

New 'ex-gay' study lauded by right but faulted on methods: Assessment of "reparative therapy"

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A new study suggesting that religiously motivated conversion from homosexual orientation is possible and not harmful has been hailed by social conservatives, but others are questioning the study's methodology and the motive behind it.

The study, funded by an "ex-gay" group and released in book form by a Christian publisher, is called *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation*. Released last month in conjunction with a conference by Exodus International, the organization that sponsored the study, it was written by psychologists Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse.

Jones is a professor at Wheaton College in Illinois, one of evangelicalism's flagship academic institutions. Yarhouse is the director of the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity at Regent University in Virginia. Regent was founded by conservative Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson.

The study is the first long-term attempt to assess people who enter Christian "reparative therapy" to alter their sexual orientation. The American Psychological Association and other professional mental-health organizations have deemed sexual orientation to be immutable and consider attempts to change it via therapy prone to causing psychological harm.

"The present study produces significant scientific evidence that sexual orientation is in fact changeable for some, and this should trigger a considerable reexamination of many of the presuppositions about sexual orientation and sexual identity that hold sway in contemporary Western culture," write Jones and Yarhouse.

The study followed 98 participants in Exodus groups over periods varying from 30 months to four years. Of those, 72 were men and 26 were women, with an average

age of 37. However, by the end of the study, more than a quarter of the original participants had dropped out or disappeared. Only 73 completed the series of three interviews that researchers used for data.

Of the remaining people, researchers determined that 15 percent had experienced a “significant” decrease in same-sex attraction and a similarly significant increase in heterosexual desire. Another 23 percent felt they had undergone a significant reduction in homosexual attraction but had not developed heterosexual desires sufficient enough to enter into relationships with the opposite sex.

Jones and Yarhouse called that 38 percent of the sample successful in altering their sexual orientation, although they admitted that many of the successful participants still experienced occasional same-sex desires.

A third category, 29 percent of those who completed the study, said they experienced insignificant amounts of reduction in their same-sex attractions but were committed to continuing therapy. Another 15 percent said they had experienced no reduction in their homosexuality and were confused about whether to remain in therapy.

Baptist Press, the Southern Baptist Convention’s news service, and Focus on the Family both published stories hailing the study as a breakthrough, suggesting that large percentages of gays can successfully change their sexual orientation.

“These results are comparable with the success rates for dealing with other difficult issues, like depression, and more favorable than those reported by U.S. Department of Labor tax-funded programs in overcoming substance abuse,” said Melissa Fryear, head of the Colorado-based ministry’s gender-issues department.

But critics said the study’s methods left much to be desired. Its sample—as Jones and Yarhouse concede—was self-selected from participants in an evangelical Christian ministry, it relied exclusively on the truthfulness of patients self-reporting their desires and feelings, and it had a high dropout rate.

Jim Burroway, a contributor to the Box Turtle Bulletin gay news blog (www.boxturtlebulletin.com), in his analysis posted September 17 said the study’s “rigorous design was not matched by similar rigor in execution.”

Burroway particularly criticized the inattention to what motivated the large number of dropouts—many of whom, he hypothesized, may have dropped out because they embraced their homosexuality and wanted nothing more to do with Exodus or the study.

Clinton Anderson, director of the American Psychological Association's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns Office, said September 21 that he had not yet read the study but questioned why it was published in book form by a Christian publisher rather than in a scientific journal. "Even if you think it's an excellent study, why would they choose to not have it published in the peer-reviewed literature? That's where it belongs," he said. *-Associated Baptist Press*