

The Fight to be Normal

By RUTH N. GELLER

HumanistNetworkNews.org

June 4, 2008

It may be hard for some of us to believe, with gay marriage, gay adoptions and anti-discrimination laws on the books in some states, that it was only as far back as the 1970s that homosexuality was considered a form of mental illness by medical professionals.

While religion had historically shaped attitudes regarding sexuality, deviant and otherwise, and still does for many people today, by the late 19th century, medicine and the burgeoning field of psychiatry were competing over the right to distinguish normal and healthy from sick and abnormal.

The renowned European sexologist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, listed homosexuality with 200 other case studies of deviant sexual practices in his influential work, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, published in 1886.

He considered homosexuality as either a "congenital inversion" which occurred during birth, or an "acquired inversion," in any event, a brain anomaly. For some years after that, invert became a synonym for homosexual. (In a later article, he described the brain development in the homosexual brain as a differentiation, not anomaly.)

Sigmund Freud, a contemporary of von Krafft-Ebing, had a more benign and accepting attitude toward same sex love.

He believed that all humans were inherently bisexual and that whether a particular person ultimately became homosexual or heterosexual was a result of environmental factors combined with biological sex drives.

He doubted that the possibility of conversion from homosexual to heterosexual could ever truly succeed.

In a famous letter to a mother who had asked Freud to treat her son, he wrote:

"By asking me if I can help (your son), you mean, I suppose, if I can abolish homosexuality and make normal heterosexuality take its place. The answer, in a general way, is no...."

Later in the letter, he told the worried mother that "homosexuality is assuredly no advantage but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness..."

"...Many highly respectable individuals of ancient and modern times have been homosexuals, several of the greatest men among them (Plato, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, etc.) It is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime, and cruelty, too..."

Early in the 20th century, Havelock Ellis, author of the first English medical text book on homosexuality, argued that homosexuality was inborn and therefore not immoral. Like Freud, he felt that it was not a disease, and that many homosexuals made outstanding contributions to society.

However, many in the generations of psychiatrists to come did not hold this tolerant view.

Some argued that homosexuality resulted from pathological family relationships during the oedipal period (around 4-5 years of age) and claimed that they observed these patterns in their homosexual patients.

Sandor Rado, a psychoanalyst who published frequently in the 1940s, rejected Freud's assumption of inherent bisexuality, stating instead that while heterosexuality is "natural", homosexuality is a "reparative" attempt to achieve sexual pleasure when normal heterosexual outlets prove too threatening.

In the first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-I) published in 1952, homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder.

(The DSM, vetted and published by the [American Psychiatric Association](#) (APA), is considered the clinical "Bible" for those in the mental health professions. It provides a comprehensive listing of mental disorders that affect adults and children and has grown wildly in the past 56 years as new psychiatric problems are diagnosed and cataloged. The current version, the DSM-IV-TR, is over 500 pages.)

As late as 1968, Dr. Charles Socarides speculated that the origin of homosexuality was pre-oedipal, and therefore, was even more pathological than thought of by earlier analysts.

He claimed to have successfully cured hundreds of homosexuals who came to him for help. He and Dr. Irving Bieber, another believer in homosexuality as sickness, were psychoanalysts who dominated the field of study in the 1960s.

Bieber did an extensive research study on homosexual men, in which he said that the cause of the "disease" was a close binding mother combined with a detached, rejecting father.

Therapeutic conversion therapy was seen as the cure by these doctors and others. Along with psychoanalysis, then the predominant therapeutic method, more controversial and dangerous means to a cure were used: electroshock treatment, aversion therapy, hormonal enhancement therapy, castration, lobotomy, and, for lesbians, hysterectomy and clitoridectomy.

Amidst this hostile climate, the first gay and lesbian civil and social rights organizations, such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, were born in the 1950s.

In the 1960s, as the gay pride movement was starting to become more vocal, homosexuals were still forbidden to become either psychiatrists or schoolteachers.

The drive for equal rights accelerated and spread after the Stonewall riots in 1969. Gays wanted their civil rights and they certainly wanted to be considered as sane as their straight counterparts. They wanted the 81 word passage which listed homosexuality as a sexual perversion in the DSM, removed.

Even though homosexuals were officially banned from practicing, there was a group of closeted male psychiatrists, who met at the APA convention every year. They jokingly called themselves the "Gay-APA."

In 1970, the American Psychiatric Association's convention was held in San Francisco, Calif. Several panel discussions, including one on transvestitism with Bieber as a speaker, were disrupted by a very vocal and very colorfully dressed group of gay liberationists and lesbian allies.

Yelling "oppressors" and "sadists" to a startled gathering of conservative psychiatrists, they managed to break up the meeting. It is thought that they were tipped off as to the convention's schedule and the whereabouts of Bieber by someone in the [Gay-APA](#).

In 1973, the APA finally declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder in its DSM-II. The vote was hardly unanimous—only 58 percent of the membership voted in favor of the removal.

Actions such as the San Francisco APA protest, as well as more traditional lobbying efforts from gay and lesbian groups, and a more liberal social climate, were strong factors in leading to the removal.

Ground-breaking research on sexual behavior by Alfred Kinsey and Dr. Evelyn Hooker in the 1950s, also helped destigmatize homosexuality.

Yet the victory in psychiatry was only half won. A new diagnosis—ego-dystonic homosexuality, was put in the third edition of the DSM, published in 1980. This was viewed by many as a political compromise to appease the psychiatrists, mainly psychoanalysts, who still considered homosexuality a sickness.

However, by 1986, this diagnosis was removed entirely from the DSM.

The American Psychological Association endorsed the psychiatrists' actions, and both professional associations have since striven to remove any negative label historically attached to being gay.

Today, the American Psychiatric Association's [web page](#) posts this position statement:

"The American Psychiatric Association opposes any psychiatric treatment, such as "reparative" or "conversion" therapy, which is based upon the assumption that homosexuality per se is a mental disorder, or based upon a prior assumption that the patient should change his/ her homosexual orientation."

Source material:

[Facts about Homosexuality and Mental Health:](#)

http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/HTML/facts_mental_health.html

[Episode 204: 81 words](#)

http://www.thisamericanlife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?episode=204

Ruth N. Geller is the editor of [Humanist Network News](http://www.humanistnetworknews.org/) (http://www.humanistnetworknews.org/), the weekly e-zine of the [Institute for Humanist Studies](http://www.humaniststudies.org/) (http://www.humaniststudies.org/).