

Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: During June Pride Month and the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots that took place in New York City in 1969, kicking off the modern LGBTQ civil rights movement, The Thought Project podcast will host guests who will share their stories. Today we host Dr. Perry Halkitus, a public health psychologist, researcher, educator, and advocate who is dean and professor of biostatistics and urban global public health at the School of Public Health at Rutgers University. Dr. Halkitus obtained a PHD in Educational Psychology from the Graduate Center CUNY in 1995. He is also the author of *The Public Lives of Gay Men From Stonewall to the Queer Generation*, published by Oxford University Press 2019. Welcome, Perry, to The Thought Project.

Perry Halkitus: Thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for coming onto the program today. As an openly gay man who is HIV positive, you have been a tireless advocate for the lives of members of the LGBTQ community for decades and for the rights of those who are HIV positive. How have the lives, in your opinion, how have the lives of LGBTQ citizens in America changed since that seismic moment at the Stonewall and 50 years ago?

Perry Halkitus: Well, thank you for that question. I think that over the course of the last 50 years, my own work and the research of others have shown that certainly social and political conditions have been slightly improved since that time. I think of recent, unfortunately, there has been a deterioration in some of those advances forward. But despite the fact that we have had these advances, I think that the wellbeing of the population is still sub par. And I think that in part because the health care profession at large is not well equipped to address the specific health needs of the population. And because the LGBTQ population continues to experience marginalization and victimization, which undermines their health and their wellbeing, or our health and our wellbeing.

Perry Halkitus: So, I think certainly, I have just written an editorial for the American Journal of Public Health where I described the stonewall riots as a necessary precondition to AIDS activism, as a necessary condition to marriage equality. All of these linear connections have happened and things have certainly socially and politically gotten a little better, but I think we still have a long way to go in sort of improving the lives and having LGBTQ people have an equal place in our society here in the United State. I'm not even touching the rest of the world, here I think advances in certain parts of the world are horrific or have not even occurred.

Tanya Domi: Sure. I share some of those observations. I actually am a scholar and I focus on Southeastern Europe and the Balkans. I'm actually writing a book about the LGBT human rights movement there, and so you're right. Yeah, you're right. There's like two steps forward, one step back. Very difficult circumstances there, although many success stories too. But very early in its development.

Perry Halkitus: Can I just ... Let me just add to that.

Tanya Domi: Please.

Perry Halkitus: I think it's a really important point, because I think when people .. I love that you're doing the work in Southeast Europe. I am Greek ancestry. I spend time in Greece doing work around HIV and other issues. When people think Europe, they think the UK and France, where certainly there are advances that parallel the United States. That's not the case in Greece, as you know perfectly well, right?

Tanya Domi: Sure. Oh, yeah. In Serbia. Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Albania. Yeah, it's, you're right. And I have actually met some of the people who lead a great Greece pride there. So you know, it's, you're right. Very difficult situation.

Perry Halkitus: I say, this is like a ridiculous comment that's made to me over and over again when I reveal that I'm Greek. Then people say, "Well, your people created gay." I'm like, "No, my people didn't create gay." Gays is an identity and a culture. Certainly men in ancient Greece had sex with young boys, but that was not about being a gay man, right? So there's this notion that somehow, I mean actually I think that whole thing was about misogyny quite frankly, but I think that there's a long way to go there. You know because you probably have been there recently that there was an HIV positive Greek-American man who was murdered by the police about a year ago. And that's still, Zack Kastopolis, and that still goes unsolved. Anyway, thank you for bringing that up.

Tanya Domi: Oh, absolutely. Well, your points are well-made on subpar with respect to health, health care, responsiveness from the medical community. Can you talk about that in a little bit more detail?

Perry Halkitus: Yeah, I certainly can. I think that look at prior to the stonewall riots when you know we were all being arrested and in prison just because of the people we love the health care community didn't even know we were present, and certainly was making no effort to attend to us. I think the Stonewall riots happen and there is a sort of a notice to society at large that being a gay person, an LGBT person, is something that is part of American society. And in 1973 and '74 the American Psychological Association the American Psychiatric Association, it's actually reversed order, declassified homosexuality as a type of pathology. So it's not even 50 years that homosexuality was considered-

Tanya Domi: That those events took place. Yes, that's correct.

Perry Halkitis: Yeah, it's incredible, right? But so you have a recognition certainly in the early '70s that homosexuality is not ... Homosexuality is not a psychopathology. Then the AIDS crisis happened, and I think that really catapulted the LGBTQ population. Gay men working with lesbians, working with all sorts of folks to say, "Look, health care providers, you must pay attention to us. Not only are we here, but you must attend to our wellbeing." Despite the fact that I think that HIV has been devastating to the population and just society at large, I actually think this is one of the benefits that came out of it.

Perry Halkitis: And that that moves us forward to the 21st century where I think we are beginning, we still have a long way to go, to train medical providers, nurses, other healthcare providers, and provide them with the tools that they need to deal with their population. We still have a long way to go. Most medical students only get four hours, or a couple of sessions on LGBTQ health, and then they're expected to solve all these issues. So I think certainly things are better. But I think what we need to do is, as I say throughout the book, is we need to normalize LGBTQ people, right? So it can be that people are being trained to be provided help without attending to all parts of the population. And LGBT people should not just be an afterthought that gets four hours of competency. Cultural competency training.

Tanya Domi: Right. It should be integrated across the board.

Perry Halkitis: Everything should be integrated.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Perry Halkitis: Yeah. Just just my husband is an eighth grade social studies teacher, he integrates all aspects of history with his students. It's not just, "Okay, now we're gonna do black yesterday, now we're going to do gay history, or now we're going to do women's history." History is just history. Healthcare is just healthcare. It means you you deal with all people and attend to their differences, and attend to their specific needs.

Tanya Domi: Yes. So in your new book, which you've mentioned and which we've already discussed in the introduction about you, you employ ethnographic research and you use obviously public health data. You studied the coming out experiences of 15 gay men, ages 19 to 78, from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, six of whom identify as HIV positive. Tell us what you found out and tell us what surprised you.

Perry Halkitis: Yeah, thank you for that question. So, let me just, firstly, I actually first interviewed 23 men because I felt like when I had gotten to a certain point I still hadn't reached a point of saturation. I think I was still learning. But I ended up in the book just highlighting 15 men because I felt that that was much more accessible to the reader if I had five for each generation.

Perry Halkitus: Okay, so what-

Tanya Domi: What did you find out?

Perry Halkitus: What did I find out and what surprised me and what doesn't surprise me? So, I guess what doesn't surprise me, I'll start there. And I think that is the hypothesis that I went into the book with is the idea that while socio and political conditions are somewhat better in the United States, and certainly media representations of LGBTQ people are advancing, when you think about film and music and television, that in fact the coming out process is a psychological process and that it doesn't matter if you're four years old when you're feeling that there's something different about you, there may be all these advances going on in society, but your feeling of otherness and your feeling of difference is something that you're not reconciling with all those advances. And so that commonality, that feeling of otherness, which I actually think I traced to the development of loneliness and depression and substance use in the population if it goes on uncontrolled, is pretty consistent across time. So that's number one.

Perry Halkitus: I think the thing that was revealing to me in these conversations was how articulate and incredibly intelligent the youngest generation, the millennials who I called the queer generation, were in their verbalization and their emotional responses about what it means to be a gay man. For them, gay man was not a monolith like it was very much for like the older guys, right? For them, there was this very, very, very nuanced understanding of gender, and culture, and class, and ethnicity, and race, and gay identity, and gender identity that all sort of intersected. They verbalized it in a way that was really for me enlightening. I knew about it intellectually. I had read about it, I had written about it, but the emotional reaction that they had to it and how they spoke about it, and about the need to chip away at this the archetype of the hyper masculine white gay man, that was like to me not only ... I guess it was riveting to me more than anything else and I spent a lot of time in the book thinking about that.

Perry Halkitus: And then I would say that the other thing that was really interesting to me that came out pretty consistently as a theme, which I guess I knew, but I didn't really ever ... It never came to my mind, but I talk about in the book is that coming out is not a one time event, right? Coming out for an LGBTQ people goes on throughout the course of their lifetime. And I remember during the course of the interviews coming to that understanding and remembering that when I left NYU about two years ago and I went to Rutgers, assumed the dean's role, I had to come out all over again.

Tanya Domi: Yes. Yeah, I agree with you. Every day we make a decision. Every day. Do I come out? Do I not come out? Is it appropriate for me to come out or not? This is what confronts all LGBT people.

Perry Halkitus: Yeah, I completely agree. I will say that at 56 years old with a person, with my life experiences, and the power, and the privilege that I have in my life that I recognize, it's easier, right? Because I am in this position of authority. But it reminds me of all those times ... It raised for me, even though I'm in this very, very advantageous position as a white gay man of means, it raised all those negative, horrible feelings I had as a younger man about the times I would have to come out to people. And in a sense that's so very real still. And you're right, when do we come out? How do we come out? To whom do we come out? Is it safe to come out? This is like, I challenge straight people to think this way, that they have to do that everyday of their lives.

Tanya Domi: This is the running thing in your head that it's always there. It's always in the back of your mind. You're not always conscious of it obviously, because that would be emotionally intolerant, but yeah. But in fact, this is always in your head. Interesting. Interesting takeaways too, and I want to talk about the millennials now. You have articulated, I thought it was very interesting. You have articulated three generations of the LGBTQ movement in America. The Stonewall in moment 50 years ago, which are all celebrating, commemorating in this incredible June pride month. And then the second one obviously being HIV/AIDS generation, which emerged initially in 1980 and 1981, and then the millennials in which you really connect them to and identify them with a global recession which launched in 2007 and 2008 and its lagging presence. It's still very, not only present here, but it's also very present in Europe, for example in my area of research.

Tanya Domi: So let's talk about those millennials. We know about the historical figures and you have spoken and written eloquently about HIV/AIDS, which has changed considerably. I mean, there were moments in 1996 when I had friends who were literally given their death, they had bedside priests giving them blessings and prayers because they were expected not to live. And then somebody was on their death bed that I know quite well. The cocktail kicked in and he's alive 35 years later. That's really, we've seen a big shift there. But what are some of the challenges with the HIV/AIDS generation? And then I like to talk about the millennials.

Perry Halkitus: Yeah. I thank you for framing it that way. And I think, yeah, for those of us who live through that period and remember it, very dark moments. The height of the epidemic, '93 to '95, is when most people died here in the United States. And I remember those moments too, this Lazarus Syndrome that you described when people were for all intents and purposes were dying, then all of a sudden were living. The thing about the psychological, and social, and emotional processes, the impact that that has on somebody's life.

Perry Halkitus: But to your point, the fact of the matter is despite the advances and despite the fact that now we have biomedical technologies in the form of treatment as prevention, which confers upon a positive person the ability to not to transfer the virus if their viral load is undetectable, and the use of preexposure

prophylaxis, which is the use of an antiviral once a day sort of in the form of like a birth control pill. These advances that have happened in the last decade, despite all of this, despite, we still have about 40000-50000 new infections in this country every year. And in this country, the majority of those infections are in gay men. And the majority of those infections are in gay men of color. And so, the challenge we have in eradicating this disease is that despite these biomedical advances and despite an administration on the federal level that thinks it's going to end AIDS with pharmaceuticals, this is a socially as much as the virally produced condition. And I think I tie the ongoing HIV epidemic in the United States, and certainly in gay black men, And certainly endgame and gay men more largely to the social the social conditions that fuel the disease.

Perry Halkitus: People don't just wake up and say, "I'm going to acquire HIV, or I'm going to become an opioid addict, or I'm going to become obese." Or whatever it is, whatever the health condition is, it's social conditions and minority stressors that get people to this place in their lives. And the Trump administration just sort of thinks that we're going to get pills and everything's going to be fine. Well, at the same time they're chipping away at LGBTQ rights left and right, right? I actually think, I think I just actually wrote an editorial where I'm saying I think there's going to be ... What's happened since he's become the president is that the HIV rates, which should have been falling, have stayed stable. I bet you they're going to go up because when you are bombarded with these negative, negative, political and social conditions and these policies, of course it's going to affect your health. So, things are better with HIV, but we have to keep an eye on it. We still don't have a cure. And I think that until we have a cure it's going to be very much in our population.

Perry Halkitus: But to your other question about millennials, I appreciate you asking that because I think it was fascinating to me also is the data are out there, right? The data out there showing that people in their twenties and even in their early thirties are living at home longer. They're in debt. They can't get jobs. It's a generation that's not going to do as well as our generation, or my generation. This is something that is very real in the minds of the queer generation. How do I go to establish my life in the world when the opportunities don't exist there, rights? I'm already trying to reconcile my sexual identity and perhaps it's a little better than it was 30 years ago, but now I came to leave my parents' home to go into establishing my life on my own because social and economic conditions prevent that from happening. And I think this rests very, very heavily on the minds of millennials, of the queer generation.

Perry Halkitus: I've spoken at conferences where I've said, "I feel for this generation." Never in my mind when I left the graduate center or when I finished Columbia in 1981, '84, that I would not have a career. I always knew what was going to happen. And if that did happen, if I were an 18 year old right now going to Columbia, I don't know if I would feel the same way as I did in 1981. I think this is a burden, the global crisis that manifests here and around the world. You've seen it in Greece where 40% of young people are unemployed, is going to have a toll on

people's, of course economic wellbeing, but also on their health. And so, it's going to challenge millennials to have to think in different ways about how they make their place in the world. And I'm not sure they've quite figured out how to do it yet, but they will because it's probably of the three groups I talk to the most nuanced thinking and sort of like out of the box thinking group of all of them. So, yeah, it's a huge challenge.

Perry Halkitus: I also, I'll say one more thing, which is when you think about HIV or other health conditions and bombarding the population, maybe risk behaviors doesn't feel so bad when you don't have a job, or you have to live at home. Right? And so that's why I think I raise the point throughout the book about the economic conditions and tie it there, because I think it is very much tied to the health of the population and the wellbeing, the psychological, the emotional, the social, the physical health of the population.

Tanya Domi: Yes, and when you refer to them as the queer generation, what I have discovered having done some movement work with millennials in the last decade, and also there's a forthcoming study out of the Public Science Project here at the graduate center where we have discovered that the millennials are the most multi-racial, multicultural generation in US history. And one of the outcomes of that is that those who identify as queer, not only do they identify as queer, but in this new study that's forthcoming, they indicate that they identify themselves in with more than 300 different identities out of this study. So they're very different from the rest of the movement in terms of where we are historically. So you have the boomers in the movement, the gen x-ers, the gen y-ers, and now you have these millennials that are very, very different. And what they think is important, their priorities are very different.

Perry Halkitus: I agree. I agree. I think that, look, in the conversations it was so ... The Stonewall guys who are like in their sixties and seventies they couldn't even begin to articulate intersectionality ideas. That was like nowhere on their radar, right? Gay was gay, was gay, was gay. My generation, the AIDS guys, they could do like, "Oh, yeah, I'm a brother, and I'm an a father, and a gay man." Right? They could do that, but not really a mosaic or an intersection. You're completely right. This ability to think about oneself in these multidimensional ways is an intelligence and an emotional intelligence that I think this generation has over and above any generation that we've ever seen before. And I think it's refreshing and amazing, and you know, quite frankly, scary to those who want to keep white straight men in power.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. Or cisgender white gay men forward, too. This is a nice segue because I took note of your last chapter, which is entitled Intersectionality and Racism, which was refreshing to see in a book by a cisgender white gay man. Racism, as you know ... First of all, how does this intersectionality play out in terms of your research among white gay men and gay men of color? And then as you know, Perry, racism remains a significant challenge in 2019 America. We have a lot of

work to do, but what, what does your research say about the dynamics of intersectionality and racism within the gay male community?

Perry Halkitus: Yeah, so thanks for that. Cool. About a year and a half ago, I wrote an editorial for the Newark Star Ledger where I basically ... It was sort of the springboard for this chapter because I was thinking about this chapter and it was about racism in the population. All these straight people came up to me afterwards and they said, "We had no idea." And I'm like, "What?" Like LGBTQ people are people, right? And we know that the marginalized tend to marginalize and the oppressed tend to oppress, right? So why would we think that that LGBTQ people would be any different terms of their racism?

Perry Halkitus: So, having said that, I will tell a personal story and then I will just talk about, the ideas more broadly, which is I remember as a young gay man navigating social spaces here in New York City where I grew up, and they were very segregated by race, right? Like the White Party, which was like this circuit party-

Tanya Domi: Yes.

Perry Halkitus: Was a white party.

Tanya Domi: Yes. It really was, yes.

Perry Halkitus: It really was. And Act Up, despite what my friend Peter Staley and others worlds may claim, was not a multi-racial phenomenon.

Tanya Domi: It was very white, very white.

Perry Halkitus: It was a very white, it was a very white often people from means-

Tanya Domi: Had privilege without a doubt.

Perry Halkitus: Right? And privilege that probably helped the movement at the end of it, but let's not make believe that there were people of color in their room because there really weren't people of color room. I actually am angry that as a group what we didn't do was then transfer the knowledge and the skills to those who are most in need of these knowledge and skills in fighting the epidemic. Okay.

Perry Halkitus: So say having said that, I think there's this ongoing challenge in the population that has to deal with the the same challenges that white people face who are straight is what gay people face also. And I think it is better, and this taps into our last comment, our last set of comments about millennials who are thinking about these intersectional ideas in a much more sophisticated way. But I think that for the older folks there is an, and I write about this in the book, there is this still the segregation, this I think objectification that goes on around racial issues. Around Asian men being bottoms and all those horrible terms that you

hear gay men using, right? Like rice queen and stuff like that, which is just despicable to me.

Tanya Domi: That's really not ... That's nasty.

Perry Halkitus: The whole thing is just nasty. And I think that comes from a sexual objectification. And I think it comes from a sexual object objectification that keeps the white gay man in power.

Tanya Domi: Yes. Dominant. Yes, I agree.

Perry Halkitus: Dominant.

Tanya Domi: Yeah.

Perry Halkitus: Right. And that, you open any magazine, I'm dating myself, magazine. You go to a new website or whatever, and the images of gay men or white buff chiseled men. And so, what is considered A list still in the gay community is that, and I think the young guys just have had it. Let me tell you what about one of the men I interviewed, who is the young Ghanian man, who in the book I believe his name is Yasser. And he very strong, big body, came into the interview, he's like in his early twenties and sat down. He had the brightest yellow nail polish I've ever seen in my life, right? And it kind of blew my mind for a second, but that's because I'm a 56 year old man of the AIDS generation, right? And he was completely comfortable in his body. This body that was clearly built, that was clearly he spent time at the gym, and these yellow nails. And he was so comfortable and fluid in his gender, and that was amazing to see.

Perry Halkitus: So, this is all to say there are racist tendencies very much present in the population still. We have to question ourselves as much as we question everybody else. There is objectification that comes out that I think is very much at the heart of the racism that you know that exists in the population. But again, I think with the new generation that's really pushing the boundaries and saying, "Look, gay is not gay, is not gay, is not gay." It's going to get better.

Tanya Domi: Well, I think that's very interesting. I wanted to end on a profile that stayed with you. Is there another personal story that you came across during your research you want to share with us quickly?

Perry Halkitus: Yeah, well, just really quickly. I will connect two stories, but the one that stays with me the most I think when I think about it, because I had to interview him twice because it was Wilson, who was the African-American man who is 78 years old, who grew up in Baltimore in the 1950s who actually just arrived at the interview with volumes of his love letters from his boyfriend from the 1950s, which was like incredible.

Tanya Domi: Wow.
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Transcript by [Rev.com](#)

Perry Halkitus: Incredible.

Tanya Domi: Okay.

Perry Halkitus: Right? And quite frankly, wow, he was interesting because his identity was a lot about his race and not so much about-

Tanya Domi: His sexuality.

Perry Halkitus: ... the Stonewall riots. Yeah, and all of that, which is really, really interesting. And it spoke a lot about Baldwin and others, and just what that meant to his life. So he sticks out.

Perry Halkitus: But then the other one, the other story that I really love to tell is one of the younger men talking about coming out to his parents, and one of the AIDS generation men, Emilio. And Emilio talks about writing a letter to his parents before goes and visits them to come out to them to see if he can prepare them. And you fast forward to the story in the 21st century who's Reed, and he does the same thing except he does it with a text message. Right?

Tanya Domi: Very different.

Perry Halkitus: Right, right. But same type of communication, different media.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, different meaning, different modality.

Perry Halkitus: Yep.

Tanya Domi: Perry Halkitus, I just want to congratulate you on a wonderful book. People should go out and get it. This is pride month. It's Stonewall 50. The Public Lives of Gay Men From Stonewall to the Queer Generation. Congratulations to you. Thank you for joining us today.

Perry Halkitus: Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, Dr. Perry Halkitus, Dean of the Rutgers University School of Public Health.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishmen. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.