

Case 8

Gay Conversion Therapy

Psychiatrist Robert Spitzer recently renounced his 2003 study that supported gay conversion therapy. “I owe the gay community an apology,” Dr. Spitzer wrote. In the 1970s, Dr. Spitzer was championed by the gay community when he challenged the classification of homosexuality as an illness—“sociopathic personality disturbance.” He proposed an alternative classification, “sexual orientation disturbance,” that identified those whose sexual orientation (gay or straight) caused them distress. This alternative classification was accepted in 1973, and the gay community saw this as a victory.

In the late 1990s, Dr. Spitzer became interested in the idea of gay conversion therapy—a concept based on the Freudian theory that everyone is born bisexual and that sexual orientation is malleable. At the time, gay conversion therapy had gained traction with various conservative groups and was being promoted by The National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH). Dr. Spitzer conducted a study on the subject, interviewing 200 people who had undergone conversion therapy. A majority of the subjects reported that they had been successfully converted from either predominantly or exclusively homosexual to either predominantly or exclusively heterosexual. Advocates of conversion therapy were excited by the findings, but others were concerned that the study was flawed. Because people lie, it would be impossible to determine whether the therapy had truly worked by simply asking the patients. Dr. Spitzer himself now agrees that the study was flawed.¹

Some still claim that gay conversion therapy works and is beneficial to those who want to change. NARTH is dedicated to “uphold[ing] the rights of individuals with unwanted homosexual attraction to receive effective psychological care and the rights of professionals to offer that care.” The organization has responded to Dr. Spitzer’s admission by stating that the science of his study is still accurate and that it is still plausible that some of the participants were actually changed by the therapy.²

Even if it is possible to change one’s sexual orientation through therapy, however, the question remains whether it is even a laudable goal. Conversion therapy is based on the assumption that it is preferable to be heterosexual rather than homosexual. For this reason, it reinforces the social stigma against being gay and privileges heterosexuality as the norm. But—if successful—conversion therapy could also allow people to escape that same stigma by becoming heterosexual.

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¹ Benedict Carey, “Psychiatry Giant Sorry for Backing Gay ‘Cure,’” The New York Times, May 18, 2012; see also Gabriel Arana, “My So-Called Ex-Gay Life,” The Prospect, <http://prospect.org/article/my-so-called-ex-gay-life>, April 11, 2012; Reza Gostar, Pan American Health Organization Denounces Gay Conversion Therapy, <http://redondobeach.patch.com/articles/major-health-organization-denounces-gay-conversion-therapy>, May 19, 2012.

² NARTH.com; NARTH Mission Statement