

Some Gay Advocates Acknowledge Reorientation Therapy as a Legitimate Option —

Simon LeVay Joins Douglas Haldeman in Qualified Support

by Linda Ames Nicolosi

Some gay advocates—including noted researcher Dr. Simon LeVay and psychologist Douglas Haldeman—say that reorientation therapy should be permissible out of respect for client choice and autonomy.

Douglas Haldeman is a gay man, an activist for gay causes, and a psychologist who has strongly advised against reorientation therapies. Still, he has conceded that—

“not all supporters of conversion therapy seek to interfere in the lives and freedoms of gay people, or...are out to do us harm. Rather...there is a religious basis from which these people are operating, not malicious, but rather in the service of their own religious beliefs....This is not to say that I endorse these beliefs or share them myself; but neither do I endorse the prospect that we, as gay scholars and activists, should interfere with people’s choices.”⁽¹⁾

Out of respect for personal autonomy, Haldeman grants that the client with strong religious convictions therefore has the right to pursue change:

“A corollary issue for many is a sense of religious or spiritual identity that is sometimes as deeply felt as is sexual orientation. For some it is easier, and less emotionally disruptive, to contemplate changing sexual orientation, than to disengage from a religious way of life that is seen as completely central to the individual’s sense of self and purpose.”⁽²⁾

Therefore, Dr. Haldeman says, such therapy is not necessarily harmful or unethical:

“There appear to be many dissatisfied homosexual-oriented individuals who seek psychological guidance or spiritual intervention to achieve a goal they identify as a change in sexual orientation... some...particularly those who have experienced less invasive styles of conversion therapy, seem not to have been affected adversely.”

LeVay Agrees with Haldeman

Likewise, the same qualified support for reorientation therapy comes from noted researcher Simon LeVay. LeVay garnered worldwide attention about ten years ago with a study that found a difference between the brains of a small group of homosexual men, most of whom had died of AIDS, and heterosexual men who had died of other causes. Although LeVay’s study has not been replicated, it is said to offer evi-

dence suggesting that for an unknown percentage of homosexual men, a disruptive prenatal hormonal event could have feminized a portion of the brain called the hypothalamus.

LeVay observes that the concept of psychological normality is a value judgment, ultimately outside the realm of science. *Science cannot tell us* what constitutes “core identity,” LeVay says—that is, whether a person can legitimately claim that “homosexual is *who I am*.”

Biological Error — Or Normal Variant?

LeVay’s statement followed his expressed concern that the prenatal hormonal influences that may predispose some people to homosexuality could be viewed as a “biological error.” And if those prenatal influences are biological errors, then a homosexual orientation could, following the same reasoning, be conceptualized as a developmental disorder.

But that conclusion need not follow from the evidence, he says. Because the issue of sexual identity is a philosophical rather than narrowly *scientific* matter, LeVay says, people who believe gay is “who they are” are free to consider their sexuality a normal variant. Similarly, people who choose sexual-reorientation therapy should have the right to choose change—even though he himself considers their choice to be misguided. As LeVay explains it:

“First, science itself cannot render judgments about human worth or about what constitutes normality or disease. These are value judgments that individuals must make for themselves, while possibly taking scientific findings into account.

“Second, I believe that we should as far as possible, respect people’s personal autonomy, even if that includes what I would call misguided desires such as the desire to change one’s sexual orientation.”⁽³⁾

Endnotes

⁽¹⁾ From a paper presented by Douglas Haldeman at a symposium entitled “Gays, Ex-Gays, Ex-Ex-Gays—Examining Key Religious, Ethical, and Diversity Issues,” American Psychological Association Annual Meeting, August 7th, 2000, Washington, D.C.

⁽²⁾ Ibid.

⁽³⁾ From “Sexual Orientation: The Science and its Social Impact,” by S. LeVay, to be published in *Reverso*, a gay and lesbian studies journal in Spain. NIH website. (http://members.aol.com/_ht_a/slevay/page12.html)