

New Study Finds Homosexuals Can Alter Orientation

by Julia Duin

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A groundbreaking new study asserting it is possible for homosexuals to become heterosexuals was released on May 9 at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in New Orleans.

The 40-page study, which was debated during a three-hour symposium, is especially unusual because its author, New York psychiatry professor Dr. Robert Spitzer, championed a vote among APA members to normalize homosexuality nearly three decades ago.

Thanks to efforts by the Columbia University physician, the APA in 1973 removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders.

But a chance 1999 encounter with former homosexuals from the Washington area caused him to change his mind.

"They were claiming that, contrary to the APA position statement, they had changed their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual," he says. "I started to wonder: Could it be that some homosexuals could actually change their sexual orientation?"

His study of 200 former homosexuals, conducted last year, polled people who had experienced a significant shift from homosexual to heterosexual attraction and maintained it for at least five years. Fifty-seven were women, 143 were men. More than 80 percent of both sexes reported "high" same-sex attractions.

Before changing, 20 percent were married. Afterward, 76 percent of the men and 47 percent of the women had tied the knot. The typical respondent started trying to change at the age of 30 but did not feel any different sexually for at least two years. Seventy-eight percent reported a change in orientation after five years.

Due to a combination of therapy and prayer, 17 percent of the men and 55 percent of the women reported they had no homosexual attractions whatsoever. Twenty-nine percent of the men and 63 percent of the women reported "minimal" same-sex attractions.

"History has done some interesting twists," the doctor says. "Some homosexuals can change, to varying degrees."

The findings, compiled in a study titled "200 subjects who claim to have changed their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual," has already drawn fire.

"Dr. Spitzer is clearly biased on this issue," says Wayne Besen of the Human Rights Campaign. "In a press conference last year, he said he's against gay adoptions, gays serving openly in the military and gay marriages. He's a cultural conservative on these issues."

Dr. Spitzer, who terms himself an "atheistic Jew," denies this, saying he appeared on the Geraldo show in 1995 representing the APA position that sexual orientation is unchangeable.

"I said there that studies showing change were so methodically flawed, they lacked credibility. "Since 1973, I had been very

skeptical of the possibility of change."

But while attending the 1999 APA convention in the District, he encountered 20 picketers hoisting signs with slogans like, "Maybe the APA can't heal a homosexual, but God can!!"

"He came up and said, 'You guys are out here again,' " says activist Anthony Falzarano of Falls Church, Va., the national director of Parents and Friends Ministries who debated Dr. Spitzer on the Geraldo show.

"I asked him if he would consider taking us more seriously and attend our press conference. I told him some prominent ex-gays would give their testimonies. To my surprise, he came."

The doctor not only came, he asked Mr. Falzarano's group to supply him with names of several hundred former homosexuals. The doctor settled on 200 individuals, most of whom were referred to him by ex-homosexual groups. He also gleaned a few names from an ad in the *Village Voice* and various therapists.

"I would have worked with the devil if he had referred me subjects," Dr. Spitzer says. "They were not easy to find. When I went to my colleagues, they said they had patients they had helped to change, but they were not comfortable calling them up."

The doctor, who will further describe his findings next month at the 10th Healing for the Homosexual Conference at Catholic University, says there is a possibility the 200 respondents were self-deceived.

"But the following reasons suggested to us that they cannot be easily dismissed," he said. "The gradual nature of the change, and the frequent pattern of less homosexual feelings followed by more heterosexual feelings, indicate it is not a simple made-up story."

Sixty-six percent of the men and 44 percent of the women attained what he calls "good heterosexual functioning." Emotional and sexual satisfaction skyrocketed after people changed, he said. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents reported feeling more masculine if men and more feminine if women.

Joseph Nicolosi, director of the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, which provided Dr. Spitzer with names of former homosexuals, calls the study "revolutionary."

"He is reporting something totally against the assumptions of the APA and the American Psychological Association," says Mr. Nicolosi, a California psychologist. "The mental health profession assumes that once gay, always gay."

"The assumption that people can't change is a political conclusion rather than a scientific conclusion. It points to the influential gay lobbyists within the profession, of which there are many. When we issued a study last year saying more than 800 people had changed, it was pushed to the side. But when Spitzer issues this, it has to be listened to because of his track record as a gay advocate."

Mr. Besen remains unconvinced.

"Time and time again we heard of people who say then have changed, only to find out later they have not," he says. "Look at the social pressures these people were under. Ninety-three percent said they were 'very religious.' That shows the pressures they were under and how desperate they were to change."

"This is clearly an unscientific, biased study. What about the tens of thousands of people who did not make the cut?"

Dr. Spitzer concedes the study has its limitations but was surprised that two-third of the men surveyed achieved "good heterosexual functioning."

He says: "These are people having sex with their spouse. That was higher than I expected." ■