

## Freud's Influence on Gay Conversion Therapies in the Twentieth Century

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Homophobia has existed within Western societies for centuries, painting gay men as criminals, deviants, and sinners. However, it was not until the turn of the 20th century that homophobia started to run rampant within the field of medicine on the basis of pseudoscientific arguments. Much of this started with the birth of the field of psychoanalysis, which emerged due to Sigmund Freud's research on human psychology.<sup>1</sup> His writings sought to understand the foundations of the human psyche where he explored the unconscious motivations which develop due to life's experiences.<sup>2</sup> Much of his work focuses on the emotional attitudes held towards parents and the ways in which humans cope with love and loss.<sup>3</sup> However, Freud's work did not transfer well into the post-World War I and II period. The societal pressure for men to uphold traditional masculinity fueled anti-LGBTQ(Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, Queer) beliefs. Freud's research into the causes of homosexuality generated arguments that allowed physicians to characterize non-heterosexual identities as mental disorders. Within the writings of Freud, the fields of psychoanalysis and psychology justified their hostility towards LGBTQ people using a "scientific" basis throughout the 20th century, leading to the widespread popularity of conversion therapies.

Freud's theories on human sexuality utilize harmful rhetoric leaving room for its misuse and misinterpretation. In one of Freud's books on sexuality entitled, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," he explores the causes of human attraction. In his first essay, "The Sexual Aberrations," he states that "[t]he popular view of the sexual instinct is beautifully reflected in the poetic fable which tells how the original human beings were cut up into two halves—man and woman—and how these are always striving to unite again in love."<sup>4</sup> Freud understood that the society in which he lived viewed heterosexuality as the only morally correct form of sexual expression. Even with such a claim, afterward, he describes that an individual who identifies as homosexual is a "great surprise,"<sup>5</sup> which reinforces the idea that these specific people are "not normal." He further separates homosexuals from heterosexuals by stating that "people of this kind are described as having 'contrary sexual feelings,' or better, as being 'inverts.'"<sup>6</sup> The word invert means that there is some sort of sexual reversal from heterosexuality, the "norm." Within the first paragraph of "The Sexual Aberrations", Freud has already pushed homosexual people into a different category than heterosexuals via harmful labels.

Freud's description of homosexual people as "sexually immature" resulted in physicians believing that this characteristic was something that must be fixed. Freud believed that "adults who achieved sexual excitement by means other than penile-vaginal intercourse—fellatio or receptive anal sex, for example—suffered from either sexual fixations or regressions."<sup>7</sup> This idea

<sup>1</sup> "Who Was Sigmund Freud?" Freud Museum London, 2020, <https://www.freud.org.uk/education/resources/who-was-sigmund-freud/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Freud, Sigmund. Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume VII, 1901-1905, pp. 123-246.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, Sigmund. Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality. pp 136.

<sup>6</sup> Freud, Sigmund. Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality. pp 136.

<sup>7</sup> Drescher, Jack. "A History of Homosexuality and Organized Psychoanalysis." *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry* 36, no. 3, 2008. pp 443-60.

that homosexuals were mentally regressed created a harmful image that left dangerous room for conversion therapies to sprout. Along with this, “Freud saw these latter activities [non-heterosexual sex], heterosexual or homosexual, as expressions of immature sexuality and contrasted them with what he believed to be mature forms of genital, (hetero)sexual expression.”<sup>8</sup> According to Freud’s writings, homosexual people were expressing “immature sexuality,” which was interpreted as needing therapy so that they would be pushed into their full maturity. Due to Freud’s theories on the origins of sexuality, he directly created pseudo-scientific ideas that physicians used to justify the creation of conversion therapies.

Freud’s intention is not to depict homosexual people as mentally ill, rather, he believed that there was a way to convert sexualities. In a *Letter to an American Mother*, he states, “Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation; it cannot be classified as an illness.”<sup>9</sup> Freud believes there is nothing inherently wrong with those who identify differently than heterosexually, however, confusion may be created when he stated “we consider it [homosexuality] to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development.”<sup>10</sup> Although Freud may understand that there are no moral issues with having a different sexual identity, his description of homosexuality as an “arrest of sexual development” makes it seem that such individuals are mentally inferior to others. Later in his letter, when he explained the potential outcome of conversion therapy, Freud stated that “in a certain number of cases we succeed in developing the blighted germs of heterosexual tendencies which are present in every homosexual.”<sup>11</sup> The word “success” implies that conversion to heterosexuality is the most optimal outcome, not simply allowing an individual to express their own sexual identity. Freud also makes it appear that in certain homosexual people, there can also be heterosexual desires present, allowing justification for conversion. Although Freud seems to have no personal issue with people identifying differently than heterosexual, his rhetoric does not clarify this position and therefore allows anyone to take his quotes out of the context of his research and be used to uphold their homophobic agendas and ideas, which was what a homophobia-complacent society was eager to take.

Freud’s original research was misused by homophobes due to societal, rampaging toxic masculinity which forced men into rigid gender roles. Homophobia tends to exist in parallel during times when gender roles are being heavily enforced, such as during a period of war. Many of the men growing up during the early 20th century faced the realities of war-making society in which, “a boy child is socially categorized and raised with the expectation that when grown he may be called on to dominate and kill.”<sup>12</sup> In the 1950s after World War II, the pressure of a nuclear family where a union is strictly between a man and a woman informed much of the work of conservative psychologists at the time. Homosexual people did not fit into the nuclear family system, therefore psychologists used Freud’s previous arguments as a way to depict them as mentally ill.

Samuel B. Hadden was one of many conservative psychologists who misused Freud’s research in order to support the creation and use of conversion therapy. His techniques were developed with the works of Freud and previous psychologists in order to “cure” homosexuality.

<sup>8</sup> Drescher, “History of Homosexuality”. p. 446.

<sup>9</sup> Drescher, “History of Homosexuality”. p. 447.

<sup>10</sup> Freud, Sigmund, "Letter to an American Mother", *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 1951. p. 787.

<sup>11</sup> Freud, "American Mother". p. 787.

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson, Brian, “Masculinity and War,” *Current Anthropology* 62, no. S23, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1086/711622>.

He described his opinions of homosexuality in a Time Magazine article in 1971, where he stated “to me, there is no such thing as a homosexual. I regard homosexual activity and orientation as but a symptom in an individual who is maladjusted.”<sup>13</sup> Hadden’s views paralleled Freud’s as he believed that “symptoms” of homosexuality were caused by underdevelopment during childhood. However, where their opinions split was on the validity of their identity. Hadden was not supportive of people who identified as homosexual like Freud was, rather, he believed it was a mental disorder that needed to be cured.<sup>14</sup> While cherry-picking from Freud’s work, Hadden synthesized the argument that homosexuality developed a response to a child’s mistreatment throughout their childhood which led to pent-up aggression towards that specific sex.<sup>15</sup> In the case of a gay man, this would be from insecurity and a lack of meaningful relationships with his father.<sup>16</sup>

Hadden believed that the “cure” to homosexuality involved group therapy, wherein each member plays an important role. The therapist of the group “is a parent figure who provides reassurance and protection. He accords them all significance and tolerance and permits difference of opinions among the members as well as objections to his views and when hostility is expressed there is no retaliation.”<sup>17</sup> The therapist is intended to be the secure parent which Hadden believes many of these people do not have. This arises from Freud’s theory of the Oedipus Complex in which an individual has sexual attraction to the opposite sex parent. However, in the case of homosexuals, Hadden and Freud both believed that parental insecurity prevented them from developing that connection to the opposite sex. As for the rest of the group, they are intended to provide a type of pressure that influences the person to be ashamed of their sexual identity, however, Hadden describes it as a way to “find acceptance as they are and find themselves joined in a common cause in which they seek understanding of self and others.”<sup>18</sup> His sentiment appears to be in support of allowing LGBTQ individuals to express themselves freely, however, the purpose is the opposite, where they must repress their emotions. Hadden describes that “[The therapy group should] tease, encourage, they scold and even ridicule each other but there is no malice,”<sup>19</sup> which directly contradicts the idea that this is meant to be a safe and supportive community. Freud’s arguments were used in Hadden’s research and practice, therefore allowing him to justify group therapy to pressure the suppression of sexuality.

Robert Galbraith Heath’s research in the 1950s, which focused on the “treatment” of homosexuality through neuromodulation, also misused the work of Freud. Heath worked as a psychiatrist in a variety of institutions until he earned tenure at Tulane University where he was promised full academic freedom.<sup>20</sup> Within his work he focused on “research into the role of deep cortical brain regions and the biological basis of schizophrenia.”<sup>21</sup> However, his research pivoted once he started working with patient B-19. Heath’s diagnosis for patient B-19 included

<sup>13</sup> Hadden, Samuel B, "Group Psychotherapy in the Treatment of Homosexuality," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 38 : No. 3 , Article, 1971.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 150.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 151.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 152.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 155.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 156.

<sup>20</sup> O’Neal, Christen M., Cordell M. Baker, Chad A. Glenn, Andrew K. Conner, and Michael E. Sughrue. “Dr. Robert G. Heath: A Controversial Figure in the History of Deep Brain Stimulation.” *Neurosurgical Focus* 43, no. 3, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*.

“personality disorder with homosexual behavior and drug experimentation” and “temporal lobe dysfunction.”<sup>22</sup> In his reports, he wrote that the patient requested psychological treatment for homosexuality, however, other legal accounts suggest that B-19 was only sent a court order for his drug charges.<sup>23</sup> This means that Heath likely developed his own unauthorized trial on this patient, looking for a “cure” for his homosexuality. In regard to the treatment plan, he implanted electrodes in multiple locations throughout the brain that were known as “pleasure sites.”<sup>24</sup> While a current was sent through the electrodes, Heath would have B-19 watch heterosexual pornography.<sup>25</sup> This plan was developed with the accepted Freudian research which argued that homosexuality was caused by the movement of a positive association with a parent of the opposite sex to oneself. With Heath’s awareness of this “scientific” argument, he hoped that the treatment would develop a positive association with women in his brain. In hopes of further developing his heterosexual desires, he requested a court-ordered prostitute to come in and perform sexual acts with the patient. Heath claims that this caused the patient to change sexualities, however, this is entirely speculative.

Another product of Freud’s research on homosexuality was Charles W. Socarides, an American psychologist who studied the connection between childhood and sexuality. Socarides especially argued that homosexuality was psychosocial maladjustment that occurred during childhood. In his book *The Overt Homosexual*, he regurgitates all of Freud’s arguments strictly to support his own arguments. He never brings up the fact that Freud was actively against therapies to “cure” homosexuality, rather, brings up arguments in regard to homosexual people’s alleged immaturity and repressed sexual feelings.<sup>26</sup> Although he is writing almost sixty years later, his ideas still reflect those of Freud, therefore showing his permanence in the field of psychotherapy.

Freud’s impact on the field of psychology is prevalent throughout the twentieth century. His research on the causation of homosexuality set an example for the work that came after him, however, not in the way that he intended. Even though he was supportive of pro-LGBTQ legislation, his writings lacked positive rhetoric which, in hand, muddled its clarity. This allowed many psychologists to take his ideas out of the context of his writing, therefore bending them to support their own homophobic agendas in the relevance of their era. Freud provided these conservative researchers with a new “scientific” basis which allowed the medical field to support gay conversion therapy throughout the twentieth century.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Socarides, Charles W. *The Overt Homosexual*. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1968. p. 35.