



Reparative Therapy

by Randolph Baxter

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Reparative therapy is often defined as any formal attempt to change a person's sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. It includes the attempts of Christian transformational ministries to use prayer, religious conversion, individual therapy sessions, and group counseling, to change a person's sexual orientation, as well as attempts by secular psychologists and psychotherapists to "cure" homosexuality.

Background

The reparative therapy movement is rooted in the work of 1960s psychologists such as Irving Bieber and Charles Socarides, who claimed that homosexuality was both pathological and susceptible to change. When their position was repudiated by the 1973 decision of the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from the category of "illness," they launched a counter-offensive against the views of the psychological and psychiatric establishment.

The belief in "restoring" heterosexuality was furthered by the work of Elizabeth R. Moberly, who, relying heavily on the theories of Sigmund Freud, Lawrence Hatterer, and Bieber, proposed in the 1980s that all people would develop as heterosexuals unless they suffered a real or perceived rejection from their same-gender parent during early childhood, leading to a "defensive detachment." Homosexuality was thus a logical yet inappropriately eroticized attempt to repair this "developmental deficit."

Moberly argued that, using techniques similar to "inner-child healing" therapy, homosexuals could correct their disidentification and "reclaim" heterosexuality.

Although Moberly disavowed her own work in the early 1990s, her arguments have been widely adopted as "scientific" theory in fundamentalist Christian circles.

In 1992, the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) was established. Led by Joseph Nicolosi and Charles Socarides, and funded largely by right-wing religious and political organizations, NARTH is self-described as "a non-profit, educational organization dedicated to affirming a complementary, male-female model of gender and sexuality." It essentially espouses the view of homosexuality that was dominant in the 1950s and 1960s: that a homosexual "preference" results from a developmental problem, especially a child's failure to identify properly with adult figures of the same gender.

As the only professional organization to support reparative therapy, NARTH has been particularly important to the efforts of Southern Baptist, Mormon, Roman Catholic, and other religious organizations to encourage the conversion of homosexuals to heterosexuality.

Ex-Gay Ministries

One of the earliest religious-based organizations to engage in reparative therapy is Love in Action, the first

"ex-gay ministry," which was established by Frank Worthen in 1973. A 43-year-old San Francisco businessman raised in an evangelical Christian home who had been "out" for twenty years, Worthen became disaffected with the "gay lifestyle."

By 1976, Worthen and others had formed Exodus, a national coalition of ex-gay ministries. Its member groups have numbered in the hundreds over the years, but many--perhaps most--of them have foundered, usually as a result of their clients returning to a homosexual life. Love in Action found that its own clients--including those in a year-long "live-in program"--proved so susceptible to temptation from nearby San Francisco that the organization decided to move to Memphis in 1994. Exodus is now located in Orlando.

Ex-gay groups prefer the term "preference" to "orientation." They promote "heterosexuality as God's creative intent for humanity" while homosexual "tendencies" are seen as "one of many disorders." Love in Action, for example, promotes "freedom from life-dominating sin," and Exodus advertises "release from sexual brokenness," the latter being a catch-phrase used to define almost all non-marital sexual behavior. "Release" is achieved through "repentance from sin and faith," celibacy, and friendships with heterosexual mentors.

Decreasingly since the 1980s, heterosexual marriage has been touted as the ultimate "proof" of displaced homosexual desires. Same-sex friendships are discouraged for fear of "emotional dependency," which could lead to sexual desire. Suicide attempts are not uncommon among those who "fail" to change, especially since ex-gay groups usually ostracize those who "return" to the "homosexual lifestyle" for not having "prayed hard enough" or "fully submitted themselves to God's will."

Partly in response to Exodus and as a part of the nation-wide growth of gay-affirming religious groups of all faiths, Evangelicals Concerned With Reconciliation has reached out since 1980 to "ex-ex-gays" from conservative Christian backgrounds. It has been particularly concerned with refuting those who misinterpret the Bible to condemn homosexuality.

Does Reparative Therapy Work?

Ex-gay ministries refuse to keep statistics on the success/failure rate of their clients, claiming that counselees should not dwell on the past. Outside observers have found that at least two-thirds of those in such groups give up within two years, and that over 75% of ex-gay organizations fail within five years.

Nearly all the claims of the success of reparative therapy are anecdotal. There are no studies in peer reviewed scientific journals that attest to the success of reparative therapies.

Moreover, the claims of cure tend to focus on abstinence rather than a change in the object of desire, a position consistent with reparative therapy's tendency to see homosexuality not as an orientation but as a "preference" and a behavior. Thus, if a person refrains from sexual activity and becomes functionally asexual, reparative-therapy proponents claim a "cure."

Interestingly, only one of the ex-gay leaders has claimed a complete change of sexual orientation. Alan Medinger (of "Regeneration" ministry, Baltimore) claimed in the 1980s to have lost all homosexual desire after a cathartic night of prayer. Yet even he admitted that he was bisexually oriented before this "conversion," and can only demonstrate to have denied fully the homosexual side of his bisexuality.

Honest analysts admit that abstinence of sexual activity cannot be judged as reorientation from homosexuality to heterosexuality. "Change" thus devolves into semantics; one can only change one's behavior, not one's orientation.

For a few people, reparative therapy may provide some initial relief from intense, internalized homophobia. Ex-gay Christian ministries are often the first group to tell a depressed homosexual that her or

his "sin" will not necessarily condemn her or him to hell, a welcome respite from the more overt vilification still prevalent in conservative religious circles.

The more secular practitioners of reparative therapy often deny homophobia and even claim to support basic civil rights for homosexuals and to oppose stigmatization of homosexuals, so their clients often experience an acceptance that they find difficult to give themselves.

(It is important to note, however, that nearly all the position statements adopted by NARTH are in opposition to glbtq rights, supporting instead the rights of anti-gay groups. Its guise of political neutrality with regard to homosexual civil rights simply masks an anti-gay political agenda.)

Ultimately, however, reparative therapy does not work. Most clients fail to "convert" even to an emotionally healthy state of abstinence (much less to heterosexuality). They commonly are left more disillusioned and isolated than when they started. Frequently, they "come out" of the closet with a lasting animus toward religion.

Reparative therapy may be judged as a well-meaning but misguided and potentially destructive attempt to resolve the tension between homosexual orientation and conservative social and religious views. It has been embraced by such enemies of the glbtq rights movement as Pat Robertson, James Dobson, Lou Sheldon, and others who would "reclaim" America by "rolling back" the so-called gay rights agenda.

In 1998, the board of trustees of the American Psychiatric Association unanimously voted that reparative therapy is dangerously misguided, observing that "the potential risks of 'reparative therapy' are great, including depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior, since the therapist's alignment with societal prejudices against homosexuality may reinforce self-hatred already experienced by the patient."

Bibliography

Bieber, Irving. *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study of Male Homosexuals*. New York: Vintage, 1962.

Drescher, Jack. *Psychoanalytic Therapy and the Gay Man*. New York: Analytic Press, 1998.

Duberman, Martin. *Left Out: The Politics of Exclusion: Essays 1964-2002*. Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2002.

Evangelicals Concerned With Reconciliation. www.ecwr.org.

Exodus. exodus-international.org.

Ford, Jeffrey G. "What Is Reparative Therapy." jgford.homestead.com/Fordessay.html.

"Introduction to Reparative and Similar Therapies." www.religioustolerance.org/hom_exod.htm.

Love in Action. <http://www.loveinaction.org>.

Moberly, Elizabeth R. *Psychogenesis: The Early Development of Gender Identity*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983.

National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality. www.narth.com.

Nicolosi, Joseph. *Reparative Therapy of Male Homosexuality: A New Clinical Approach*. Northvale, N. J.: Aronson, 1991.

Socarides, Charles. *The Overt Homosexual*. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1968.

About the Author

Randolph W. Baxter studied European History at the University of California, Berkeley and U. S. foreign policy and Third World security at Columbia University before completing his Ph.D. in History at the University of California, Irvine. His dissertation on *"Eradicating This Menace": Homophobia and Anti-Communism in Congress, 1947-1954* is excerpted in "Homo-Hunting in the Early Cold War: Senator Kenneth Wherry and the Homophobic Side of McCarthyism" in *Nebraska History*. Baxter participated in "ex-gay" Christian ministries from 1983 to 1988, and since 1993 has been active in Evangelicals Concerned with Reconciliation, a glbtq Christian organization.