

of these individuals that Spitzer found volunteers for his investigation.

The Spitzer Study

In order to appreciate the contribution of this investigation, it is necessary to have a clear idea of its limitations. The study did not assess the techniques of reparative therapy itself. The particular sample reported on was not representative of those who seek such interventions. The research was not designed to ascertain the effectiveness of reparative therapy nor did it assess complications resulting from such intervention. It is possible, for example, that most people who requested the intervention were either not helped by it or actually harmed in some fashion. The design of the study was such that these issues were intentionally not addressed. As a single point study of people selected to have benefited from the treatment, the sample was obviously highly biased. The data base reported on in the study therefore does not support any generalizations about reparative therapy per se. Spitzer cites estimates of success in sexual orientation change by Socarides and Nicolosi, but their global impressions do not meet scientific standards for acceptable data.

The Usefulness of the Study

This is an investigation of sexual histories taken in a detailed and systematic manner of an unusual sample. It has three major strengths. First, the structured interview used is comprehensive and carefully constructed. Second, the data are available and open to inspection by others. This type of transparency and sharing of information is a welcome advance, supporting scholarly values at a time when political correctness often dominates academic discourse. Finally, the data support inferences already available to therapists and scientists but obscured by controversy. Some degree of plasticity with respect to the object of sexual desire appears possible for some people. This was already known by the scientists and clinicians, but because the possibilities for abuse of the majority through misguided application of “reparative” principles has been so great, this point has recently been obscured. Scientific and clinical judgment suggest that even among a delimited universe of highly religious men, meaningful change is probably impossible for most. The small minority for whom such change is possible, however, have rights and the subgroup of that minority who have psychiatric disabilities also have clinical needs which must be appropriately responded to by therapists. The needs and attributes of this minority, however, must

not be taken as applicable to those of most gay/lesbian people.

Conclusion

Systematic investigation of unusual cases has always been an integral part of academic—clinical work. The findings of the Spitzer study are part of this tradition. The fact that this research was carried out is even more important than its findings. It is necessary for reasoned inquiry to proceed during periods of social unrest when pressures towards censorship are particularly great.

The Politics of Sexual Choices

John H. Gagnon, Ph.D.

122, blvd. Carnot, Nice 06300, France; e-mail: jgagnon@bigplanet.com.

The decision, recorded in the article by Spitzer, for people who have a well established history of sex with persons of the same gender to seek professional help and religious encouragement to start a life of having sex with persons of the other gender, becomes remarkable only in particular political and scientific circumstances. I will not discuss the methodology or substance of the article in any detail. This will undoubtedly be the topic of a number of other commentaries. My concern is how the political and scientific contexts shape the way in which individual changes in gender preference in erotic relationships are understood. Only two comments about the changers—the folks who made the change seem to have done so for reasons that have to do with becoming more conventional in their social performances rather than for a more satisfying “sexual,” in the narrow sense, life. And it may well be that the amount of “*sturm and drang*” involved is a function of the moral condition (which is a consequence of its political status) of their prior sexual lives—sinners always proclaim the difficulty of giving up their sins as they return to the moral community, in this case the moral community of straightness.

Let me first address the problem of politics. There are those who believe that it is possible to study “homosexuality” without addressing the political context of their research, but I am not one of them. Although there is survey evidence that antigay prejudice is less than it once was, there still remains a substantial number of persons who are actively antigay and a still larger number whose latent antigay sentiments can be mobilized by provocative political campaigns. At the present time, important positions in the U.S. federal government are occupied by persons of these antigay persuasions.

Many gay men and lesbian women feel threatened by these circumstances. These fears are not fanciful. Thus, the availability of programs to “help” persons who are unhappy with the fact that they are having sex with persons of the same gender can reasonably be construed as the beginning of the proverbial “slippery slope.” A slippery slope that may lead to the prescription of behavior change programs for all persons who continue to maintain a sexual life with partners of the same gender. This appears to be the most benevolent option.

This is the political context. A number of antigay folks feel that having same gender partners is both sinful and psychologically pathological and they are actively seeking to make folks who have same gender partners sufficiently unhappy that they will try to change the gender of their preferred sexual partner.

Let me use an analogy. Consider being Jewish. As with a preference for a same gender sexual partner, being Jewish is for the child who grows up in a Jewish family “un-chosen.” Even when surrounded by Christians (or Muslims or atheists), being Jewish, for the growing child, is part of the natural order of things. At some point, the young person realizes that there is a political context around being a Jew, that there is a cost to this “un-chosen” preference. In less politically fraught circumstances, this may only result in housing or work discrimination; as the level of fraughtness increases, it may result in forced conversion to the majority religion (or even “voluntary” conversions—see the composer Arnold Schoenberg or the philosopher Karl Popper—or simply name changing to avoid identification by hostile others) or in most terrifying circumstances, being exterminated in camps constructed for the purpose.

So Jews are anxious about the survival of their practices (and, in certain circumstances, their very selves.) They worry about “Jews for Jesus,” they are concerned about political attacks on the State of Israel, and they discuss rates of marital exogamy as threats to the existence of Judaism. One may differ about the level of danger, but one cannot quarrel with the notion that this small minority that has been victim of systematic and murderous persecution has the right to feel nervous about the intentions of the majority.

Men who have had sex with persons of the same gender have had similar experiences with these practices (from discrimination to mass murder in Germany, but with discrimination to imprisonment and state encouraged violence in other countries). Prejudice against lesbian women has not been as intense, but antilebian practices have been both common and in many cases violent.

So that is, in brief, the political context.

And now for the issue of rates of change between one significant social practice to another. A change that occurs within the political context has to be understood within that context.

Human beings change their membership groups at very high rates and often do so with great success (and such changes usually occur in coercive political and economic circumstances). Thus, vast numbers of persons from very different “native” cultures have crossed national borders and have become, for the most part, satisfactory members of the new cultures to which they have moved. In the nineteenth century, millions of rural, non-English speaking peoples, who often lived in societies with quite different political, economic, religious, reproductive, and sexual regimes moved to the United States, learned to live in urban settings, operate in a market economy, work in factories, tolerate other religions, reduce their family size, change their sexual lives, and give up one language and learn another. For some, it took three generations to become “Americans”; some never succeeded and fell afoul of the prisons and the mental hospitals, others went home (in the millions), but most became “Americans” (indeed some so quickly succeeded that positive programs of discrimination in elite universities had to be created to prevent them from succeeding). All found themselves both objects of oppression and discrimination as well as enlightened attempts to “Americanize” them, both of which shaped their individual and collective adaptations.

Becoming an American was not an easy task and many worried about the abandonment of old ways. The compound names for most American ethnic groups (Irish-Americans, German-Americans, Japanese-Americans, and the like) reflect both collective and individual ambivalence about becoming American. Marrying out of the group was one of the great markers of the betrayal of the old and the triumph of the new. Marriage across ethnic, religious, skin color, and class lines were the central dramas of the American cinema of the 1930s. The lament of mothers and fathers as they watched their children rise in the world and abandon them, their religion, and their views of family life is a chronic dirge in the American story. Even in the present day, the notion of “giving back to the community,” which is ritual expectation of members of minority groups who are becoming Americans, is a measure of the attempts of an older, usually oppressed social world, to hold on to their members.

But what does this example of culture change have to do with sex, particularly that aspect of sex which has to do with the gender of the partner one prefers (a.k.a. homosexuality and heterosexuality)? If one believes that sexual partner preferences are fundamentally different than all other preferences, a position marked the choice of the phrase “sexual

orientation” or the belief that there is direct pathway from a gene (or complex of genes or mixture of chemicals) and the like to desiring to have sex with someone who has similar genitals, the answer is nothing. But, if you believe, as I do, that the complex of sex practices is learned in a particular historical and cultural situation, then the idea of comparing sexual practices with other social practices is not very mysterious.

It is clear from the Spitzer study that some persons who have long (and perhaps exclusive) histories of sex with same gender partners move, often with religious and other “therapeutic” supports, to lives in which they have sex with persons of the other gender. From prior studies, we know that substantial numbers of persons who have had long (and perhaps exclusive) lives with partners of the other gender have voluntarily (sometimes describing the experience as finding their true selves) and sometimes with therapeutic support to lives in which they have sex exclusively or nearly exclusively with persons of the same gender. This movement back and forth in partner preferences is not unexpected given the general movement of humans from one to another deeply seated and “un-chosen” life way or practice.

Most of our early life is “un-chosen.” We learn whatever is expected of us, sometimes well, sometimes poorly, sometimes we learn what adults want of us, sometimes we learn the opposite. Religious parents raise atheists as well as believers, parents raise children who speak English, who then learn French and emigrate, working class parents raise children who go to Harvard and learn to exploit the working class, rich parents raise children who become communists. These are all minority outcomes, but they happen. If you believe, as I do, that language, religion, and gender learning are as deeply embedded in a person (as un-chosen, if you will) as the specific sexual preference of the gender of the sexual partner, then in adulthood when some ways of life seem uncomfortable and choices are apparent (sometimes hard choices), it is not surprising that changes take place.

It is the politics of the change that shape most of the debate. The actual process is quite understandable and expectable. Whether such change should happen, what direction it should take, whether it should be encouraged, and who should decide whether it is a good or bad thing for either individuals or communities is the political question.

Too Flawed: Don’t Publish

Lawrence Hartmann, M.D.

Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School,
147 Brattle St., Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138; e-mail:
lhartmann@worldnet.att.net.

I think Spitzer’s paper is too flawed to publish, and is likely to do harm. Yet, here it is, being published.

The area of change in sexual orientation is an interesting one, worth study, and one where little is known, but where many think they know, and where many have passionate commitments to what they think they know. The area is embedded in so much context, history, bias, passion, self-delusion, and even lying that it deserves a higher level than Spitzer provides of careful and detailed openness, skepticism, and multiple levels of scrutiny.

There are too many problems, major and minor, in the article to discuss in reasonable detail in a brief commentary. I will touch on only a few below. Some of the problems are technical; others are of emphasis or skepticism, of definitions, of numbers, and of ethics. Some of these problems were pointed out to Spitzer by many very critical peers when he presented the paper at a May 2001 panel at the meeting of the American Psychiatric Association. He has not fixed them. The article remains a failure at establishing what it says it establishes: that some gay people can be changed to straight.

One might, from this article (from some of its interesting and energetic outreach attempts, data, careful-looking psychiatric research apparatus, and discussion of possible problems), and from my numerical calculations below, legitimately conclude that a *minute* number of gay people *may* be able to change their sexual orientation somewhat in some way, *perhaps related to* interventions designed to help them change. Modesty and accuracy demand “may,” not “can,” and “perhaps related to,” not “caused by.” And a *minute* number is a key element in this potential legitimate conclusion—and that is very different from the loose common word “some.” (That the vast majority of gay people probably cannot change orientation is essentially left out of this study).

Spitzer rightly recognizes that credibility of his subjects is a basic and significant potential problem, but I think his statements are rather naive and under-concerned about that. Also, the selection of subjects is worth far more scrutiny than it gets. A study designed around the question “Can I find any people who say ‘x’ about themselves?” especially in an area people feel strongly about and have fought about—such a study is particularly vulnerable to (and pretty much invites) pressure, distortion, bias, self-delusion, and lying. Spitzer does not protect adequately against this, as even he seems to know.

Selection/inclusion criteria and procedures are not made clear enough. There was no prospective study. No controls. No independent observations or measurements at all: physiological, psychological, social. Spitzer relies wholly on self-reporting and on one 45-min telephone