

# ANALYSIS OF DR. SPITZER'S STUDY OF REPARATIVE THERAPY

## Professional organizations and conversion therapy:

Various professional organizations, including the *American Academy of Pediatrics*, *American Psychiatric Association*, *American Psychological Association*, and the *National Association of Social Workers* [have stated that a person's sexual orientation cannot be changed](#) by reparative therapy. <sup>1,2</sup>

The one exception is the very small group: *National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality* (NARTH). NARTH was founded in 1992 as a "non-profit, educational organization dedicated to the research, therapy and prevention of homosexuality." It currently consists of "more than 1,000 mental-health professionals." -- fewer than 1% of the therapists who belong to either of the APA's. <sup>3,4</sup> [NARTH](#) strongly advocates the use of reparative therapy, believing it to be very effective and safe. They regard homosexual behavior as a treatable disorder.

The *American Academy of Pediatrics*, *American Counseling Association*, *American Association of School Administrators*, *American Federation of Teachers*, *American Psychological Association*, *American School Health Association*, *Interfaith Alliance Foundation*, *National Association of School Psychologists*, *National Association of Social Workers*, and *National Education Association* have formed the "*Just the Facts Coalition*." In 1999, they developed and endorsed "*Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation & Youth: A Primer for Principals, Educators and School Personnel*." It includes a number of quotations from major professional organizations expressing concern about reparative therapy and other methods of attempting to change an individual's sexual orientation. One example is the *American Academy of Pediatrics*, which stated: "*Therapy directed specifically at changing sexual orientation is contraindicated, since it can provoke guilt and anxiety while having little or no potential for achieving changes in orientation.*" <sup>5</sup>

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## Background of Dr. Spitzer's study:

Dr. Robert Spitzer is a Professor of Psychiatry at *Columbia University*. During his three decades of psychiatric research, he has specialized in the topic of human sexual orientation. In 1973, he was one of the members of the *American Psychiatric Association* who was instrumental in removing homosexuality from their list of mental illnesses. The APA was the first major mental-health agency to do so.

For their annual conference in 2000-MAY, the *American Psychiatric Association* had scheduled a panel discussion to debate whether there is any hard evidence that an adult's sexual orientation can be altered through reparative therapy. Dr. Robert Spitzer was scheduled to be the moderator. Two psychiatrists withdrew from the panel, stating that the topic is too politically charged to permit scientific discussion. The debate was then cancelled. According to the APA: "*The doctors who were to debate on the topic decided there was not enough scientific information to have a proper debate. They felt that any debate would turn into a political debate and not a true scientific debate. While there is information on reorientation therapy, there have been no controlled research studies.*" <sup>6</sup> Dr. Spitzer said: "*I think we ought to be able to talk about anything in a dispassionate way.*" Referring to the speakers who dropped out, he said, "*I think they [the psychiatrists who withdrew] felt that to even debate it was to legitimize the topic and they felt that since the groups that they regard as their enemy were kind of salivating over having the debate, they didn't want it.*"

*Exodus International*, a Fundamentalist Christian group who tries to help gays and lesbians change their sexual behavior, protested the cancellation. Their national board chairman, John Paulk of Colorado Springs, CO, said: "I'm here as one representative for a virtually unseen but sizable population. I once lived as a gay man, but now I'm heterosexual, something the American Psychiatric Association says does not exist." <sup>10</sup> It is notable that he did not say that he was once gay; he said that he "lived as a gay man." We have a hunch that he has had a bisexual orientation during all of his adult life, engaging first in homosexual behavior, and more recently in heterosexual behavior.

At the time of the proposed debate, Dr. Spitzer suspected that an adult's sexual orientation is fixed. He said: "There is no documentary evidence showing someone's sexual preference can be changed by therapy."

The term "sexual preference" is normally only meaningful when used to refer to persons with a bisexual orientation -- adults who are attracted to both men and women. Bisexuals are often attracted to one gender more than the other. They can thus be described as having a "preference." who The vast majority of adults have either a heterosexual or homosexual orientation. They are attracted to only one gender, and thus cannot accurately be said to have a "preference." Dr. Spitzer appears to have used the term here in place of the more generally used term "sexual orientation."

He continued: "There is only anecdotal evidence, mostly from the therapists themselves, claiming that what they do works. That's not very scientific. On the other hand, there's no scientific evidence to show that this is impossible...It hasn't been studied."

Before the scheduled debate, Dr. Spitzer had decided to conduct a study of "ex-gays" and "ex-lesbians," These are individuals who:

- Had once identified themselves as homosexuals.
- Had attempted to change their sexual orientation by:
  - either engaging in [reparative therapy](#) with a therapist, or
  - through spiritual counseling from a conservative Christian transformational ministry.
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- Now consider themselves to be heterosexual.

Almost all are Evangelical Christians.

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## Definitions of terms:

Since essentially all "ex-gays" and "ex-lesbians" are conservative Christians, they generally use the [same definitions of words as do Fundamentalist and other Evangelical Christians](#). That is:

- They regard a homosexual as a person who has sex with others of the same gender. That is, their definition is based on a person's behavior. This differs from the definition of "homosexual" by most therapists, human sexuality researchers, religious liberals, gays and lesbians. These latter groups define a homosexual as a person who is sexually attracted only to members of the same gender -- whether these feelings are acted upon or not.

- They rarely refer to bisexuals -- persons who are attracted to both men and women. They generally lump them together with gays and lesbians or with heterosexuals, depending upon their behavior at the time.

- A person with a bisexual orientation who enters therapy and makes a decision to confine their sexual relationship(s) to members of the opposite gender are considered to have "*left the homosexual lifestyle*," to have become "*ex-gays*" or "*ex-lesbians*," and to have become heterosexual. They are counted as success stories by reparative therapists or transformational ministries. Non-Evangelicals would suggest that the individuals are still bisexual; their orientation has remained unchanged.

- A person with a homosexual orientation who decides to become celibate is also considered a victory for reparative therapy or a transformation ministry; they have become an "ex." Again, non-Evangelicals would suggest that the individuals have not changed their orientation, which remains homosexual. They are simply celibate homosexuals.

## About the study:

According to Parul Varnell of the Chicago Free Press, "*Spitzer admits that he had 'great difficulty' finding people who claimed to have changed their orientation from gay to straight. Ex-gay groups regularly claim to know of 'thousands' of people who have 'changed' or 'left homosexuality.'* But after searching for nearly a year and a half, Spitzer could only find 274 possibilities." <sup>8</sup>

Dr. Robert Spitzer finally studied 143 "*ex-gays*" and 57 "*ex-lesbians*" who had reported that they had become "*straight*." During 45 minute telephone interviews with each subject, they were asked 60 questions about their "*feelings and behavior before and after their efforts to change orientation. They discussed their motives for change; their strategies, which included counseling, support groups, prayer and mentoring; and their current relationships with the opposite sex*". <sup>7</sup>

Dr. Spitzer reported:

- "*Some people can and do change. Like most psychiatrists, I thought that homosexual behavior could only be resisted, and that no one could really change their sexual orientation. I now believe this to be false.*" <sup>17</sup>

- That 86% of the men and 63% of the female subjects emerged from therapy still having feelings of attraction to persons of the same-sex. That is, after therapy they are bisexuals, not heterosexuals.

That sixteen (11%) of the men and 21 (37%) of the women report that they now have a heterosexual orientation. It is not known how many of these had entered therapy as bisexuals and how many had been homosexuals.

That 66% of the males and 44% of the females had arrived at "good heterosexual functioning." According to *Cnn.com*, that term is defined as having been "in a sustained, loving heterosexual relationship within the past year, getting enough satisfaction from the emotional relationship with their partner to rate at least seven on a 10-point scale, having satisfying heterosexual sex at least monthly and never or rarely thinking of somebody of the same sex during heterosexual sex."

"Of the 112 men (out of the total 143) who acknowledged that they masturbated, more than half (56 percent) said they used homosexual fantasies some of the time and about one-third (31 percent) said they seldom had opposite-sex masturbation fantasies." <sup>8</sup>

Of the 200 subjects, 86 had been referred to Dr. Spitzer by conservative Christian groups specializing in converting homosexuals. [NARTH](#) referred 46 subjects. Some other sources provided 68. It is apparent that the individuals that Dr. Spitzer interviewed were hand-selected from a very large group of persons who had either a homosexual or a bisexual orientation. Those who had been unable to change their sexual behavior would not have become subjects in the study.

There are more than 1,000 professional therapists who belong to NARTH. Assume that the average member has treated 50 clients a year for the past five years. That means that there are over 250,000 clients from which NARTH could select subjects for this study. Assuming that reparative therapy had a "cure" rate of 0.02% then NARTH would have been able to provide the approximately 50 "successful" clients to this study. But a cure rate of 0.02% can be expressed as a failure rate of 99.98% -- not a promising form of therapy! If one considers the anecdotal accounts of gays and lesbians who have committed suicide after failed reparative therapy, then it becomes even less attractive.

Dr. Spitzer reported his findings at a meeting of the *American Psychiatric Association* on 2001-MAY-9.

In later interviews, Dr. Spitzer said:

"Our sample was self-selected from people who already claimed they had made some change. We don't know how common that kind of change is. . . . I'm not saying that this can be easily done, or that most homosexuals who want to change can make this kind of change. I suspect it's quite unusual." <sup>13</sup>

"I suspect the vast majority of gay people would be unable to alter by much a firmly established homosexual orientation." <sup>14</sup>

"...the kinds of changes my subjects reported are highly unlikely to be available to the vast majority [of gays and lesbians]... "[only] a small minority -- perhaps 3% -- might have a "malleable" sexual orientation." He expressed a concern that his study results were being "twisted by the Christian right." <sup>15</sup>

He told the *Washington Post* in 2005 that supporters of reparative therapy have misrepresented the results of his study. He said:

"It bothers me to be their knight in shining armor because on every social issue I totally disagree with the Christian right...What they don't mention is that change is pretty rare."

He noting that the subjects of his study were not representative of the general population because they were considerably more religious. He calls as "*totally absurd*" the beliefs that everyone is born straight and that homosexuality is a choice. <sup>20</sup>

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### Responses to Dr. Spitzer's study:

In response to Dr. Spitzer's study, the APA issued a statement affirming its position and cautioning that "*there is no published evidence supporting the efficacy of reparative therapy as a treatment to change one's sexual orientation.*" <sup>Quoted in Ref. 2</sup>

Other comments were:

The then APA president, Lawrence Hartmann, a professor at Harvard Medical School, called Spitzer's study "*too flawed to publish.*" A *Washington Post* article stated that:

"Hartmann noted the study was retrospective, that it lacked controls or independent measurements, and was based entirely on self-reports by people who were motivated to say they had changed because of their affiliation with ex-gay or anti-gay groups." <sup>20</sup>

On 2001-SEP-23, Jack Drescher, M.D., FAPA Chair Committee on Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Issues of the American Psychiatric Association wrote a letter to the Finish Parliament which discussed the Spitzer study:

"As for the scientific merits of his study, I believe it is significantly flawed. One flaw is that the majority of subjects in the study had one 45-minute telephone interview with Dr. Spitzer and no follow-ups. Other than Dr. Spitzer, I can find no reputable researcher who will agree that this is an accurate way to assess whether a person has changed their sexuality. That point was underscored in another study presented at the same symposium. Schroeder and Shidlo's study (in press) found that many individuals who claimed to have changed sexual orientation during a first telephone interview changed their story at a second, follow-up interview." <sup>21</sup>

David Elliot, spokesperson for the *National Gay and Lesbian Task Force* said, "*The sample is terrible, totally tainted, totally unrepresentative of the gay and lesbian community.*"

Psychologist Douglas Haldeman of the *University of Washington* commented that there is no credible scientific evidence that sexual orientation can be changed, "*and this study doesn't prove that either.*" He noted that the participants appeared unusually skewed towards religious conservatives and people treated by therapists "*with a strong anti-gay bias.*"

Joan Gerry of the *Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD)* referred to the subjects as "*a self-selected sample of people who are so troubled by their sexual orientation that they will go to any lengths to attempt to 'change' it....These are people who live in a world where gays, lesbians and bisexuals are treated like second-class citizens.*"

The CNN.com report on the study claim that "*some gay people can turn straight if they really want to.*"

Doug Nave of *Covenant Network of Presbyterians* commented: "*...the subjects did not have any anonymity that might help them candidly report unfavorable outcomes; Spitzer could not assess their credibility face-to-face; and the findings were based entirely on the subjects' self-report (rather than, e.g., physiological measures of arousal), which research has shown is often very misleading. In addition, Spitzer's study has not been subject to any peer review or other normal professional tests of validity. Some therefore believe that the study merits no credit at all.*"<sup>12</sup> [Actually, after peer review, Dr. Spitzer's paper was published in the 2003-OCT issue of the *Archives of Sexual Behavior.*]

Barbara Pogue of the *Lone Star Citizen*, wrote: "*Spitzer concluded that sexual orientation shifts are definitely possible, albeit rare, unusual and difficult.*"<sup>16</sup>

Joe Nicolosi, president of the *National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH)*, said that the study is "*an historic event in the history of psychiatry's understanding of homosexuality.*"<sup>17</sup>

*Family Research Council*, a Fundamentalist Christian group, simply reported that: "*Dr Robert Spitzer's study of 200 former homosexuals found that change is possible... [He] found that 66 percent of the men and 44 percent of the women had achieved 'good heterosexual functioning.'* *The vast majority of the study participants reported that they were bothered only slightly, or not at all, by unwanted homosexual feelings.*" The implication is that the subjects were chosen at random from among homosexuals who had gone through therapy, and that most homosexuals can change their orientation. This is deceptive reporting.<sup>18</sup>

Family Research Council reported that the Spitzer study was not widely reported in the media. However, *Exodus International*, the largest Fundamentalist Christian umbrella group of transformational ministries stated that: "*The Spitzer study is reported in today's issue of USA Today, The Washington Post, The New York Times, and was released to hundreds of local newspapers by the Associated Press. The story is also being widely reported on the World Wide Web through such prominent news sites as foxnews.com, cbsnews.com, abcnews.go.com, and msnbc.com. Dr. Spitzer was featured on this morning's edition of 'Good Morning America.'*" 19

ABC News interviewed Dr. Spitzer about the hazards of "*change therapy*." He replied: "*There's no doubt that many homosexuals have been unsuccessful and, attempting to change, become depressed and their life becomes worse...I'm not disputing that. What I am disputing is that is invariably the outcome.*" He later told ABC news that some of his subjects had become despondent and even depressed after having been told "*...by many mental health professionals that there was no hope for them, they had to just learn to live with their homosexual feelings.*" 19

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## Conclusions:

We have not been able to find any information on the subjects' original sexual orientation. We suspect that most or all had a bisexual orientation and had previously engaged in at least some homosexual activity. After therapy, we suspect that they remained bisexual, and feel that they have successfully developed a relationship with a person of the opposite gender.

Telephone interview data on behavior and practice are notoriously unreliable. Individuals often answer questions according to what they think others expect of them. For example:

17% of American adults say that they tithe (i.e. give 10 to 13% of their income to their church). Only 3% really do. 9

Many polls indicate that the percentage of adults who say that they regularly attend religious services is about 40% in the U.S., and a little under 20% in Canada and perhaps 10% or less in Europe. But when noses are actually counted, the true figures are about half the stated North American figures (about 20% in the U.S. and 10% in Canada.)

On a topic as incendiary as changing one's sexual orientation, a lack of honesty can be expected on the part of many of the participants. This problem is even more severe in this study because so many of the subjects were so closely associated with ex-gay or anti-gay groups.

Assuming that the more than 1,000 therapists in NARTH each have had 50 clients per year over the previous five years, then they have treated over 250,000 homosexuals and bisexuals with reparative therapy. Various transformational ministries have treated other gays, bisexuals and

lesbians who were seeking change. Yet, Dr. Spitzer was only able to find 274 potential subjects for his study in all of America. This data alone indicates that reparative therapy is almost always a failure.

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**Author's note:**

I am personally enraged at the irresponsibility of the large professional mental health organizations. They have not had a good record about emerging therapies. They took little effort in the 1980's and 1990's to curb [recovered memory therapy](#) which generated false memories of incest, [Satanic ritual abuse](#), abuse in former lifetimes and abuse onboard UFOs. This experimental and untested therapy caused the destruction of tens or hundreds of thousands of families of origin, and probably triggered many hundreds or perhaps thousands of suicides.

Today, there are at least a 1,000 therapists conducting reparative therapy. There are many dozens of Fundamentalist Christian ministries also attempting to convert clients' sexual orientation. Yet no statistically valid, long term, peer-reviewed study in this field has ever been attempted that might give some indication of the therapy's safety and effectiveness. Dr. Spitzer's study was peer-reviewed and published. However, it was confined to a small number of carefully selected subjects who were interviewed by telephone. There are anecdotal stories of suicide attempts following failure of reparative therapy. With the information available in 2002, there was no reliable data on the therapy's safety and efficacy.

The situation is similar to that during the 1980s and 1990s with [recovered memory therapy](#) (RMT) and [multiple personality disorder therapy](#) (MPD). We now know that both were dangerous, responsible for the destruction of tens of thousands of families, created enormous numbers of false memories -- images of events that never happened. They drove some clients to suicide.

In 2006, the world is still waiting for a peer reviewed study of reparative therapy and transformational ministry therapy. If less than 1% of the millions of dollars spent on therapy had been directed to fund a meaningful study, then we would now be aware of the therapy's safety and effectiveness.