

Sexual Orientation Change Efforts: Why 'harm' is a red herring

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James and Janet would like to marry, but James worries that he experiences some latent sexual attraction to men. A friend of his left his wife and children for another man and James does not want to risk this.

John is a therapist who has assisted some men in reducing same-sex attractions. James asks him for help but he declines. The UK Council for Psychotherapy have introduced new rules forbidding such efforts as being "not in the patient's best interests". They claim that although "sometimes limited effect has been reported", there is "overwhelming evidence that undergoing such therapy is at considerable emotional and psychological cost."

This distresses James. He does not want to be harmed. He writes to the UKCP asking what the 'overwhelming evidence' is. Their polite reply evades the question. Then he is disturbed to hear on Radio 4 (*Sunday* programme, 3 Feb 2013) Dr Di Hodgson of UKCP say, "whether or not something works doesn't mean that it is ethical or in the public interest or the right thing to do for someone. So we have taken a view in a way which is regardless of the scientific findings." So even if therapy might help him, the UKCP have taken a view "regardless of the scientific findings" that he has no right to receive it. And, sadly, John is living in fear of his own professional body. Something must be badly wrong.

John shows him a 2007 submission to the Church of England from a special interest group in the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which also warned that such therapy can be "deeply damaging,"¹ citing two studies. "The first study claimed that change was possible for a small minority (13%) of LGB people, most of whom could be regarded as bisexual at the outset." James checked the study for himself and was shocked to find that the Royal College had grossly misrepresented it. It actually said, "The majority of participants gave reports of change from a predominantly or exclusively homosexual orientation before therapy to a predominantly or exclusively heterosexual orientation ...". The Royal College had changed 'majority' to read 'small minority' and "predominantly or exclusively homosexual" to read "bisexual". Was this not effectively scientific fraud – the Royal College misleading the Church?

The Royal College described the second study as finding "little effect as well as considerable harm". The first study comprised mainly 'satisfied' clients; this second one selected people 'dissatisfied' with their therapy. "Help us document the damage of homophobic therapies" said the advertisement for participants (later modified). Yet as many as 61% reported finding some help in the therapy. A larger number, 85%, reported some harm (the total exceeds 100% because some reported both help and harm).

Both of these studies have been criticised methodologically – they were not prospective (following people over a period of time not knowing what the end result would be) and did not use robust measures of same-sex attraction or harm. But John knew a study which addressed these weaknesses – the only such study in existence, he believed. Jones & Yarhouse (2011) followed a

¹<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/Submission%20to%20the%20Church%20of%20England.pdf>

cohort of people through church-based change ministries for several years. They found that stress levels (measuring 'harm') went down rather than up and said, "the findings of this study appear to contradict the commonly expressed view that sexual orientation is not changeable and that the attempt to change is highly likely to result in harm."

Dr Nicholas Cummings, a former American Psychological Association president, said it was, "the kind of scientific research I had in mind when in the mid-1970s I introduced my successful resolution in the APA Council of Representatives that homosexuality is not a disease ... I have waited over thirty years for this ...".

James did not expect easy success in his personal aspirations but he concluded that the 'harm' issue had been used illegitimately by people who held an ideological doctrine, in Dr Hodgson's words, "regardless of the scientific findings".

He was gaining confidence that he might yet marry the woman he loved. But he wished that the Church would challenge the Royal College over its misrepresentations, and that the UKCP would give John freedom to help him reduce his same-sex attractions.

The authors are respectively a Co-Director and a member of the Council of Reference of *Core Issues Trust*, a charity that assists people who have unwanted same-sex attractions.