
Can Homosexuals Change? Is the Attempt Harmful?

*A Longitudinal Study Of Religiously Mediated Change In Sexual Orientation:
Implications For NARTH.*

Stanton L. Jones, Ph.D. (Wheaton College)

My co-author Mark Yarhouse and I recently reported in our book *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (Jones & Yarhouse, 2007a) the findings of our study of men and women seeking sexual orientation change through involvement in Christian ministries affiliated under the umbrella organization Exodus International.

Our findings address directly two of the most contentious and disputed questions of our day: *Is change of sexual orientation, particularly change of homosexual orientation, possible at all? And is the attempt to change sexual orientation harmful?*

We are evangelical Christians committed to the truth-seeking activity of science who accepted funding for this study from Exodus, while pledging to Exodus that we would report publicly the results of our outcome study regardless of how encouraging or embarrassing Exodus might find those results.

In this study we found empirical evidence that change of homosexual orientation is possible for some through involvement in Exodus ministries. Success took two forms. One form of success was an embrace of chastity with a reduction in prominence of homosexual desire. These persons regard themselves as having reestablished their sexual identities in some way other than their homosexual attractions.

The second form of success was marked by a diminishing of homosexual attraction and an increase in heterosexual attraction, with resulting satisfactory, if not uncomplicated, heterosexual adjustment. These latter individuals regard themselves as having changed their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. Further, we found little evidence of harm incurred on average as a result of the involvement of the participants in the Exodus change process.

These findings would appear to contradict directly the commonly expressed views 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.

In this paper I repeat much of the initial summary of our findings (Jones and Yarhouse, 2007b), but also respond to several criticisms of the study and extend discussion to matters of concern to the constituency of NARTH.

I should mention further that while my name appears as sole author of this paper, this work and all of our interpretations thereof reflect my close collaboration with my valued co-author Yarhouse on this project.

What Questions Were We Trying To Answer In This Study, And Why?

This study focuses on two questions: Is change of sexual orientation, specifically homosexual orientation, possible? And is the attempt to change sexual orientation harmful? We framed these questions in the context of strong declarations by sectors of the mental health community that change of sexual orientation is impossible, and that the attempt to change is harmful. There are two sets of methods employed today by those seeking change in sexual orientation: One set of methods involves professional psychotherapy of some kind as typified by the constituency of NARTH. Independently, there are religious ministries of various kinds that use a combination of spiritual and psychological methods to seek to produce orientation change. Our study addresses the generic questions of whether sexual orientation change is possible at all and whether the attempt is harmful by focusing only on the religiously mediated change approaches to change. Ours is not a study of professional psychotherapy.

APA Claims

The declarations by the mental health community are emphatic. The American Psychological Association (undated), our professional organization, asserts an absolute answer to the thorny question of change on their public affairs website: "Can therapy change sexual orientation? No. . . . [H]omosexuality is not an illness. It does not require treatment and is not changeable."¹ The same website offered a suitable description of our study: In answering the question "What About So-Called 'Conversion Therapies'?" the APA states such "claims are poorly documented. For example, treatment outcome is not followed and reported over time as would be the standard to test the validity of any mental health intervention." In this study, we report exactly such long-term, longitudinal treatment outcome data, thus meeting accepted professional standards for these findings. In the next paragraph, the APA raises the issue of harm, saying "The American Psychological Association is concerned about such therapies and their potential harm to patients."

Our Results Conflict With APA's Claims

The tools of scientific study are ideally suited to empirically investigate such strong, absolute claims. Thus, we framed our hypotheses in agreement with the strong positions urged by our profession. We hypothesized first that change of sexual orientation is impossible, and second that the attempt to change is harmful. The logic of scientific inquiry then drives us, based on our results, to reject both hypotheses and to conclude first that change of sexual orientation is *not impossible* because it indeed appears

possible for some, and second, that the attempt to change sexual orientation is not harmful on average.

What Is Unique About This Study?

We have argued previously that claims like that of the American Psychiatric Association (1998) that “[T]here is no published scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of ‘reparative therapy’ as a treatment to change one’s sexual orientation” are questionable. Literally *dozens and dozens* of studies published in professional journals have reported evidence of the possibility of sexual orientation change for some (reviewed in Jones & Yarhouse, 2000; Jones & Kwee, 2005). Much less of this research has been published in the last several decades, as the political climate has more recently made such research professionally threatening, and as the mental health professions have increasingly accepted homosexuality.

In this climate, past research has been dismissed on three principle bases. 1) It has been dismissed cynically as homophobic, biased and hence of no value. 2) It has been dismissed based on contrary anecdotes of failed and traumatic change attempts. 3) It has been dismissed based on methodological shortcomings of the research. This dismissal has been inadequately justified, in our view.

Study Addresses Previous Areas Of Weakness

Nevertheless, past research has not typically met the highest standards of empirical rigor. In particular, and in the words of the American Psychological Association (undated), “treatment outcome is not followed and reported over time as would be the standard to test the validity of any mental-health intervention.” Further, many of these prior studies utilized obscure or idiosyncratic measures of sexual-orientation change, often relied on therapist ratings rather than hearing directly and objectively from the clients themselves, and often utilized reports from memory of past feelings rather than sampling subjects prospectively, and following their progress in real time. These flaws have been manifest in some of the research NARTH itself has promoted and relied upon, and I offer this paper today in part to urge you on to greater rigor in the your study of the therapeutic interventions offered by NARTH constituents. Our study was designed to address those exact weaknesses of previous studies. Thus, we report here the results of a rigorous, prospective and longitudinal study of a respectably large and arguably representative sample of those seeking to undergo change in sexual orientation via religiously mediated means through Exodus ministries.

Exodus International is a worldwide, interdenominational, “Christian organization dedicated to equipping and uniting agencies and individuals to effectively communicate the message of freedom from homosexuality, as well as how to effectively convey support and understanding to individuals facing the reality of a homosexual loved one.” Exodus began in 1976 and is the largest umbrella organization for Christian ministries to people who are struggling with sexual behavior or sexual identity concerns. Exodus sees itself as articulating a Christian perspective that neither rejects homosexual persons nor embraces a “gay” identity.

Our focus was on the individuals troubled by their sexual orientation and thus participating in specific Exodus-affiliated ministries to achieve “freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ.”

Most Exodus-affiliated ministry groups rely on small groups as the primary intervention setting, and the typical methods of intervention are comprised of worship, prayer, education and discussion. A variety of additional services are provided through specific groups, including residential programs; seminars; individual, couple and family therapy; support groups for family members; and written materials.

Success is defined differently by different programs. Some focus primarily on one’s relationship with God and with others, including freedom from dependence in relationships. Other programs define success in behavioral terms, including what it means to achieve celibacy and chastity, while others are concerned with change of thoughts, fantasies and feelings which are seen as leading to change of orientation. The motives behind the various ministries are grounded in the traditional Christian moral teaching disapproving of homosexual conduct. The individuals who enter these ministries for help may or may not share that motivation initially, but such religious understandings of homosexual behavior -- specifically, a shared belief that homosexual behavior and desire are not God’s intention for them -- are the backdrop for their experiences in these groups.

Our study is prospective. In contrast to retrospective methods that ask participants to remember change experiences that happened in their pasts, a prospective methodology begins assessment when individuals are starting the change process and assesses them as the results unfold.

Those who propose that change is possible almost universally agree that change of sexual orientation is a slow process, with substantial change taking five years or more to solidify. Over half of our sample completed their Time 1 assessment when they had been involved in the ministry for less than a year, and a second group of subjects had been involved in the change attempt for between one and three years when they were first assessed for our study. Our study is longitudinal. That is, our study followed participants over time with multiple assessments rather than simply sampling their status at one static moment in time. We report the results of change from the Time 1 assessment through two additional assessments at Time 2 and Time 3, covering a span of thirty months to four years.

This study examines a representative sample of the population of those in Exodus seeking sexual orientation change. We cannot be absolutely certain of perfect representativeness, since no scientific evidence exists for describing the parameters of such representativeness. Still, we are confident that our participant pool is a good snapshot of those seeking help from Exodus.

(This article was excerpted from the NARTH Conference Papers 2007. Order the complete set of papers in the online bookstore for \$10.)