

Can Sexual Orientation Change?

You can tell when an opinion begins to harden into a dogma – when Hollywood releases a film about heroic victims of oppressive zealots. Which is what has happened this year on the topic of “gay conversion therapy”. Not one, but two films describe the horrors endured by gay teenagers whose parents force them to attend a conversion bootcamp.

[The Miseducation of Cameron Post](#) is aimed at young adults and won an award at the Sundance Film Festival recently. It takes a relatively light-hearted look at a camp with outlandish de-gaying techniques. [Boy Erased](#), starring Nicole Kidman and Russell Crowe, will be released in November and is already creating Oscar buzz. Lucas Hedges plays a teenager who loves his parents but wants to be true to himself. In both films, the buffoonish or sinister “heteros” are Christian pastors.

The premise for these scripts is that sexual orientation is fixed and immutable and that attempts to change it – variously called reparative therapy, conversion therapy or “praying the gay away” – are misguided, cruel and psychologically disastrous.

This is the conventional wisdom at the moment. “So-called reparative therapies are aimed at ‘fixing’ something that is not a mental illness and therefore does not require therapy,” said the president of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2015. “There is insufficient scientific evidence that they work, and they have the potential to harm the client.”

With this in mind, California passed a law in 2012 banning mental health professionals from trying to change the sexual orientation of anyone under 18. At last count, 14 states and the District of Columbia have passed bans on conversion

therapy for minors. Last week the California state senate went even further and passed a bill which would ban all “conversion therapy”, even if a client wanted it. The reaction of [Senator Scott Wiener](#), the bill’s sponsor, sums up its image in the media:

“Conversion therapy is psychological torture and has no medical or scientific basis. It’s fraudulent to charge people with the promise of ‘changing’ them. Today’s Senate vote in favor of AB 2943 is a major step toward protecting LGBTQ people from pseudo-scientific treatment that harms them and scams them out of their money.”

But is it true that any attempt to change sexual orientation “has no medical or scientific basis”? Even the APA is reluctant to put its weight behind such a claim. While strongly opposing reparative therapy, the worst criticism that it can make is that “there is insufficient evidence to support the use of psychological interventions to change sexual orientation”. “Insufficient evidence” is not evidence that all attempts to change are “pseudo-scientific”.

Which brings us to a recent article in [The Linacre Quarterly](#) about evidence of moderate success in “sexual orientation change efforts” (SOCE), the term used in academic discourse.

In “[Effects of Therapy on Religious Men who have Unwanted Same-Sex Attraction](#)”, the authors, a New Zealander and two Californians, report on a survey they did of 125 men who had tried SOCE. They found that

“Most of those who participated in group or professional help had heterosexual shifts in sexual attraction, sexual identity and behavior with large statistical effect sizes, similarly moderate-to-marked decreases in suicidality, depression, substance abuse, and increases in social functioning and self-esteem. Almost all harmful effects were none to slight. Prevalence of help

or hindrance, and effect size, were comparable with those for conventional psychotherapy for unrelated mental health issues. Judged by this survey these therapies are very beneficial for lay religious people ...

It's important to understand both how weak and how strong this claim is. The authors are not arguing that all homosexuals can be "converted". They only say that some men who have a religious motivation to change can change and that those who tried, whether or not they succeeded, did not suffer ill-effects, let alone "psychological torture". They conclude that "The concept of the immutability of sexual attraction must be rejected."

Their research raises many questions about laws banning SOCE *for those who want it*. Obviously no one should be coerced, but why shouldn't someone who wants to change be allowed to? Laws banning conversion therapy are banning choice; they condemn people to live in a lifestyle which they find uncomfortable or even abhorrent. It's like banning poor people from applying for high-paying jobs. How does the government know what's best for you?

The authors frame this objection in a less strident way. The APA, they say, only respects evidence based on "group sociological criteria". Well and good for the majority of homosexuals who do not want to change. But, they contend:

"we affirm that psychotherapy is ultimately tailored to individuals and this is one important measure of satisfactory therapy. For example, we take harmful or helpful effects to a statistically insignificant group of individuals to be worth considering, whereas a pure sociological approach does not. If this emphasis predominated, some individuals would actually be prevented from obtaining the help they wanted.

How effective was the therapy? Of the 125 men, 68 percent reported a reduction in their same-sex attraction and behaviour, ranging to “some” to “much” as well as an increase in attraction to women. On the whole, the participants found their therapy helpful. Only one reported extreme negative effects.

About one in seven (14 percent) claimed that their orientation had changed from exclusively homosexual to exclusively heterosexual. As the authors point out, even though the APA has declared that SOCE is “unlikely to be successful”, many men with religious convictions might think that a one-in-seven chance of success is well worth taking.

The acronym for unconventional sexual orientations is LGBTQ. The Q stands for “questioning”. Aren’t gays and lesbians allowed to ask questions any more? Banning questions about the deepest issues in life is not protecting them; it’s putting them in chains.

—

Michael Cook is editor of MercatorNet. This [article](#) was republished from MercatorNet under a Creative Commons license.