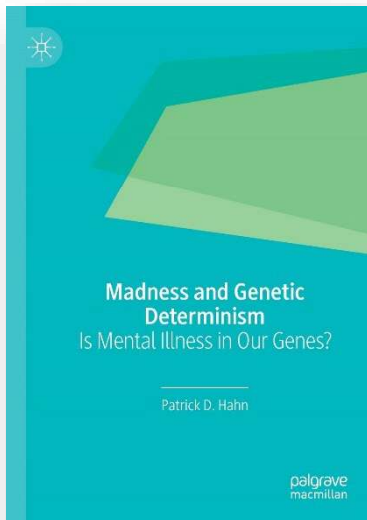




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## ***Madness and genetic determinism: Is mental illness in our genes?***

**Patrick D. Hahn**

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### **Review by Kevin Hans Waitkuweit, first published online 27 November 2023.**

Patrick Hahn's *Madness and Genetic Determinism* provides a compelling view of genetics in medicine through several historical and contemporary case studies. His argument outlines the connection between genetics and mental illness/differences: particularly schizophrenia. In a past review of Hahn's monograph, Colin Ross (2020)<sup>459</sup> points to the book's value to readers interested in the intersection of genetics and schizophrenia.

Hahn explores the complicated connections between heredity and mental illness. Using schizophrenia as a case study, he outlines how the arguments for genetic and biological heredity of schizophrenia result in two potential outcomes: either multiple mental illnesses have genetic/biological origins, or another factor is the cause. To prove his point, Hahn provides a robust narrative of the socio-historical complexities that encompass the integration of genetics as a mainstay for psychiatric discussions of schizophrenia.

Through discussing the history of genetics *Madness and Genetic Determinism* does a wonderful job of incorporating the social elements that impact mental illnesses like schizophrenia such as the importance of social environmental factors to the formation of mental strains as well as the socio-historical factors of psychiatry that still inform the nature of how schizophrenia is viewed in contemporary psychiatric discourse.

Tracing early work on mental illness in American psychiatry to European researchers, Hahn intertwines the complex story of medicine with the individuals involved in particular case studies that came to inform psychiatric conceptualizations of schizophrenia. His argument throughout the monograph provides a much-needed critique to the absolutism of diagnostics and offers tools for readers to take a critical reflection on the complexities that exist around psychiatry and genetics as they relate to schizophrenia. In reading *Madness and Genetic Determinism* Hahn provides a

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<sup>459</sup> Colin A. Ross (2020) Madness and genetic determinism. Is mental illness in our genes?, *Psychosis*, 12:3, 300-301, DOI: 10.1080/17522439.2019.1700300



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clear and valid critique of psychiatry through the socio-historical narrative of genetics as it is applied to schizophrenia. The holistic approach Hahn takes shows great care and offers a template for other scholars interested in researching the complexity of medical diagnostics.

Hahn's stance is one that would find some connections with the concerns voiced through the anti-psychiatry movement and provides an expansion to the works of scholars such as Thomas Szasz. Similar to Szasz, the work of *Madness and Genetic Determinism* is not a condemnation of psychiatric discussions around mental illness but a concern around the need to understand how social factors function within the diagnosis and employment of psychiatric means to address the needs of those with mental illness, like individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Hahn (2019) stresses the importance of the social applications of psychiatry, describing how:

"More than forty years ago, psychiatrist Thomas Szasz noted that in other branches of medicine, a diagnosis is an explanation for what has happened to a patient. In psychiatry, 'schizophrenia' and other diagnostic labels are a justification for doing something to a patient. That, too, has not changed" (p. 156).

The concern around diagnostic labels elucidates how a medical system can become intertwined with a patient's existence. The emphasis on social concern, is noted in the concluding paragraphs of Hahn's work, where Hahn (2019) asks psychiatry experts "[w]hat has the field of psychiatric genetics contributed to mankind?" (p.165). The responses offered a varied discussion of the complexities that exist and the problems that psychiatry has caused in the world today. These quotes, especially those related to the history of psychiatric genetics provide a coda to the historical undertakings of Hahn's monograph.

*Madness and Genetic Determinism* is in essence a historiography of the interconnectedness between genetics and mental illness. The work demonstrates the importance of understanding social and historical factors that influence the realities of diagnoses. From connecting the history of genetics in the United States with eugenics and Nazi views on mental illness, to the recognition of the highly personal nature that such medical diagnostics has on the individuals themselves, Hahn's work offers a prime example of how individualistic and social factors are interconnected in the ways in which mental illness is understood in contemporary US society.

Hahn's view is one that recognizes the ever-growing nature of genetics in discussions of diagnostics. Where Szasz famously contested the existence of mental illness throughout his career,<sup>460</sup> Hahn provides a more nuanced approach. In concluding his treatise on schizophrenia and genetics, Hahn's focuses on the sobering reality that psychiatrics and genetics are complicatedly interconnected. His implications from his research emphasize the toll of psychiatry on those diagnosed with schizophrenia as well as the social impact of deterministic views in psychiatric treatment. Ultimately, any reader interested in learning more about the complicated relationship between genetics and schizophrenia would benefit greatly from reading *Madness and Genetic Determinism*. This text would be beneficial to readers and scholars interested in psychiatry, disability studies, medical anthropology, medical history, and medical sociology.

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<sup>460</sup> Benning T. B. (2016). No such thing as mental illness? Critical reflections on the major ideas and legacy of

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