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Can Gays Switch Sides?

By Jeffrey Kluger

More than a generation ago, psychiatrist Robert Spitzer helped millions of Americans get instantly well. In 1973 Spitzer, a professor at Columbia University, led the charge to have homosexuality removed from diagnostic manuals as a mental disorder. In a stroke, a segment of the population once considered sexually deviant was declared mentally sound.

Last week Dr. Spitzer appeared to take a troubling step away from that clean bill of health. In a study presented at the convention of the American Psychiatric Association, he argued that some "highly motivated" homosexuals may be able to turn themselves into heterosexuals. The A.P.A. quickly distanced itself from the study, and gay-rights groups condemned it. In the days since, the work has sparked a firestorm in the psychological community, one that may say more about questionable science than it ever could about sexual orientation.

The biggest problem with Spitzer's study is the way he conducted it. Relying on telephone surveys, he interviewed 143 men and 57 women who had sought help--in some cases through religious groups that openly oppose homosexuality--to change their sexual orientation. His surveys convinced him that 66% of the men and 44% of the women had indeed achieved "good heterosexual functioning."

Those are surprising numbers--until you consider the sample group. Drawing conclusions about homosexuality from gays trying to go straight is like surveying public opinion about one religion by polling people converting to another. Spitzer argues that since the goal of his work was simply to show that heterosexual conversion is possible, contacting people working to make the change was the only sensible method. "The question wasn't, Does everybody change?" he says. "The question was, Does anyone?"

Fair enough, but did anyone? Spitzer measured his "good heterosexual functioning" with decidedly subjective standards--asking the respondents if their heterosexual experiences were satisfying. More rigorous studies might have looked for signs of physical arousal in the presence of various stimuli. What's more, his work has not yet been published or peer reviewed, two basic stripes that studies usually must earn to be taken seriously.

Spitzer is clearly the same researcher he was in 1973, and nothing in his study suggests that he believes homosexuality has any place in a manual of disorders. The new work, however, does feel oddly out of step

with mainstream thinking. Most scientists stress that everything from brain architecture to environment help determine sexuality. While gays may be able to swear off one kind of sex and grimly slog away at another, that doesn't alter their basic orientation. "It's possible to change almost any human behavior," says geneticist Dean Hamer of the National Institutes of Health. "But changing the underlying mechanism is a different matter." A study presented at the same convention addressed the same topic and found that of 202 homosexuals who sought to change, 178 failed. Spitzer stands by his findings and insists they should never be used to justify coercive or discriminatory treatment of gays. In a culture in which homosexuals already face so much of both, however, his work certainly doesn't help.

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