

Dismantling a Diagnosis — Episode One: A Kind of Madness

Eric Marcus

<https://makinggayhistory.org/podcast/dismantling-a-diagnosis-episode-one-a-kind-of-madness/>



Archival image taken from the short documentary "Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT)." Credit: YouTube/@RenatoSabbatini.

Episode Notes

In the 1950s, psychiatrists diagnosed all homosexuals with a mental illness, and the sickness label created new forms of oppression for gay people in America.

The sickness label was pervasive and seemingly inescapable. Until 1973, according to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (the DSM), homosexuality was a mental disorder. In this first episode of *Making Gay History's* "Dismantling a Diagnosis" miniseries, you'll hear testimony from Eric Marcus's archive describing this dangerous diagnosis and how the label affected the lives of LGBTQ people in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. We also explore the crucial role of psychiatric pseudoscience in propagating misinformation about homosexuality. And through first-hand accounts recorded decades ago, you'll hear from gay men and lesbians who were subjected to therapies or treatments aimed at "curing" their homosexuality. In the words of activist Morris Kight, "Imagine trying to burn out of your brain your love."

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Episode Transcript

Eric Marcus Narration: A kind of madness.

Hal Call: Well, for both of us, let me get it this way. My name is Harold L. Call, and I'm... You're, you're running now?

Eric Marcus: Mm-hmm.

HC: My name is Harold L. Call, and I'm executive director of the Mattachine Society, Incorporated. And your name is?

EM: Eric Marcus.

HC: Eric Marcus. Okay. Do you have any kind of an affiliation or whatever that I should know about?

EM: Uh, no. I'm an independent writer working for Harper & Row on a new book, which doesn't have a title yet. It's an oral history of the struggle for gay rights, covering the period from 1945 to 1990. And you figure rather prominently in there, so that's why I'm here today to talk to you.

HC: Okay, Eric. Well, let's get going.

EM: Interview with Morris Kight, Monday, August 21, 1989. Location is the home of Morris Kight in Los Angeles, California. Interviewer is Eric Marcus. Tape one, side one.

You were talking about areas of oppression and I interrupted you.

Morris Kight: Universities, education, high schools, textbooks, uh, taught that our love was abnormal, deviant, variant.

EM: Interview with Frank Kameny, June 3, 1989. Washington, D.C. Tape two.

Frank Kameny: We were sick, we were sinners, we were perverts. You have your long litany of, of pejoratives. There was absolutely nothing whatsoever which anybody heard at any time anywhere at all which was other than negative. Nothing.

EM: Interview conducted at Hal Call's office in downtown San Francisco.

And did you think at the time that, that homosexuality was sick? Was that what, what the prevailing belief was?

HC: Mm-hmm.

EM: Did you believe that then?

HC: No.

EM: No.

HC: I never believed it, but I know that that was the prevailing attitude among the behavioral scientists, psychiatrists, and, uh, psychologists alike. And that was the doctrine they were teaching.

EM: Barbara Gittings and Kay Tobin Lahusen.

Barbara Gittings: At the time the movement started, which was the late 1940s, the early '50s, we were considered sick. People turned to psychiatrists for answers to the question of homosexuality. What causes it? What can we do about it? How can we eliminate it? So the sickness label infected everything that we said and did. And made it very difficult for us to have any credibility for anything we said for ourselves.

EM Narration: This is *Making Gay History*, I'm Eric Marcus. It was a kind of madness. I was born into a culture, into a society, that believed that because I'm gay, I must be mentally ill. During my childhood and early adolescence, American psychiatry said that my attraction to other boys was pathological: a disease that required treatment. A disease that could, in some cases, be cured. The first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—the DSM I—was published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1952. It listed homosexuality as a sociopathic personality disturbance.

By the time I was in my 30s and started working on my book about the gay and lesbian civil rights movement back in the late 1980s, mainstream psychiatry had moved on, and the dozens upon dozens of lesbians and gay men and bisexual people I interviewed were no longer deemed insane just because of who we loved or desired.

Three decades after that, when we launched this podcast, the belief that gay people could—or indeed should—be cured of their sexual desires had been banished to the fringes and was being outlawed in a growing number of places.

But with progress comes amnesia. It's almost unimaginable now what the sickness label meant for the lives of millions, and how it shaped the movement that fought to free us, not just from pseudoscience and damaging treatments, but to free us to live as equal members of society.

We're releasing this *Making Gay History* miniseries exactly 50 years after the American Psychiatric Association passed a resolution stating that homosexuality was *not* a mental illness or sickness. You're going to hear some of what that madness—the madness of the sickness label—meant for the lives of gay people. How that label fueled the fight for change. And how the legacy of that label, and that fight, filters into our lives today.

So many of the people I interviewed for my book were only ones; coming of age before Stonewall, they didn't know other gay kids, weren't out to their friends, they didn't see gay elders. So where does a person without a name for what they are, without a shared language for how they feel—where do you go to find yourself? In the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, you headed to the library.

This is act one: On the Books.

Therapist Voice-over: Case notes: Morris Kight. Confirmed homosexual. Born November 19, 1919, in Comanche County, Texas. Involved with the movement since the 1950s, becoming a key organizer of early protests in Los Angeles, including Barney's Beanery.

MK: Universities, education, high schools, textbooks, uh, taught that our love was abnormal, deviant, variant. Uh, when I enrolled at Texas Christian University in 1937, being bookish, I right away got a book pass, a stack pass, which was hard to get. It was a precious thing to have. And I rushed to the books to find out more about who I was. And, uh, the handful of books I found, uh, me called sick, sinful, deviant, variant, aberrant, abnormal, and so on.

Therapist Voice-over: Case notes: Barbara Gittings. Avowed lesbian. Born July 31, 1932, in Vienna, Austria. Sometimes called the godmother of the gay civil rights movement.

BG: You look yourself up in, um, little sections in the book on abnormal psychology. And, it's me they're talking about, but it's not me at all.

EM: What did they say?

BG: It was very clinical. It didn't speak of love. It didn't have very much humanity to it. It was, they were talking about some kind of condition, an alien condition that was a departure from the norm. And it was something strange, and it was something odd. Um, and it was possibly treatable, possibly not.

Therapist Voice-over: Case notes: Hal Call. Pornographer and homosexual. Born September 1917, Grundy County, Missouri. Resided in San Francisco. Keen proponent of sexual liberation.

HC: There were things by Dr. Albert Ellis and those psychologists and, and behavioral scientists and therapists, you know, of that era...

EM: ... who were very critical of gays.

HC: They were, most of them, yes.

EM: But gay people bought those books anyway.

HC: Well, yeah, we bought them, we had to buy them and read them because we had to see what the sons of bitches were saying about us. What we had to fight against, you see? That's the way we knew.

Morris Kight: One book on abnormal psychology was 950 pages. And at least half those pages had to do with us. Could you imagine anyone in the world being so clever as to write 450 pages of drivel, shit, nonsense, pseudoscience, religion called education? Could you imagine 450 pages of case history? "Interviewed Mr. X, a 31-year-old bachelor, celibate person, obviously abnormal, polymorphous, perverse, schizophrenic, with strong homosexual tendencies, very strong mother and weak father," and on and on and on. And that was 450 pages of that. So that was fairly oppressive, that education.

EM Narration: This is act two: Doctors and Diagnoses.

Therapist Voice-over: Case Notes: J.J. Belanger. Born January 24, 1923, in Alberta, Canada. Professed to being in love with a fellow member of the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War Two. After the war, worked as a sexologist. Claimed he worked with Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey, founder of the Institute for Sex Research.

J.J. Belanger: Krafft-Ebing. He dealt with what was called, uh, "eonism" and, uh, homosexuality. It was not used at that time, but it was "eonism" and, uh...

EM: Oh, right. Right, right, right.

JB: ... "deviation," and, uh, sort of nice little words like that. Well, Krafft-Ebing—*Psychopathia Sexualis* was his title—and he was very graphic in sex acts and, uh, other little daring activities.

Morris Kight: The most important oppressor that we ever had was the pseudoscience of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, largely developed between 1900 and 1910 by Doctors Mesmer, Charcot, Sigmund Freud, and so on, who sniffed, "These folk are not sinful, they're just sick." And so they wrote bodies of knowledge, bodies of expert information indicating that we were sick and, uh, deviant, variant, aberrant. And as a result, we picked up our very worst enemy. The worst enemy we ever picked up. They were a monolith against us because we made good trade. Perfect for them to market their pseudoscience. They would come into court and testify against us and get huge fees for that.

Unidentified Speaker 1: A sexual psychopath, as defined by the law, has the privilege of being examined by a board of three psychiatrists, sent to a state hospital for a period of from 90 days to two years. At the discretion of the judge is either released or then sentenced to serve a term in prison.

Unidentified Speaker 2: Dr. Matthew Ross, psychiatrist of the Student Health Service of UCLA, described the results of treating 133 homosexuals during the last 11 years. Homosexuality is not a disease in itself. It is a symptom of an underlying serious personality problem bordering on mental illness, a personality disorder which is subject to correction.

Unidentified Speaker 1: In almost 90 percent of the instances, neurotic...

Unidentified Speaker 3: ... one of many symptoms in mental illnesses, psychotherapy naturally is here the treatment of choice...

Unidentified Speaker 2: When you say a pathology, do you mean a glandular, physical problem?

Unidentified Speaker 3: Glandular treatment of homosexuality has occasionally been credited with some success. Something in the development went wrong during adolescence. Stuck in the immature phase of his or her development, undue mother fixation in Oedipal or pre-Oedipal complexes, fear of being deprived of the mother's breasts. Full maturity never took place.

Therapist Voice-over: Case notes: Kay Lahusen. Former Christian Scientist. Partner of Barbara Gittings. Born January 5, 1930, Cincinnati, Ohio. Spent the 1960s and '70s documenting the gay rights movement as a photojournalist.

Kay Lahusen: Oh, no, they're not sick, it's only an arrestation of development.

EM: A what? Arre—?

Barbara Gittings: Arre—arrestation of development.

EM: Isn't that nice?

BG: Yes, sure.

KL: An arrestation of psychosexual development.

BG: But that was on the assumption that everyone goes through a fixed set of stages. Whereas, in fact, those vary according to the individual. Many gay people go through a heterosexual stage in, in childhood and then mature to their own adult homosexuality.

But that didn't come along. That truth didn't appear for some time because, of course, the research was all being done in a cockeyed way. Instead of trying to find out, objectively, what causes homosexuality, a lot of the research was in the direction of what went wrong to produce homosexuality. And that's not the same question.

A classic example is the famous Bieber study, which had enormous impact on the general public, believe it or not. It was a study by a group of psychoanalysts. And they were medical psychoanalysts. This study was not even, uh, an attempt to get direct information from gay male patients. It was only gay men, not lesbians. It was the psychoanalysts recall of what their patients told them. So even that was not criticized. The Bieber study was so badly done from start to finish, and yet it did not attract the kind of criticism in the profession that it should have had.

They should have torn it to shreds. And with certain kinds of research, I'm sure they would be perfectly willing to sail into a shoddy piece of research like that and show it up for what it is. But, for some reason, because the subject was homosexuality...

KL: It advanced their, it advanced their economic cause. I mean, they...

BG: They wanted patients to save.

KL: That's how they could make money.

EM Narration: Act three: The Treatment.

Therapist Voice-over: Case notes: Elver Barker. Born in Newcastle, Wyoming, in 1920. A key member of the Mattachine Society in Denver, Colorado.

Elver Barker: I went to psychotherapists.

EM: What did they tell you?

EB: Four different ones.

EM: What did, what did they tell, what—well, first, what were you looking for and then what, what did they tell you?

EB: I had been converted to the falsehood that it was a mental illness. Up until my senior year in high school, I accepted myself as I was and was well-adjusted. Then when I began to read the literature that it was a mental illness, I thought, well, maybe I can get well. I can be heterosexual and have a family. It was the biggest mistake of my life. Then I, uh, read an article in *Reader's Digest* about Dr. Theodore R. Sarbin in Chicago, who was using hypnotherapy.

EM: For homosexuals?

EB: Yes. And I thought, well, I'll be hypnotized into a heterosexual. I planned my vacation and went to Chicago one hot summer and saw him every day for over a week, except Sunday. Well, he tried to change me, but he couldn't hypnotize me. When I felt myself going under, I thought, isn't this interesting? I'm being hypnotized. And that broke the spell, and he wasn't able to do it again. But nevertheless, he kept trying. He said, "It's a matter of relaxation, suggestion to the unconscious mind." And, uh, so it's different, there are different degrees of hypnosis, he explained. Well, that didn't do any good.

EM: Did you tell him what you were there for?

EB: Oh, yeah, sure.

EM: And what did he say?

EB: He was going to help me become heterosexual.

EM: Uh-huh.

EB: He made suggestions to me to, about sex with women and to try it, which I did once.

EM: And?

EB: With a lesbian at the University of Denver. And it was a total flop. We couldn't, we didn't magnetize one another. Total flop.

Therapist Voice-over: Case Notes: Joyce Hunter. Lesbian. Born in April 1939, the daughter of an unmarried teenaged Orthodox Jewish mother and an African American father. Grew up in a group home only to return to abuse in the home of her birth parents. Self-described butchy kid from the Bronx. Attempted suicide.

Joyce Hunter: I didn't know what it meant to be gay. I had no idea. I just thought I was this, this odd entity, you know? And, uh, all I heard when I was growing up in the '50s was really negative stuff. You were sick, you were a sinner. It scared the hell out of me. I thought that somebody was gonna come after me. And I definitely didn't want my parents to know. I was in a, in a situation that was pretty violent.

EM: At home.

JH: Uh, my father was very abusive, yeah. And, uh, so the homosexuality was a factor. The family situation was a factor. And, uh, and of course I didn't see any future. I didn't see, you know, how things could get better. I just thought they were going to get worse. Although I couldn't imagine it being worse. And, uh, I just thought it would be easier to be dead than to live.

My mother was, like, banging on the door and I stopped, and she took me to the hospital. They carted me off to a state hospital. And I was a kid, and so, um, and I think there were, there was questions about my sexuality.

I spent my 18th birthday in a state hospital.

EM: Not a happy 18th birthday. So you, but, so you saw a psychiatrist there then?

JH: Once.

EM: Once.

JH: Once. You served time there.

EM: Really?

JH: I swear to god, that's how it was to me. When I got there, I was fingerprinted. And they took a picture of you, so you look, it was like a mug shot. It was so dehumanizing, and so, and, and I felt like I had did something so terrible. They kept me there for, I was away for almost a year, I guess.

And, um, they had me talk to a psychiatrist, and then after that, periodically somebody would come and talk to me. And, I worked—basically, uh, you just work your way out of there.

I got real hep to what was going on there. And I didn't complain about anything—um, until after I did one crazy incident. I threw the food. I said, "This food is not fit for a dog," and I flung it. And, uh, they don't treat you too well when you do things like that. Give you shots in the butt and, you know, stuff like that.

When I got out, the follow-up was that I was to have, go for therapy. They didn't do any there—they just got a year's good work out of me. Wasted my time, wasted, just a waste of my time. Anyways, uh, so when I came out, I started seeing a therapist who told me, "If you get married, it'll go away."

EM: Did it go away?

JH: No. I was married one year, and then I met, I met this woman, my first adult lover, while I was married. And I fell in love with a woman, and I kept it a secret. I mean, I was so, so, the, the, I had never experienced any kind of feeling like that, ever. You know, not with no guy.

EM Narration: Act four: The Torture.

Therapist Voice-over: Billye Talmadge, case notes. Born in Missouri, December 7, 1929. Raised in Oklahoma. Worked as an elementary school teacher but had a double life as a secret lesbian activist, an early member of the Daughters of Bilitis homophile group. Claims she counseled other lesbians.

Billye Talmadge: At that point of time, we finally got homosexuality out of the criminal category and into the medical category. Then all of the medics jumped into it and wanted to cure them. See, a lot of people came to us with, really, you know—really disturbed people. Beyond the normal pale of, of, um, just being homosexual and trying to live with it back in the '40s and the '50s and the '60s. I mean, some of them that, that had, that had problems that homosexuality was just a minute little tiny part of the problem. And we were well aware of this.

And we tried for years to find a psychologist who would work with us, who would counsel some of these people. That we could say, "We can refer you to this person." Remember, there were not many women psychologists in those days. Hardly any women psychiatrists. And we interviewed several, and all of them men. And, uh...

EM: You say that with, with anger in your eyes.

BT: I am. Because two of them—we referred two people, and the first thing they did was try to cure them on the couch.

EM: On the couch?

BT: That's right. They attacked both women that we referred them to. And, uh...

EM: Not standard procedure, exactly.

BT: In any sense of the word. But in a sense, yes, it was. Because at that point of time, they were trying to cure homosexuality.

EM: Did you hear stories from, from women who came to DOB about that?

BT: Yeah. Yeah.

Morris Kight: These monsters did lobotomies, uh, aversive conditioning, behavioral modification. They provided anectine, succinylcholine, and, uh, mind-altering drugs. And, uh, did lobotomies. And electroconvulsive shock therapy. Imagine trying to burn out of your brain your love. Good grief. This is genocide.

EM: They'd have to kill me, uh...

MK: No, no, no. I don't know. Don't be so, don't be so bright. You might easily have given in to them.

EM: Oh. If someone applied electrodes to me, I'd say anything, probably.

MK: Yeah.

EM: Uh, you must have seen people who had been through that mill.

MK: One of my oldest counselees, one of my oldest living counselees, a very old man... I certainly would do nothing whatever to even vaguely identify who, where, or what state he's in. But he's a continuing counselee. Is a functioning, uh, honest, achieving adult. Badly, badly blunted. Because his family in, uh, in an Eastern state, uh, knowing of his homosexuality, mistook that for a sickness.

These are good people, by the way. Really good people. All I've interviewed him over the years tells me that they're good people. And they, uh, submitted him for electroconvulsive shock therapy conditioning. And two days a week he went to the state hospital, uh, for it. And the doctors were so crude, so crass, so unprofessional, such agents of torture, that they left the room door open where the previous patient was receiving his or her shock therapy.

And he observed their body convulsing and them screaming and vomiting, could see that through the door, and he was on a gurney waiting to be the next one going in. Uh, they burned out of him, uh, uh, some sensibility, some motor facility, but he's still homosexual. He's as homosexual as he ever was.

EM Narration: Imagine trying to burn out of your brain your love. Good grief. Psychiatrists who claimed the sickness label was a kindness to gay people—that it was better than being criminalized, better than being damned for all time—were willfully ignoring the fact that pathologizing homosexuality provided cover for those other forms of oppression, too. It legitimized the widespread victimization of gay people.

In the 1950s and '60s you could lose your home and your job if you were outed. Professionals like teachers, accountants, lawyers, and, yes, even psychiatrists could have their licences revoked. Landlords could evict gay tenants. You wouldn't want a sexual psychopath around, would you? It led families to seek out brutal and damaging treatments for their loved ones in a misguided effort to cure them. The sickness label seemed like an impossible trap to escape, because—at a time when mental illness was even more stigmatized than today—if you're crazy, why should anyone listen to you?

Barbara Gittings: The problem with the sickness label is that that supposedly is scientific and not subject to dispute. And therefore it's harder to move it. It's harder to make a chink, a dent in it, to get a, make a chink in it somewhere. Uh, and I'm delighted that it moved as fast as it did, although I will say we spent a lot of years fighting it.

EM Narration: Next time on *Making Gay History*, the fledgling gay rights movement sets its sights on toppling psychiatric orthodoxy. How a coalition of allies and activists worked from inside and outside of the American Psychiatric Association to depathologize homosexuality.

This *Making Gay History* miniseries was produced and written by *Making Gay History*'s founding editor, Sara Burningham, and Anne Pope. Anne also scored, mixed, and sound designed this episode. Tyler Albertario provided archival research support. Our studio engineers were Michael Bogner and Charles de Montebello at CDM Sound Studios.

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To learn more about the people and stories we've featured over the past seven years, please visit makinggayhistory.com where you'll find links to additional information, archival photos, as well as full transcripts for all our episodes.

I'm Eric Marcus. So long, until next time.

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