEs.
2. Organization of an ABCT watch party of the movie *Conversion*. This watch party will be followed by an interactive discussion with Drs. Silverstein and Davison and Mr. Gregory Caruso. Date: Thursday, June 16th 6:00 - 8:00 p.m. EDT. *Conversion* can be streamed via Amazon at <https://www.amazon.com/Conversion-Zachary-Quinto/dp/B09RW4XW2C>
3. Showing of the movie *Conversion* at the 2022 annual convention in New York City on Saturday, November 19, 2022. This will again be followed by an interactive discussion with Drs. Silverstein and Davison and Mr. Gregory Caruso.

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