

# Sexual Orientation Conversion Therapy: Help or Hindrance?

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*This article is a summary of Dr. Dreikorn's doctoral dissertation, U.S. International University, 1998. In this study, Dr. Dreikorn found striking similarities among respondents in parental patterns and boyhood sports avoidance. Three years or more after the conclusion of therapy, 73% of the participants report a major reduction in homosexual attractions.*

There is continuing debate today over whether it is possible to change from a homosexual to a heterosexual orientation. In an effort to make a positive contribution to the discussion, I conducted a research study to identify how a group of men who had struggled with a homosexual orientation and subsequently underwent therapy to change it, perceived that experience. Was the therapy helpful in reaching their goal, or was it a hindrance?

This study used the method of depth interviewing in order to permit the men to freely express themselves and share their experience.

The basic qualifications for participants in this study were:

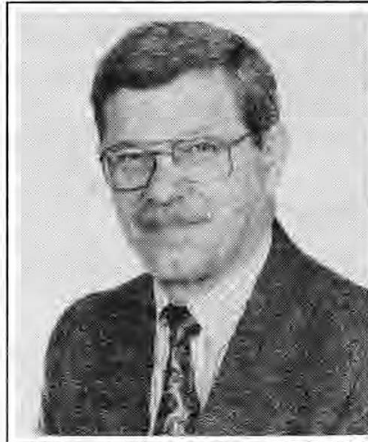
- (1) They should be males who had undergone counseling for the purpose of changing their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual;
- (2) Counseling must have concluded a minimum of three years ago.

In order to secure participants, approximately 650 letters were sent to the membership of NARTH. As a result of the letter, 40 persons emerged as possible participants. This group was narrowed to 18 persons with whom it was possible to set up a face-to-face interview. Interviews were conducted literally from coast to coast: three interviews in San Francisco, one in Los Angeles, five in Salt Lake City, four in Ohio, three in Pennsylvania, one in Virginia, and one in San Diego. When the interviews were conducted it was discovered that three persons had to be screened out, because they had not been out of counseling for the required three-year period.

The following open-ended questions were used in the interviews:

1. When did you first become aware of homosexual feelings, and how did you deal with them?

2. What was your childhood like?
3. What contributed to your decision to seek counseling for your homosexual feelings?
4. What was the counseling like that you received?



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5. What were the counselors like?
6. Looking back at your experience in counseling, what was it that you found to be helpful, and what was not helpful to you?
7. Beside the counseling you received, were there other things that helped or hindered you in reaching your desired goal?
8. How would you describe your overall mental health and sexual orientation today?

The interviewer attempted, as much as possible, to be nondirective and to avoid leading the participants.

All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis. The method used to analyze the transcripts was content analysis, which is broadly defined as "a technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (Marshall and Rossman, 1989).

As part of the analysis, Natural Meaning Units were identified. A NMU is defined as "the experience which reveals the essence of the phenomenon" (Barrett, 1994).

Responses were listed under four categories:

- 1) childhood experiences
- 2) counseling experiences
- 3) factors other than the counseling that helped or hindered reaching the desired goal
- 4) self-evaluation of present mental health, and of present sexual orientation.

An effort was made to insure the objectivity, accuracy and reliability of the researcher's identification of Natural Meaning Units. For that purpose, the interpretations of two colleagues who had training in research methodology

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were compared to that of the researcher. Each of the three was given five randomly selected interviews. After the colleagues had opportunity to independently identify NMUs and themes from the five interviews assigned to them, the researcher met with them to compare his own findings and to reconcile any differences. No significant differences were found between the researcher's analysis and reporting, and that of the two colleagues.

### Childhood Experiences

Eighty-three themes emerged from the 15 interviews that were included in this study. One theme was agreed upon by all 15 participants; that is, their father/father-figure was distant, uninvolved in their upbringing, frightening, and unapproachable.

Thirteen of the 15 participants (87 percent) voiced two themes: they spoke of a mother who was close, controlling, and overbearing; and they also said their mental health had improved as a result of counseling to overcome an unwanted homosexual orientation.

Eighty percent of the participants (12 of 15) verbalized the theme that they had not been good at sports (not athletic) when they were children.

Eleven of the 15 participants (73 percent) stated they now had greatly reduced homosexual attractions as a result of the counseling they had received, and two participants said they were totally free of homosexual feelings. Thus, 87 of the participants in this study reported they had been helped by the counseling they received to overcome their unwanted homosexual feelings.

Additionally, 19 themes were articulated by 7 of 15 participants (47 percent):

- (a) my family was dysfunctional
- (b) I was sexually abused as a child
- (c) I was physically abused as a child
- (d) I kept to myself as a child, did not participate in school activities, and had few friends
- (e) I masturbated frequently
- (f) I had overwhelming feelings of worthlessness, and felt at the end of my rope
- (g) dealing with my feelings was a constant struggle between denial and acceptance
- (h) counseling support groups helped

- (i) a counselor who was a caring, trusting, encouraging, understanding, friend helped
- (j) a counselor who believed change possible helped
- (k) reparative therapy helped
- (l) learning masculine skills helped
- (m) learning to be open, communicate, share myself helped
- (n) faith in God, active in the church, Bible study, support by church members helped
- (o) wanted to overcome homosexual feelings and wanted to get married
- (p) counselor and/or support group shared my religious beliefs
- (q) having a wife, family, friends who were supportive helped
- (r) it did not help to have a counselor who did not understand the problem

At least five participants in the study (33 percent) mentioned the following themes:

- (a) wore girl's clothing as a child
- (b) knew I was different
- (c) there was family illness and/or death in childhood
- (d) did not tell anyone about homosexual attractions
- (e) got married as a way of dealing with homosexual feelings
- (f) had religious beliefs that were opposed to homosexuality
- (g) gay-affirmative counseling did not help
- (h) counseling that focused on anger, relationship with father, and others was helpful
- (i) having an ex-gay as a counselor helped
- (j) having a friendly counselor who did *not* understand the problem did *not* help
- (k) books and tapes about change helped
- (l) developing athletic skills helped

## Reasons for Seeking Counseling

Because of the phenomenological design of this research, this study does not provide conclusive empirical evidence of the cause of a homosexual orientation, nor offer positive proof a person can change sexual orientation. It does, however, provide some intriguing and informative data that points us in the direction of disturbed family relationships during childhood as a significant contributing factor in the etiology of homosexuality.

This research also underscores the fact that there are men who believe they have achieved some degree of success in overcoming an unwanted homosexual orientation. Eleven of the 15 participants (73 percent) noted that, although they still had occasional homosexual feelings, these feelings were greatly diminished and were now under control. Another two men said they were totally free of homosexual attractions.

Two insights of Nicolosi (1991) were seen in the responses of the group of men. First, as Nicolosi observes, "some homosexual desires will persist or recur during certain times in the life cycle." Second, that rather than speak about "cure," it is more accurate to speak about "change." Eleven of the participants did not see themselves as "cured"; they saw themselves as changed and still working on further change.

Moreover, this research gives additional insight into the experience of what it is like to struggle to overcome an unwanted homosexual orientation. That the experiences these participants had gone through were deeply painful was frequently evidenced, as nearly all the participants paused to fight back tears as they related their stories in the course of the interview.

### Common Childhood Patterns

Looking at the results of this research, they do suggest there is a certain toxic constellation of factors in the early childhood experiences of some males that provides risk factors for the development of homosexuality.

**Based on the themes articulated here, that toxic environment is likely to include a combination of these factors: a distant father, an overly close mother, lack of athletic skills, sexual/verbal/physical abuse, isolation from peers, and a dysfunctional family.** All the aforementioned were reported by at least eight participants (53 percent).

This research suggests that further investigation of these eight frequently mentioned themes would be useful.

The motives for seeking counseling are also interesting: 11 participants (73 percent) expressed variations of the theme that they wanted to have a traditional heterosexual marriage and children. The next most-mentioned reason for seeking change (mentioned by seven participants) was "feeling worthless," being at "the end of my rope," and being "suicidal." Religious beliefs that were opposed to homosexuality were mentioned by six participants.

In regard to evaluating their experiences in counseling, the most helpful factors were said to be: support groups (mentioned by 11 participants), a counselor who believed change is possible (mentioned by 10 participants), and a counselor who is trusting, caring, encouraging, understanding, and a friend (mentioned 10 times). This would appear to suggest that two factors are of great importance in effecting a change in sexual orientation—namely, a positive group experience, and the counselor's theoretical position and personal demeanor.

Also, it is interesting to note that 23 of the 83 themes that emerged in the interviews (28 percent) were voiced by at least seven of the 15 participants (47 percent). This would indicate that, while there are differences in experiences and perceptions of those experiences, there is also a substantial amount of commonality. Further, the fact that three years or more after the conclusion of therapy, 13 men relate that counseling has helped to greatly diminish or totally remove homosexual feelings, suggests that change to a heterosexual orientation certainly is possible for some, if perhaps not all, homosexual men.

### Bibliography

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