Reparative therapy: harm or help?

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In recent times, homosexual activists in NSW and elsewhere have sought to ban any treatment or counselling by psychiatrists or others to help people who wish to change their sexual orientation.

There is evidence on the public record that properly conducted reparative therapy has helped many men and teens. They sought therapy because they wanted to marry a woman and have children naturally or because they did not want the significant physical and emotional health risks associated with the homosexual lifestyle. People have even sought therapy in the Netherlands, where homosexuality carries no stigma.

The wellbeing of those seeking freedom from same-sex attractions has been put at risk by a political campaign that is distorting the truth.

Can a person's sexuality change?

Overseas studies have shown that significant numbers of younger people change their sexual orientation over several years – mostly without therapy. These studies show clearly that sexual orientation can be a fluid condition. Change is certainly possible for some people.

A 1997 study of Dutch adult males found that, of those who had experienced same-sex attraction at some stage of their lives, about half reported that those feelings disappeared later.[1]

A New Zealand study found that one half of females and one third of males with occasional same-sex attraction at 21 years had only opposite-sex attraction at 26 years.[2]

Sexual attraction is particularly unstable in adolescents. US longitudinal research on adolescent health, using large scale surveys of 16, 17 and 22 year olds, revealed major changes in romantic attraction and sexual behaviour between those ages.[3] Of the boys who identified at 16 years as same-sex attracted, 72% were opposite-sex attracted by the age of 22 years – they had "discovered" girls. And of the same-sex attracted girls at 16 years, 55% were opposite-sex attracted by age 22.

Therefore, the common claim that sexual orientation is fixed and unchangeable is a myth.

Ethical responsibilities of psychologists

Psychologists generally understand the main principles of modern therapeutic practice. Client autonomy (or self-determination) is one, and informed consent is another.

In the leading academic journal *Psychotherapy*, and again in the *American Journal of Family Therapy*, Dr Mark Yarhouse of Regent University argues:

"Psychologists have an ethical responsibility to allow individuals to pursue treatment aimed at curbing experiences of same-sex attraction ... not only because it affirms the clients' right to dignity, autonomy and agency ... but also because it demonstrates regard for diversity."[4]

What is 'reparative therapy'?

Reparative therapy has become widely known since the 1990s through the work of US psychotherapist Dr Joseph Nicolosi.

- It is a "talking therapy" and doesn't involve electric shocks.
- It does not involve repressing sexual feelings, nor any kind of "trying" to be interested in the opposite sex.

Rather, patients who seek this therapy are encouraged to learn to connect with men as brothers, along with developing an unconditional self-acceptance. If and when changes in sexual orientation occur, they flow naturally as a consequence of overcoming shame issues around men, and feelings of "not fitting in" with men and one's place in their world as equals.[5]

Is reparative therapy harmful?

Despite claims cited by Sydney Independent MP Alex Greenwich and others,[6] there is no valid research showing that reparative therapy causes harm. A 2002 study by Shidlo and Schroeder,[7] purporting to show such harm, was biased from the start.

The researchers recruited subjects by urging: "Help us document the damage of homophobic therapies"! Of around 200 men in this study, 23 said they had tried to kill themselves during their therapy, and 11 tried to do so after finishing therapy.

But the study did not prove that reparative therapy caused these serious consequences. No fewer than 25 participants had already attempted suicide before undergoing the therapy. A significant proportion of these men were psychologically very unstable.[8]

Indeed, *all* forms of therapy for *any* psychological condition carry some degree of risk of negative experiences. Extensive research has shown that 5-10% of adult clients across all forms of psychotherapy are worse after treatment and that higher deterioration rates – sometimes exceeding 20% – have been reported for children and adolescents in psychotherapy.[9, 10,11]

Thus researchers would need to demonstrate reparative therapy deterioration rates significantly beyond 10% for adults and 20% for youth in order to substantiate harm. No such research exists.[12]

The American Psychological Association (APA) commissioned a task force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE). The task force presented its report in 2009. It set out its methodology regarding the assessment of harm as follows:

Based on Lilienfeld's (2007) comprehensive review of the issue of harm in psychotherapy, our systematic review examines harm in the following ways:

- *Negative side effects of treatment (iatrogenic effects)*
- *Client reports of perceptions of harm from treatment*
- *High drop-out rates*
- *Indirect harm such as the costs (time, energy, money) of ineffective intervention*

The task force had been strongly criticised for its unbalanced composition

'Gay' gene myth

Human behaviour is complex. Humans are not robots. There is no single gene governing sexual preference or any other preference.

Researchers Bearman and Bruckner at Columbia and Yale Universities comment that "neither genes, nor hormones, nor specific social situations determine sexual behaviour by themselves. Rather, the extent to which same-sex and opposite-sex desires are expressed in the individual is seen to be a complex interplay of biological, social and situational factors."[28]

Several large scale twin studies have addressed the question of same-sex attraction: Bailey (2000),[29] Långström (2010)[30] and Burri (2011).[31] They have explored the influences of genes, family and unique life experiences.

All three studies found that the dominant influence on same-sex attraction is not genes, but unique life experiences – with estimates of such influences ranging from about 55% to 75%.

Homosexuals are not born that way – to suggest otherwise is a cruel lie.

– its membership only included those who subscribed to the view that SOCE were not "appropriate".

Nevertheless, the APA task force concluded that there was "a dearth of scientifically sound research on the safety of SOCE. Early and recent research studies provide no clear indication of the prevalence of harmful outcomes among people who have undergone efforts to change their sexual orientation or the frequency of occurrence of harm because no study to date of adequate scientific rigor has been explicitly designed to do so. Thus, we cannot conclude how likely it is that harm will occur from SOCE."[13]

Jones and Yarhouse say: "We found little evidence of harm incurred as a result of the involvement of the participants in the Exodus change process. These findings would appear to contradict the commonly expressed view of the mental health establishment that change of sexual orientation is impossible and that the attempt to change is highly likely to produce harm for those who make such an attempt."[14]

Valid research does not support claims that reparative therapy causes harm. The campaign against reparative therapy is driven not by evidence but by ideology.

Is reparative therapy beneficial?

Despite claims to the contrary by Alex Greenwich and others, many studies do show the benefits of reparative therapy for those who have sought it voluntarily, without pressure from family or church.

Dr Robert Spitzer was the leading psychiatrist involved in persuading the American Psychiatric Association to stop classifying homosexuality as a mental disorder in its diagnostic manual in 1973.

So Spitzer caused a huge sensation in 2001 when he presented research showing that it was possible for some homosexual men and lesbians to change their orientation. In 2003 his study was published in a peer-reviewed journal, and reported the high satisfaction rate of the majority of reparative therapy participants.[15]

But in 2005 Spitzer reported that many of his colleagues were outraged by the publication of his research. There was tremendous anger in the homosexual community, which felt he had betrayed them by his "wrong" conclusions. Spitzer said he was suffering "battle fatigue" from the controversy.[16]

By 2012 his battle fatigue had grown to the point where Spitzer contacted his publisher to apologise for his earlier interpretation of his results.[17]

Nevertheless, Spitzer's study stands. It did not falsify data, nor did it analyse them incorrectly. Some critics have argued that since his research was carried out retrospectively, its results could be skewed by inaccurate memories of participants. But if all such data are deemed invalid, a great many studies would have to be discarded – including the Shidlo and Schroeder study mentioned earlier.

Dr Spitzer's experience of continued harassment and persecution, merely because his research results did not please the homosexual community, would have had a chilling effect on others thinking of investigating similar areas.

A longitudinal study by Jones and Yarhouse found "empirical evidence that change of homosexual orientation may be possible through involvement in Exodus ministries, either in the form of an embrace of chastity with a reduction in prominence of homosexual desire, or in the form of a diminishing of homosexual attraction and an increase in heterosexual attraction with resulting satisfactory heterosexual adjustment.

"These latter individuals regard themselves as having changed their sexual orientation; the former regard themselves as having re-established their sexual identities to be defined in some way other than by

Simon: my experience of reparative therapy

"When I feel the connectedness to other men in terms of mutually expressed non-sexual affections – which I missed as a boy – I feel masculine inside and lose my sexual inclinations towards men. Reparative Therapy has provided me with real hope ..."

Reparative Therapy (RT) is often used in a general sense to describe any attempt to reduce same-sex attraction, but RT itself is a specific type of therapy.

Given the many popular views propagated by the media, which often gravely distort or exaggerate what is actually involved, I thought it might be helpful if I say what this therapy is, and what it is not.

All my sessions were conducted by telephone. The therapist explores with the client their "body states" experienced in connection with particular feelings being felt.

One of the main "body states" the therapist looked at with me, was when feelings of shame were felt in the body and how this was symptomatic of not being in an emotionally assertive and relaxed state that naturally embodies my masculinity.

What made me want to receive Reparative Therapy (RT)?

The therapy was not religious in any way. However, the therapist was happy to hear me discuss aspects of my Christian faith as and when they arose. I entered therapy hoping to develop my heterosexual potential. My same-sex attractions began in early adolescence, but I did not want to practise homosexuality. I also knew that there were a number of markers in my upbringing that I believe led to my homosexual feelings in the first place.

Books on RT read like my biography. So RT felt like the most natural and desirable course, offering me the prospect of letting go of homosexuality that brought me huge unhappiness.

Before RT, I rarely felt able to expose my vulnerabilities with men. RT helped me realise that I wasn't getting my legitimate (non-sexual) needs met, because of my barrier of shame. Dealing with it through RT helped me find freedom from the compulsive sexual yearnings for men. As I learnt to connect with once-feared men, I was amazed to find that they also reached out to me and my attractions weakened.

RT has provided me with real hope, and has demystified the issue of my needs around my male peers. I am not "different" from other men, but their equal.[25]

The 'gay' song that came second

At the 2009 San Remo Music Festival in Italy, it was the runner-up song rather than the winner which hit the headlines.

The number two song was "Luca era gay" (*Luke was once gay*) – soft rap with dramatic tunes written and performed by Italian pop star Guiseppe Povia who had won the San Remo contest in 2006. The words tell the true story of Luca di Tolve, a young man who once was a homosexual but is now a happily married father.[26]

Guiseppe Povia nearly didn't make the competition in February. Homosexual activists claimed that Luca's story was a lie and "homophobic". They organised an internet Facebook campaign to ban the song. Vittorio Agnoleto, an Italian member of the European Parliament, sought a parliamentary resolution to stop Povia's performance. A militant homosexual group called *ARCIgay* threatened to disrupt the festival.

Guiseppe Povia was not deterred, even by death threats. On 17 February he braved the *ARCIgay* protest banners outside the San Remo theatre, but his troubles were not over. Immediately before he was due to perform, Italian comedian Roberto Benigni presented a 20 minute show condemning Povia. After Povia sang, the MC gave the microphone to Franco Grillini, former president of *ARCIgay* – who also denounced Povia.[27]

Then an amazing thing happened. The audience began to hiss at Grillini – the Italian equivalent of booing. *Luca era gay* had clearly touched hearts.

The crowd's reaction, along with the award of second place to Povia's song in the finals on 21 February, has greatly encouraged the growing ex-homosexual community in Italy.

Luca di Tolve told his story to the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale*. He explained that people develop same sex attractions because of experiences during childhood. For Luca, a key factor was his parents' divorce. His father left home and young Luca "remained alone in a feminine environment, playing with dolls". Luca later came to understand that his emotionally detached father and obsessive mother had unintentionally created confusion about his sexual identity.

Guiseppe Povia said that he too once had "a gay phase" which lasted seven months. He said he has converted two homosexual friends to heterosexuality, both of whom are now married.



Guiseppe Povia

'Luca was once gay'

Below is part of an English translation of *Luca era gay*, by Wendell Ricketts:

Chorus: Luca once was gay but he's with her today. When Luca speaks, he holds his heart in his hands. Luca says: Today I am a different man.

First verse: Luca says: Before I talk about the change in my sexuality, let me make one thing clear: If I believe in God, I can't depend on human beings for my answers. Human thought is divided on this issue, so I didn't look to psychologists, psychiatrists, clergymen, or scientists. My search took me into my own past, and when I dug down deep, I found the answers to my questions.

My mother loved me – too much. Her love became obsession. Under the weight of her attention, I felt myself suffocating.

My father was a man who didn't make decisions. I could never talk to him because he was always at work, though I suspected the truth was a little different. When I was twelve, my mom told him she wanted a separation. I didn't understand what was happening, but my father said, "Yeah, that's the right decision," and after that he started drinking.

My mom never had a good word to say about my dad. She used to tell me, "Whatever you do, don't get married." She was jealous of my girlfriends; it felt so unhealthy. And my identity was more confused than ever.

Second verse: Today I'm a different man, but back then I needed answers. There were people who told me, "It's natural," but I studied Freud and he didn't see it that way. I got through high school, still not knowing what happiness was.

An older man made my heart race and that's when I realised I was homosexual. With him, I didn't hold back. He showered me with attention, and I thought it was love.

Sure, I could be myself, but then the sex became a competition. I was looking for my father in all those men. I went with them because I didn't want to betray my mother.

Last verse: Luca says: I was with a man for four years. Sometimes there was love and sometimes only deception. We cheated on each other constantly. I was still searching for my truth, for the kind of love that would last forever.

Then one night I met her at a party. She was just there with a lot of other people. She had nothing to do with what I was going through, but she listened, she laid me bare, she understood.

All I remember is: the next day, I missed her. So that's my story. No sickness, no recovery.

Dad, I've forgiven you, even though you went away and never came back. Mom, I think about you all the time, and I've never stopped caring. Sometimes I still see your face, but I'm a father now, and my heart belongs to the only woman I've ever truly loved.

their homosexual attractions," Jones and Yarhouse said.[18]

Jones and Yarhouse report that nearly every study ever conducted on change of orientation found some evidence of meaningful change. They say: "The average positive outcome across these studies is about 30%, with another 30% or so 'in process'. While this is surely not a stunningly high rate of success, it is in line with the reported success rates for change attempts dealing with complex relational issues that are often faced in marital or family therapy, or the more difficult and stable psychological conditions.

"Also, the lack of sophisticated methodology does not prove the treatments failed; rather, it challenges researchers to provide more sophisticated program evaluations and outcome studies to clarify what clients can expect from various programs."[19]

Personal testimonies of change

The Voices of Change website[20] includes accounts of scores of men and women who have experienced change in their sexual orientation over time, after help from a therapist.

The home page of the NARTH website currently includes the video testimony of therapist David Pickup who was motivated to take up his profession because of his own experience.[21]

This man revealed that at age five he had been the victim of homosexual molestation. He didn't know how to deal with this – he repressed the memory of his abuse. But after puberty, he began to have strong feelings of same-sex attraction. Such

feelings are not uncommon in boys who have been molested earlier in life.

"I can't imagine any therapist not wanting to help a young client who is in this situation because of earlier sexual abuse," he said. "But there was no help available for me in my late teens or early 20s."

He said "God help" victims of horrific sexual abuse by Scout leaders or religious workers if the victims move to California, where it soon could be illegal to provide reparative therapy to those under 18.

David Pickup continued his story, saying that he later did receive reparative therapy, which for him was very effective. He said his depression, suicidal feelings and anxiety went down, while his self-esteem and gender identity as a man went up.

And as these things changed, spontaneously – without any therapist pressure – his homosexual feelings began to dissipate and his heterosexual feelings increased "100%". They were "very pleasurable", he said.

"Others have different stories, but I have a voice," he said. "To marginalise me or my clients, to deny us a voice, is unconscionable."

But that, it seems, is what homosexual activists are currently seeking to do in their international campaign to prohibit reparative therapy or any other counselling to help those who are unhappy with their sexual orientation to explore change.

Dr Michael Davidson has included several first-hand accounts of therapy clients in his book, *The Right to Decide*.[22]

One man, Joe, said: "I want to deal with this issue for several reasons. Firstly, I don't believe God made me this way – I was not 'born gay'. I was born heterosexual, but my sexuality got a bit bent as a result of my experiences in childhood, and the resulting issues of self-image and self-worth. If those underlying issues are dealt with, I think much of my longing would go away. I long for a relationship with a woman, whom I can love and who can love me."[23]

Another, Kevin, said: "I am not religious. My family are open-minded and wouldn't have a problem if I wanted to live as a gay man…

"The main reason I have chosen my [reparative therapy] journey is because I have never been happy… there are many people out there who are not religious but are desperate to get out [of homosexuality], but we don't hear from them."[24]

Right to personal autonomy

Provided that a client has been fully informed of the nature and limitations of reparative therapy, and has voluntarily sought this treatment, his or her right to decide whether or not to proceed should be upheld by medical bodies and the parliament.

Given the absence of proven harm, and the clear evidence of beneficial outcomes in a significant number of cases, reparative therapy should be recognised as a valid option for people who suffer distress because of unwanted sexual attractions.

These attractions are influenced far more by life experiences than genes or hormones.

Nick: an Australian story

I can recall from my childhood that there was something different about me. In grade one I came running home crying because one of the other boys had bullied me and I didn't know how to handle it. That was the first of many such experiences.

My family migrated from Holland when I was four. I was closest to my mother. My father's hearing was badly damaged during the war. Learning English was hard for him, so communication was very difficult.

I left home at 17 and was often lonely. When I went to the pub with other guys, they ended up with girls and I was left alone. A hippie who befriended me introduced me to a hotel where the people fascinated me. They were very caring in a genuine way and gave me an acceptance I had never before experienced. They were homosexuals.

Many people in the "gay scene" are socially promiscuous, but others are simply seeking companionship of their own kind. I looked for a lifelong partner, but I quickly learnt that there is a great instability in the homosexual scene. Relationships develop, last three months and then end in a dramatic crisis. The percentage of long term relationships is very small.

I later found some stability in the friendship of two Christian women. I developed a real hunger for the Word of God. At that time, I also found out my homosexual partner – who I thought was going to be with me long term – had been unfaithful to me.

I was devastated. One night, I read that homosexuality was an abomination to God. It was as though a sword had pierced me deep inside. I suddenly knew that it was sin. Tears swept into my eyes as I heaved sobs of repentance before the Lord.

There followed three very tough years. I had started attending a church, but I was very lonely. The pull between my love for the Lord and the desire for homosexual relationships nearly tore me apart. But my hunger for God was stronger and I overcame the bondage of guilt.

I am now free from the grip of homosexuality, but I have to walk daily in the life of the Spirit.

Nick is now married. He and his wife have two sons.[32]

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