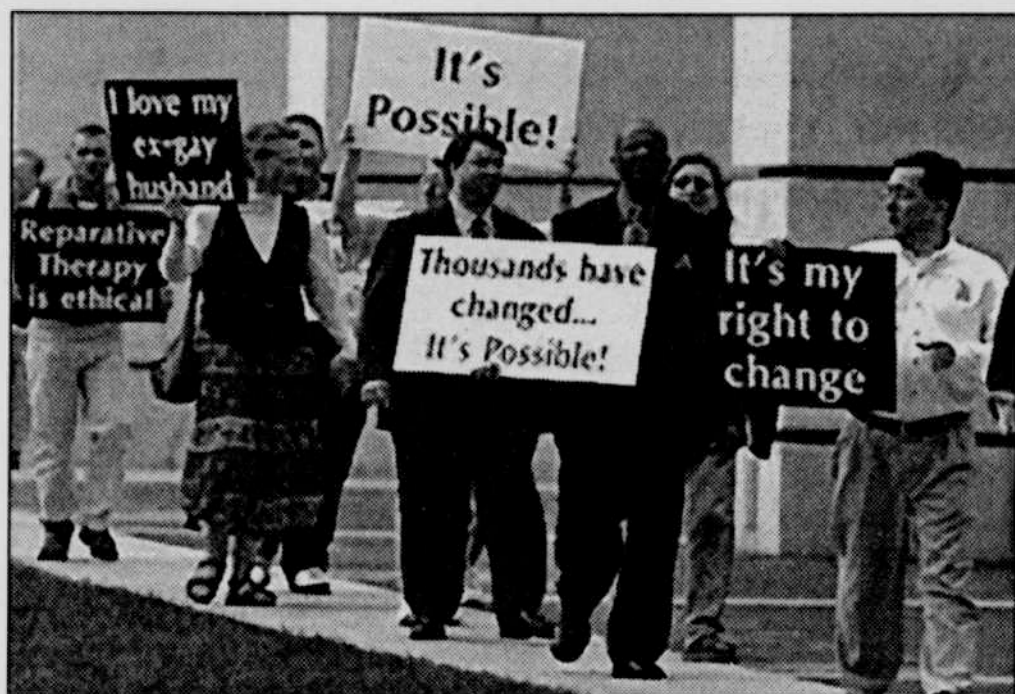


PSYCHED OUT

Questionable study says some homosexuals can change orientations

by Jim Radosta



"Ex-gay" men and women protest during the 2000 American Psychiatric Association Convention

A new study claiming some homosexuals can be scared straight through prayer, therapy and mentoring relationships is unscientific and profoundly biased, queer advocates said May 10. They questioned the research's validity because of the author's anti-gay views, close ties to right-wing political groups and lack of objective data.

Dr. Robert Spitzer of New York's Columbia University presented his findings during the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in New Orleans. He said he interviewed 200 men and women who have experienced and sustained a significant shift from homosexual to heterosexual attraction.

Many of the subjects had sought change because of disillusionment with a promiscuous lifestyle and unstable, stormy relationships, according to Spitzer. By the time of the study interview, three-quarters of the men and half of the women had become married.



Dr. Robert Spitzer

One surprising discovery, Spitzer said, was that 67 percent of the men who rarely or never had felt any opposite-sex attraction before the change effort now report significant heterosexual attraction. Even those whose orientation did not

change—but who gave up homosexual behavior—experienced a significant improvement in emotional health, according to the study.

Tim McFeeley, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force political director, called the research "snake oil packaged as science." He said 43 percent of the interviewees were referred to Spitzer by ex-gay ministries and another 23 percent by the anti-gay National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality.

"To say the very least, the data is tainted and biased," McFeeley said. "This pseudoscience lacks credibility."

The NARTH Internet site is filled with diatribes about genetics, reparative therapy and "the misuse of science." The lead essay under the heading "Activism in the Schools" is written by none other than Scott Lively, former right-hand man to Oregon Citizens Alliance executive director Lon Mabon.

Wayne Besen, Human Rights Campaign associate director of communications,

slammed the study, saying right-wingers have misinterpreted it to prove sexual orientation is changeable. The results, he claimed, show just the opposite.

Besen said that a disproportionate number of the subjects, 37 percent, were suicidal before undergoing the study and that 93 percent said religion was extremely important in their lives. Even though participants were a hand-selected sample of activists—with 78 percent hav-

ing spoken out publicly on conversion therapy—only 17 percent of the men and 55 percent of the women said they were entirely heterosexual after at least five years of expensive, time-consuming therapy.

Dr. Lorraine Hart, a psychologist and a member of the Knoxville, Tenn., chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians, said she is deeply dismayed that mental health professionals still are considering claims that homosexuals can or should change their orientation. "Perhaps we ought to research how to repair homophobia instead of homosexuality."

Joan M. Garry, Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation executive director, said the "conclusions are based on...people who are so troubled by their sexual orientation that they will go to any lengths to attempt to 'change' it. Spitzer defines them as 'highly motivated,' and that's not surprising. These are people who live in a world in which gays, lesbians and bisexuals are treated like second-class citizens."

In 1973, Spitzer was a key member of an APA panel that removed homosexuality from a list of a mental disorders. Since then, though, he seems to have undergone major conversion therapy himself.

Spitzer, who insists he holds no anti-gay bias, now publicly says sexual minorities shouldn't be allowed to adopt, marry or serve openly in the military. He made these remarks during a news conference last year with representatives from the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family, two religious political groups.

Phil Hobizal of the Portland Fellowship, a local ex-gay ministry, also has entered the debate, coming to the defense of the counseling practices.

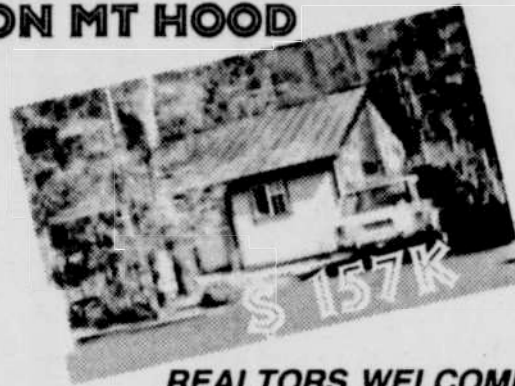
"There are those people who did not find our program helpful and have chosen to embrace their homosexuality, and we say they have the freedom to do that," he told the *Washington Post*.

Meanwhile, researchers Michael Schroeder and Ariel Shidlo presented a long-term study May 9 that stands in stark contrast to Spitzer's findings. Of their interviewees, a whopping 88 percent were unable to "convert" their sexual orientation.

Another 9 percent reported that they were struggling or celibate. And just 3 percent reported being successful and living contentedly as heterosexuals.

"Just imagine a drug company putting a product on the market that had an 88 percent failure rate and only a 3 percent 'success' rate," McFeeley said. "Yet proponents of conversion therapy are willing to subject clients to a so-called treatment that has been rejected by every major medical and mental health association." □

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