



Hooker, Evelyn (1907-1996)

by Gordon Babst

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American psychologist Evelyn Hooker was not herself homosexual, but her pioneering studies on male homosexuality in the 1950s and 1960s challenged the "sickness" model of homosexuality then prevalent, and helped pave the way for the modern gay rights movement. She is a hero of the glbtq community for her maverick scholarship and advocacy.

She was born Evelyn Gentry on September 2, 1907, in North Platte, Nebraska, and grew up in Colorado. After earning her B. A. at the University of Colorado, she earned her doctorate at the Johns Hopkins University in 1932.

After brief teaching assignments at the Maryland College for Women and Whittier College in California, Hooker accepted a position as research associate in experimental and physiological psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she would spend the rest of her career.

At UCLA, she married her second husband, Edward Hooker, an English professor, in 1951. He died in 1957.

At UCLA, she also became friends with several gay men, who in turn introduced her and her husband to other gay men, among whom were people from a wide variety of professions and backgrounds, including professors, writers, engineers, artists, salesmen, and others.

One of these friends, Sam Fromm, who had been one of her students, urged her to study a nonclinical population of homosexuals. "It is your scientific duty," he told her, "to study people like us, homosexuals who function very well and don't go to psychiatrists." Hooker's neighbor and friend, writer Christopher Isherwood, also encouraged her and provided further entree into Los Angeles's gay male community.

Taking her friends' advice, Hooker devoted herself to the study of stable, occupationally successful homosexuals. In 1954, she received a grant from the National Institute for Mental Health, which led to a breakthrough study, published in 1957.

This study, featuring empirical research on non-clinical gay males, was the first of its kind. It called into question the diagnoses of adjustment disorders in homosexual persons, as well as the objectivity of social scientists.

Hooker's friends had dared her to subject them to the standard psychological exams so as to determine whether conventional wisdom regarding the degeneracy of homosexuality was true. She administered three personality tests, including the Rorschach ink-blot test, to thirty pairs of men--one homosexual, one not--matched by IQ level, age, and other factors. These tests were accepted by the community of medical and mental health professionals as indicating the presence of emotional and mental disorders. Presumably, homosexual persons would be easy to differentiate owing to the presence of pathology.

Hooker turned the results of the tests over to a panel of three prominent experts, asking them to diagnose

which of the sixty men had a psychiatric disorder, as revealed by the test. She further asked these experts to determine which of the men in each pair was homosexual, not having indicated beforehand that any might be, or the ulterior motive behind this research. The experts concluded that the gay males were no worse, and sometimes better adjusted than the rest, and proved unable to identify correctly the gay male in each pair.

On its face, this research suggested that the assumption that homosexuals were necessarily psychiatrically disordered is erroneous; what is more, it suggested that such diagnoses of disorder may be based not on objective fact, but, instead, may be grounded in popular stereotype.

Hooker concluded from her research that the patterns of homosexuality are as varied and as complex as those of heterosexuality, and that one cannot assume that homosexuals can be easily distinguished from heterosexuals on the basis of emotional and psychological adjustment.

In her 1957 essay she offered the following summation of her research findings: "[W]hat is difficult to accept (for most clinicians) is that some homosexuals *may* be very ordinary individuals, indistinguishable, except in sexual pattern, from ordinary individuals who are heterosexual. Or--and I do not know whether this would be more or less difficult to accept--that some *may* be quite superior individuals, not only devoid of pathology but also functioning at a superior level."

The results of this and subsequent research studies by Hooker and an expanding pool of colleagues was controversial and was vigorously challenged, especially by psychiatrists who had a great deal invested in the sickness theories of homosexuality. Freudian psychanalysts such as Irving Bieber and Charles W. Socarides in particular attacked her conclusions because her work implicitly questioned the credibility of psychoanalysis.

But Hooker's position prevailed and eventually became the accepted scientific view. The ultimate significance of this body of research is that it undercuts any attempt to ground a pathology specific to homosexual persons in objective social science.

At the height of her career, Hooker was appointed the Chair of the National Institute of Mental Health's Task Force on Homosexuality in 1967, which issued a major report in 1969. This report, which was severely critical of attempts to "treat" homosexuality, placed great emphasis on the need to end social discrimination against homosexuals. It ultimately led to the rescinding of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders* in 1973, a move followed by the American Psychological Association in 1975.

Hooker retired from UCLA in 1970. She continued in private practice in Santa Monica for some years after her retirement. She died on November 18, 1996, in Los Angeles.

In her last years, Hooker was recognized by gay men and lesbians for the work she did in lifting the stigma of mental illness from them. Richard Schmeichen's acclaimed documentary, *Changing Our Minds: The Story of Dr. Evelyn Hooker* (1991), helped bring her contributions to a wider public.

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