

“Reparative Therapy” and the Ex-Gay Movement

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In the past two decades proponents of “reparative therapy” have claimed that gays and lesbians can be converted to heterosexuals through a combination of psychoanalytic therapies and adoption of Christian fundamentalist principles. This research summary presents an overview of 1) the origins of reparative therapy and the ex-gay movement; 2) the results of pertinent scientific studies designed to assess the efficacy of reparative therapy as a means to change sexual orientation.

Origins of Reparative Therapy

In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. Other American and European mainstream professional psychological and medical organizations soon followed suit. Additionally, these professional bodies have considered numerous scientific studies conducted over the past 30 years and come out as strong advocates for LGBT equality in regards to same-sex marriage, parenting, and employment protections.

The 1973 ruling by the American Psychiatric Association essentially nullified the psychoanalytical theory of homosexuality that had guided several decades of “conversion therapy” for homosexuals but had produced poor results. In short, the psychoanalytic theory held that homosexuality (mainly male homosexuality) was the result of bad parenting: an emotionally distant father and a domineering mother were seen to influence the core identity and sexual drives of their sons. A grown man’s desire for sex with other men was explained as “reparative,” meaning it represented the psyche’s disordered attempt to repair itself by bonding with other men in inappropriate ways. The theory was postulated by Sigmund Freud and his disciples and was not based on empirical research and was essentially un-provable. Freud’s theory of homosexuality is now seen by mental health professionals simply as a starting point for discussion regarding the nature of sexuality.

Unhappy with the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness in the 1970s, Christian fundamentalists resurrected the early doctrines of psychoanalysis as a means to “convert” homosexuals into heterosexuals. Christian-based organizations such as Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, and Americans For Truth routinely incorporate Freudian notions of the damaged inner psyche as the root cause for sinful homosexuality [See 1, 2]. Offshoots of these groups, such as “Exodus,” and “Love Won Out” organize therapy sessions and summer camps for men and women who want to get rid of their “same sex attractions.” Therapy sessions typically consist of “patients” reconstructing their childhoods in order to link traumatic experiences to the development of their same-sex attractions. Camp activities include instruction of gender-appropriate behaviors for boys and girls. A lone, “secular” ex-gay organization called the National Association for the Research and Treatment of Homosexuality (NARTH) considers itself a neutral, scientific agency even though it maintains many affiliations with the Christian groups.

Ex-gay groups routinely advertise and promote themselves as having high “success” rates, indicating that through Christian-based psychoanalytic counseling “thousands have walked away from homosexuality.” Aside from the fact that the groups have not been able or

willing to provide any empirical evidence supporting their success claims, a close look at what defines “walking away from homosexuality” reveals something very different from actual shifts in sexual orientation from gay to straight. Typically, success in reparative therapy is measured by getting gays and lesbians to renounce their homosexuality as sinful and accept Jesus Christ. In the published research studies measuring the efficacy of reparative therapy, the majority of respondents report that their homosexual desires remain intact, even though some pursue sexual relationships with members of the opposite sex.

What motivates gays and lesbians to try reparative therapy? It should be noted that reparative therapy clients are not the typical, adjusted gays and lesbians who have accepted their sexuality and are concerned with the everyday issues of relationships, family, and careers. Rather, ex-gay programs tend to attract disturbed individuals that wish to locate the source of their problems on their sexuality. After researching the ex-gay phenomena in Florida for *Psychology Today*, the investigator Barry Yeoman wrote:

Just who tries to change? No the average gay man or woman. Would be converts, say psychologists, typically come from deeply authoritarian backgrounds where homosexuality is branded immoral or a sin, while others are married and cannot reconcile their family commitments with their erotic desires. Many are also facing tremendous problems, including alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual abuse and parental violence or rejection.

Yeoman explains that when participants of ex-gay programs report benefits, it may simply be because they have begun to address core issues of dysfunction:

It should come as no surprise, then, when ex-gays express satisfaction about getting their homosexuality ‘under control.’ Faced with a panoply of problems, many have acted out sexually, seeking encounters to ease their pain. By dealing with core issues, conversion programs put the brakes on destructive sexual and social behavior. But, as psychologists point out, this has nothing inherently to do with homosexuality [3].

In the past decade, several scandals have tarnished the image of the ex-gay movement. Leaders of ex-gay ministries have been known to fall in love with each other, accept their homosexuality, and denounce the idea of conversion therapy. Charles Socarides, the orthodox psychoanalyst who collaborated with NARTH and argued that male homosexuality was the result of inadequate fathering, was surprised when his son came out of the closet and became an advocate for gay rights. John Paulk became Focus on the Family’s prime example when he appeared with his wife on the cover of Newsweek in the late 1990s, proclaiming that he had changed his sexual orientation. He was relieved of his duties at Focus on the Family when he was discovered in a gay bar in Washington, D.C. several years later. More recently, Michael Johnston, an HIV positive man who appeared in a video alongside his mother claiming that he had become heterosexual through the love of Jesus Christ, was recently discovered to be cruising gay internet chat rooms and organizing unsafe sex parties between men [see 4 for an extensive chronology of these cases and others]. Finally, the recent revelations of pastor Ted Haggard’s solicitation of a male prostitute drew wide scorn as he had been at the forefront of

homophobic preaching and an advocate for changing sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. A growing network of “ex ex-gay” men and women who put time and money into the conversion programs and now claim that they were lied to and treated unethically has begun to emerge [see

5]. In spite of multiple and continuous examples of high-profile “relapses” advocates for reparative therapy continue to proclaim that what they do is effective.

Scientific Research on Reparative Therapy: The Spitzer Study

The ex-gay movement has been around since the late 1970s, but the first peer reviewed article based on a scientific study of reparative therapy was published by Robert Spitzer, a psychiatrist, in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* in 2003. The publishing of the article was so controversial that a member of the association sponsoring the journal resigned in protest. For the study, Dr. Spitzer conducted telephone interviews with 143 “ex-gays” and 57 “ex-lesbians” who had reported that they had become “straight” through involvement with counseling and/or ex-gay ministries. Each study participant was administered a 45 minute phone interview during which they were asked questions regarding their behavior and feelings prior to and after their conversion experiences. The major findings of the study are reported as follows:

- 86% of the men and 63% of the women admitted that they still harbored attractions to members of their own sex.
- Sixteen (11%) of the men and 21 (37%) of the women reported having successfully converted to a heterosexual orientation.
- (66%) of the males and (44%) of the females reported good, heterosexual functioning. This meant that they said that they found sexual and emotional satisfaction with a partner of the opposite sex satisfying, having sex at least monthly, and rarely or never thinking about someone of the same sex during heterosexual sex.
- 112 of the men reported that they masturbated and more than half of this group reported masturbating to homosexual fantasies [cited in 6].
- These results of this study were heralded by conservative religious groups as hard evidence that homosexuality is a choice and that a person can change his or her sexual orientation through counseling and/or ministry. The mental health profession, however, was not impressed due to the numerous flaws in the design of the research and the study was widely criticized:
- The results of the study indicate that the majority of participants had not changed their sexual orientation, but continued to struggle against same-sex desires.
- Of the small minority of participants who reported a heterosexual shift, and the marker for this shift was low: self-reported sexual behavior with an opposite-sex partner at least *once a month*.

- The study did not account for bisexuality at all.
- The study was not longitudinal, meaning that participants were not interviewed over a span of time to assess changes in attitudes and behavior.
- Nearly half of the participant sample (N=86) was hand selected by Christian ex-gay ministries, and NARTH referred an additional 46 [7]. This resulted in a biased sample as many of these individuals still maintained ties to the organizations and may well have been in a “honeymoon” phase of their conversion therapy.

The Spitzer study was conducted several years before it was finally published and this was due to the fact that many mental health professionals simply felt it was too flawed to be taken seriously. After the results of the study were made public at a conference in 2000, Lawrence Hartman, the then president of the American Psychiatric Association made a statement that was reported in the *Washington Post*:

Hartmann noted the study was retrospective, that it lacked controls or independent measurements, and was based entirely on self-reports by people who were motivated to say they had changed because of their affiliation with ex-gay or anti-gay groups [cited in 8].

The fact that ex-gay groups continue to publicize the Spitzer study indicates another level of hypocrisy related to the scientific research and the Christian right wing. Ironically, since the announcement of his findings, Dr. Spitzer has taken steps to remove himself from the conservative Christian right wing [9, as an example]. He has reported that he believes that only a small minority of the homosexual population – perhaps 3% – may have a malleable orientation but for everyone else change would be quite unusual. A *Washington Post* article reported him saying:

It bothers me to be their knight in shining armor because on every social issue I totally disagree with the Christian right...What they don't mention is that change is pretty rare [cited in 10].

Scientific Research on Reparative Therapy: The Shidio and Schroeder Study

In 2002 another study of ex-gays was conducted by the researchers Shidio and Schroeder.

For this study a wide net was cast to recruit 202 individuals who had received either reparative therapy from a mental health provider or from a Christian ministry or both. Study participants were recruited through both the gay and the non-gay press as well as through direct mailings to gay and ex-gay organizations. Unlike the Spitzer study, which relied on a single telephone interview with respondents (many that had been handpicked by ex-gay organizations); the Shidio and Schroeder study aimed to assess the impact of reparative therapy over the *long term*

by conducting multiple interviews over time. This longitudinal approach afforded study participants the opportunity to assess their sexual orientation some time after completing the reparative therapy.

For this study male participants numbered 182 (90%) and female participants numbered 20 (10%). The mean age was 40 years. In terms of religiosity, 133 participants (66%) reported that they were religious and 49 participants (24%) considered themselves to be nonreligious.

The major findings of the study are as follows:

- The majority of the 202 participants went through a “honeymoon” phase followed by disillusionment. This means that the initial process of reparative therapy provided a sense of relief and support to the participants as they felt free to be open about their sexual desires and felt good that they were in programs designed to change their feelings.
- The honeymoon frequently ended: 176 (87%) of study participants reported that the reparative therapy had failed and they still considered themselves to be homosexual.
- The remaining 26 (13%) reported that the reparative therapy had been successful, *however*, this did not mean that they still did were not attracted to members of their own sex:
 - 12 of the 26 “successful” participants reported that they still struggled with same-sex attraction. They reported “success” because they had managed to abstain from same-sex practices for given lengths of time.
 - 6 of the 26 “successful” participants reported they were not struggling, but 3 of these were celibate and the remaining 3 refused to report their sexual identity one way or the other.
 - 8 of the 26 “successful” participants reported making a shift in orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. This shift was characterized by self-reported sexual involvement with a member of the opposite sex and abstention from sexual involvement with members of the same sex. What was more interesting about this group is that two of these respondents refused the final follow-up interview, narrowing down the number of heterosexual shift participants that completed the study to 6. All of these 6 individuals were actually providers of ex-gay counseling and 4 of them were getting paid for it. This finding supports the idea that many “successful” conversion cases may have extra motives for reporting successful conversion.

Shidio and Schroeder also noted that many of the treating therapists involved behaved unethically by misleading participants about the position of the American Psychology Association regarding conversion therapy and about the actual success rates of the practice.

They also provide guidelines for the therapists who end up treating the numerous failed “ex-gays,” claiming that the conversion process can potentially be extremely psychologically damaging [see 11 for report of entire study].

Public Figures and Ex-gay Therapy

As the years pass the ex-gay movement has continued to lose steam due to an increasing number of well-known public figures whose actions have shed light on efficacy of reparative therapy. John Paulk and Michael Johnston, for example, were both highly publicized examples of the success of reparative therapy: Both denounced homosexuality and claimed they been converted to heterosexuals. John Paulk, however, was later discovered patronizing a gay bar and Michael Johnston was found to be active within an online gay sex chat. The sensationalized Ted Haggard scandal is ongoing: After it was discovered in 2006 that he had solicited services from a male prostitute, the virulently anti-gay Haggard lost his pastor position at the mega New Life Church. He then moved to Arizona to emerge himself in reparative therapy and later announced that he was completely heterosexual. In January of 2009 Haggard resurfaced on the talk show circuit, still married to his wife but basically admitting now that his sexuality is complicated and that he continues to have thoughts (although not “compelling” ones) about men. [12].

Utilizing an Informed Approach: What Everyone Needs to Know About “Reparative Therapy”:

- “Reparative Therapy” as it is practiced today is a hybrid of two doctrinal ideologies: early psychoanalysis and fundamentalist Christianity. Both doctrines are inherently biased against homosexuality and the theory and practice behind reparative therapy are unproven and unrecognized by the legitimate medical and psychological associations.
- Leaders of the “ex-gay” movement have falsely claimed that “thousands of people” have shifted their orientation from homosexual to heterosexual through reparative therapy. When looked for, however, these “thousands” of people are difficult to find and the majority of the few hundred people that came forth to participate in research studies reported that they still had same-sex desires even after finishing their “therapy.”
- Ex-gay ministries tend to attract men and women who come from authoritarian, religious backgrounds and who have multiple concerns to deal with, including trauma, substance abuse, and mental health issues. In the course of their “therapy” these issues are explored and people feel a sense of relief but this process has not been sufficiently shown to alter sexual orientation.
- The Ex-gay movement has been beset by scandals involving poster-boy success stories such as John Paulk, Michael Johnston and others who publicly denounced homosexuality and claimed they had been converted to heterosexuals but were later discovered to be patronizing gay bars and/or gay sex chat rooms.
- The ex-gay movement bases the credibility of reparative therapy on a single study conducted by Robert Spitzer, MD, that mainly reported that gay men and women were able to prevent themselves from acting out on homosexual desires. The study was widely criticized by mental

health professionals and is not considered to be evidence that homosexuals can or should change their sexual orientation. Dr. Spitzer himself has distanced himself from the interpretation of his study by the religious right as he feels it is an inaccurate assessment of the study results.

- A separate study by Shidio and Schroeder demonstrated the need for longitudinal study designs to assess results of reparative therapy. Shidio and Schroeder conducted a series of interviews with participants of ex-gay programs over an extended period of time. This process allowed for the identification of a “honeymoon” period during which participants felt that the therapy was working and they were happy that they were finally getting treatment. This period was often followed by severe disillusionment as participants realized that their same-sex feelings had not gone away.
- Of the 6 participants (out of 202) of the Shidio and Schroeder study that reported heterosexual shift, all were still affiliated with ex-gay ministries and 4 of these were being paid for working for these ministries. This finding suggests that these 6 individuals may well have had an above average motivation for reporting a heterosexual shift.

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