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Study: Some Gays Can Go Straight

By MALCOLM RITTER, AP Science Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) - An explosive new study says some gay people can turn straight if they really want to.

That conclusion clashes with that of major mental health organizations, which say that sexual orientation is fixed and that so-called reparative therapy may actually be harmful.

Gay rights activists attacked the study, and an academic critic noted that many of the 200 "ex-gays" who participated were referred by religious groups that condemn homosexuality.

Dr. Robert L. Spitzer, a psychiatry professor at Columbia University who led the study, said he cannot estimate what percentage of highly motivated gay people can change their sexual orientation.

But he said the research "shows some people can change from gay to straight, and we ought to acknowledge that."

He is scheduled to present his findings Wednesday in New Orleans at a meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, and said he plans to submit his work to a psychiatric journal for publication.

Presentations for the meeting were chosen by a committee of the association. Selection does not imply endorsement by the association, said John Blamphin, director of public affairs for the association.

The issue has been hotly debated in the scientific community and among religious groups, some of which contend gays can become heterosexuals through prayer and counseling.

Major mental health groups say nobody knows what causes a person's sexual orientation. Theories tracing homosexuality to troubled family dynamics or faulty psychological development have been discredited, the psychiatric association says. The American Psychological Association says most scientists think sexual orientation probably comes from a complex interaction including biological and environmental factors.

Spitzer spearheaded the APA's 1973 decision to remove homosexuality from its list of mental

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disorders. At the time, he said homosexuality does not meet the criteria for a mental disorder, and he called for more research to determine whether some people can change their sexuality.

Spitzer, who said he does not offer reparative therapy and began his study as a skeptic, said the research was paid for out of his department's funds.

He conducted 45-minute telephone interviews with 200 people, 143 of them men, who claimed they had changed their orientation from gay to heterosexual. The average age of those interviewed was 43.

They answered about 60 questions about their sexual feelings and behavior before and after their efforts to change. Those efforts had begun about 14 years before the interviews for the men and 12 years for the women.

Most said they had used more than one strategy to change their orientation. About half said the most helpful step was work with a mental health professional, most commonly a psychologist. About a third cited a support group, and fewer mentioned such aids as books and mentoring by a heterosexual.

Spitzer concluded that 66 percent of the men and 44 percent of the women had arrived at what he called good heterosexual functioning.

That term was defined as being 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.

In addition, 89 percent of men and 95 percent of women said they were bothered only slightly, or not at all, by unwanted homosexual feelings. Only 11 percent of the men and 37 percent of the women reported a complete absence of homosexual indicators, including same-sex attraction.

Psychologist Douglas Haldeman, who is on the clinical faculty of the University of Washington and has published evaluations of reparative therapy, said the study offers no convincing evidence of change.

He said there is no credible scientific evidence that suggests sexual orientation can be changed, "and this study doesn't prove that either."

He also said the participants appeared unusually skewed toward religious conservatives and people treated by therapists "with a strong anti-gay bias." Such participants might think that being a homosexual is bad and feel pressured to claim they were no longer gay, Haldeman said.

Some 43 percent of the sample had been referred to Spitzer by "ex-gay ministries" that offer programs to gay people who seek to change, organizations Haldeman said are chiefly sponsored by religious conservatives. An additional 23 percent were referred by the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, which says most of its members consider homosexuality a developmental disorder.

David Elliot, a spokesman for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) in Washington, also criticized the study because of the main sources of its participants.

“The sample is terrible, totally tainted, totally unrepresentative of the gay and lesbian community,” he said.

Spitzer said he has no proof that participants were honest. But he said several findings suggest their statements cannot be dismissed out of hand.

For example, he said, participants had no trouble offering detailed descriptions of their behavior. Spitzer also said the gradual nature of the change they reported indicates “it is not a simple made-up story.”

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On the Net:

American Psychiatric Association: <http://www.psych.org/public-info/dpa-fact.cfm>

American Psychological Association: <http://helping.apa.org/daily/answers.html>

National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality: <http://www.narth.com>

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