

Where the Analyst is Biased: A Critique of Isay's Writings on the Treatment of Homosexuality

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The following is a brief excerpt of Joseph Berger's thought-provoking paper from the just-released 1997 NARTH Collected Papers (see advertisement on back page of this issue). Footnotes and references have been removed here, but are available in the full-length article.

Richard Isay is a psychoanalyst who has suggested that significant changes are necessary in the traditional psychodynamic approach to homosexuality.

In a number of papers, Isay has put forward two principal positions.

First, he has challenged the notion that homosexuality represents a failure to achieve full psychosexual developmental maturity.

Second, he has also attempted to refute the numerous published observations confirming that some people who have had homosexual experiences or thoughts can be helped by psychotherapeutic or psychoanalytic treatment.

Isay has claimed that "the effort to change the sexual orientation of gay patients is not clinically helpful....core sexual orientation remains unchanged...attempts to change [it] are, in all likelihood, futile." He has also asserted that "efforts to change homosexuals to heterosexuals...represent one of the most flagrant and frequent abuses of psychiatry in America today."

In this paper I intend to discuss the scientific foundations upon which Isay bases some of his claims, the clinical material that he presents, his own attitudes towards the work and findings of other therapists, and the conclusions that he comes to.

Recent Biological Claims

In a prominent article, Isay indicated that he accepted the claims suggesting a biological basis of male homosexuality put forward by LeVay, and Bailey and Pillard. Isay further reiterated this position in a letter in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* in January of 1994, adding the reference of the more recent claim by Hamer et al.

Unfortunately, the work of LeVay and Bailey and Pillard is based upon questionable methodology, their claims appear grossly exaggerated, and their known personal biases have made many doubtful of the scientific value of their work. The references that Bailey and Pillard cite to substantiate

their claims, do not support their conclusions. Both papers were published in conjunction with media publicity of a highly political nature that raised serious questions about the scientific neutrality and credibility of these authors. Neither of the works has yet received any scientific confirmation, but serious errors and inadequacies have been convincingly demonstrated.

Ford, Beach, and Hooker

In his earlier writings, Isay brought other material that he believed supported his case, but that has also come under extensive criticism.

He quoted the work of Ford and Beach that supposedly demonstrated homosexual activity in a wide variety of animals, and the study by Hooker that supposedly showed the absence of significant psychopathology in homosexuals.

Today, neither study is considered to have the significance that was originally claimed for it.

Isay has quoted a 1951 statement by Ford and Beach that "a biological tendency for inversion of sexual behavior is inherent in most if not all mammals," but he failed to quote Beach's later rejection of that earlier view in a 1971 interview. "I don't know any authenticated instance of males or females in the animal world preferring a homosexual partner - if by homosexual you mean complete sexual relations including climax...it's questionable that mounting in itself can properly be called sexual."

Even Friedman and Downey, who are sympathetic towards a possible biologic etiology of homosexuality, state "there is no non-human mammalian species in which predominant or exclusive homosexuality occurs in the way that it does in humans."

Regarding Hooker's work, more than ten years ago, Socarides referred to a task force critique of Hooker's claims that pointed out flawed methodology, and noted that other results had disagreed with Hooker's observations. Again, Isay chose not to quote this rebuttal.

The APA Vote

Isay and others frequently refer to the vote of the American Psychiatric Association in 1973-1974 that led to removing homosexuality per se from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. However, Isay does not

Is Human Sexuality Fixed or Variable?

The fact that people who have previously been fully heterosexual in their desire and orientation but are temporarily deprived of contact with the opposite sex, such as in prisons, may then participate in some homosexual experiences only to revert immediately to comfortable heterosexuality when free to pursue such opportunities, is but one indication that human sexual behavior is flexible, and not rigidly fixed at birth.

Similarly, many therapists and many reports in the literature have noted numerous examples of people apparently changing their sexual orientation at different times in their lives. Psychodynamic psychotherapists have offered coherent theories to explain why such shifts can occur, but for those who have proposed a biological basis for homosexual behavior, such events have provided a major challenge to theory.

The response of Isay, and those like him, has been to assert that the "true" sexual orientation of the person has not been clearly defined, or has been misunderstood, or denied by a therapist or by the patient--with at times disastrous consequences.

As we shall see, not only does the absence of any widely-accepted "marker" make such assertions highly questionable, but Isay's clinical material is quite unconvincing, and only confirms that claims about the "true" orientation of such patients are a highly contentious issue.

Nearly 15 years ago, Bieber and Bieber expressed similar concerns:

"Others claim that a true homosexual cannot change. Once the mold is set, it is unbreakable. Yet, they do not find this assertion at odds with their citations of persons who have changed from hetero- to homosexuality, sometimes as late as middle age."

At the time their paper was published, Bieber and Bieber had seen "well over 1,000 male homosexuals," and had noted that "a substantial number do become and remain heterosexual. Reversal estimates now range from 30% to an optimistic 50%."

But, they noted, "Despite the treatment results we reported and the published findings of other respected colleagues, these cynics steadfastly refuse to place any credence in these reports."

Isay has repeated (and continues to repeat) the assertion that homosexuality is unchangeable. His denials confirm the accuracy of the Biebers' insight many years earlier. Still, the literature that homosexuality *is* in some cases changeable, is overwhelming. ■

acknowledge that the National Gay Task Force, a homosexual lobbying group, had organized and underwritten the cost of mailing a crucial lobbying letter to the membership signed by the candidates for senior office, recommending acceptance of the Board of Trustees' decision. It is surprising that a psychoanalyst would ignore what might have been the true reasons and forces behind a particular manifest behavior.

Isay should also have been aware that after the APA vote, Otto Kernberg was saying to thunderous applause from huge audiences, "We do not decide scientific matters by vote." So Isay's initial position that homosexuality is something that is innate and biologically determined is based on insubstantial pillars.

The Psychological Determination of Human Behavior

If a particular form of behavior is not biologically determined, then for at least the past 100 years we have looked at the possibility that it is psychologically determined.

To a considerable extent, the idea of the psychological determination of character or behavior is a **default** theory.

It is suggested that in the absence of *physical* signs or other biological "markers," and given the uniqueness of each individual's upbringing and the impossibility of replicating it, we can only suppose that certain *psychological* factors that we may or may not be aware of, might have contributed to any person having particular thoughts, feelings, or behavior.

Furthermore, our present level of understanding is almost entirely limited to retrospectively explaining any such psychological determination. We have very little ability to state prospectively that any particular mixture of parental behavior and interaction will definitely lead to any given outcome in the child or children of those parents, in the same manner that we can predict that certain physical lesions will almost always produce certain recognized outcomes.

The reality of homosexual desire and behavior provide a perfect example of this situation. Up to the present time, we have had an absence of any good evidence of physical or biological causation. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that in spite of years of intensive research, **absolutely no definitive physical or laboratory indicator of homosexuality has been demonstrated.** There is nothing other than a person's own personal testimony that they define or identify themselves as homosexual.

Therefore, by default, we have been left with the likelihood that psychological factors are responsible, and there is much to support this notion in general terms.