

**The Quiet Death of Sexual Orientation Immutability:  
How Science Loses When Political Advocacy Wins**

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## **Abstract**

This recently published comprehensive review article is worth reading for anyone with an interest in being up-to-date on the science and legal status of sexual orientation change. In this review of the work by Diamond and Rosky (2016), I attempt to outline and summarize the evidence they cite to support their belief that assertions of sexual orientation immutability are unscientific, legally unnecessary, and unjust. I then provide some observations about the authors' perspective, with particular attention to their treatment of professional sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE), the plausibility of which the authors summarily dismiss despite their affirmation of sexual orientation fluidity in most every context except psychotherapy. I also highlight the implicit and explicit acknowledgements by the authors of how the science of sexual orientation has been compromised when it is perceived to be at odds with advocacy goals. Finally, I provide educated speculation about the impact of the authors' worldview on their treatment of the immutability question. The perceived ongoing political utility of immutability claims among gay activists likely ensures that such assertions will die a very quiet death within professional psychology, Diamond and Rosky's admirable work notwithstanding.

A recent article summarizing research on sexual orientation immutability may prove to be the turning point in scientific and academic discourse regarding this crucial subject. Diamond and Rosky (2016) marshal an array of scientific and legal evidence to conclude that the conventional notion of sexual orientation as immutable and fixed is no longer supportable or a necessary anchor for sexual minority rights. In doing so, these authors suggest that the advancement in lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) civil rights has been unwittingly aided by a scientific understanding that ultimately has proven to be inaccurate. They also weigh in on sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE).

### **Immutability Arguments in Science and Law**

Diamond and Rosky begin their analysis by providing background on immutability arguments within science and law. In terms of law, the authors noted that the concept of immutability played no essential role in the Supreme Court's decision making same-sex marriage constitutionally legal throughout America. They then concluded, "In light of the Supreme Court victory in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, we believe if there was ever a moment when it was most possible and most important to retire immutability arguments for sexual minority rights, that moment has arrived" (p. 2). They then utilize a substantial amount of text to assert that immutability claims are not scientific. As a precursor to their analysis, Diamond and Rosky noted that sexual orientation (1) has no single cause but rather multiple biological and nonbiological origins, (2) is not easy to define or measure, (3) is influenced by cultural factors, and (4) cannot be primarily defined even in terms of sexual attractions. The authors proceed to underscore the unscientific nature of sexual orientation immutability claims through their examination of five important areas: genetic contributions, neuroendocrine contributions, evidence for change, the role of choice, and the gap between science and advocacy.

#### **Genetic Contributions**

Diamond and Rosky note the important development of epigenetics, where chemical mechanisms alter the expression of genes at different points in the organism's life cycle in response to certain environmental influences. Epigenetics constitutes a direct challenge to traditional models of

genetic inheritance. “In essence,” conclude the authors, “the current scientific revolution in our understanding of the human epigenome challenges the very notion of being ‘born gay,’ along with the notion of being ‘born’ with *any* complex trait. Rather, our genetic legacy is dynamic, developmental, and environmentally embedded” (p. 4; authors’ italics).

Diamond and Rosky then turn to the issue of heritability, which they correctly indicate are estimates of variability between persons in a population and do not represent the balance of genetic and environmental influences within persons. They report studies of heritability that suggest 32% of the population variability in sexual orientation is due to genetic factors, which is less than it is for a range of characteristics not considered to be immutable. These include divorce, smoking, low back pain, and feeling body dissatisfaction. Their analysis of research literature related to twin concordance rates and human genomes likewise point in a similar direction. They cite another recent review with which they agree: “Bailey and colleagues (in press) concluded from their review that sexual orientation is somewhat—but not mostly—genetic, and that it is unquestioningly influenced by environmental factors, given the relatively low concordance of same-sex orientation in identical twins” (p. 4). Diamond and Rosky also take up the greater apparent genetic influence on male as opposed to female sexual orientation. This may not suggest less immutability among men, they contend, but instead may reflect the greater and more consistent stigmatization of male same-sex sexuality, which would “. . . allow genetic propensities to play a greater and more consistent role in the expression of male than female same-sex sexuality” (p. 5).

### **Neuroendocrine Contributions**

Diamond and Rosky offer a similarly tempered view of the neuroendocrine model, which postulates that exposure to sex-atypical levels of androgens or estrogens in utero may shape later sexual orientation. They observe that currently much of the research relevant to this theory comes from animal studies, and indicate that extrapolating from animal to humans is fraught with uncertainties. Thus, all that can be accurately stated is to report that direct evidence for prenatal hormone influences on adult sexual orientation is limited. The authors conclude, “The overall body of

evidence is mixed, again suggesting that prenatal hormones potentially contribute to same-sex sexuality in some individuals but do not determine it” (p. 6).

### **Can Sexual Orientation Change?**

In this section, Diamond and Rosky first address sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) and provide an essentially stock response that cites the American Psychological Association’s 2009 Task Force report (APA, 2009). It is disappointing (though not necessarily surprising) that, despite the authors’ clear ability for nuanced scholarship throughout their review, the treatment of SOCE is grossly simplified and caricatured. I will return to this issue later.

While the authors deny that client efforts in professional therapy can facilitate change in same-sex attractions, they do acknowledge that spontaneous change in sexual orientation occurs with striking regularity. According to Diamond and Rosky, the body of population-based and longitudinal research was simply not existent 20–30 years ago when conclusions about sexual orientation immutability were being derived from the neurobiological and genetic research of that time. In a summary table, data from these studies are presented that indicated 26–45% of men and 46–64% of women report experiencing change in sexual attractions over the time period assessed (from 3 to 10 years). Moreover, of those reporting such change, 50–100% of men and 55–91% of women reported change toward heterosexuality over the assessment period. Countering conventional wisdom on the issue, Diamond and Rosky make the further observation that “rates of change do not appear to decline as respondents get older” (p. 8).

Naturalistic change is also evident in the influence culture appears to have on the expression of same-sex attraction. Diamond and Rosky cite data from the Netherlands that indicate between 1989 and 2009 reports of same-sex attractions and same-sex behavior in women increased from 3% to 18% and 4% to 12%, respectively. For men these changes were from 6–12% for same-sex attractions while same-sex behaviors remained stable at 12%. “In summary,” state the authors, “the data on change are relatively clear: Although therapeutic attempts to change sexual orientation are not successful, patterns of same-sex and other-sex attractions sometimes change on their own, and the overall social

climate of viability and acceptance regarding same-sex sexuality may be one of the factors influencing such change” (p. 8).

### **Can Sexual Orientation Be Chosen?**

Diamond and Rosky briefly examine the “choice” issue and draw a scientifically sensible conclusion: “For the present time, the most accurate summary of the science is that some individuals perceive a role for choice in their sexual orientation and that *we do not know what this means*” (p. 9; authors’ italics). The authors align with the Alliance’s position here in suggesting that the simplistic notions of “choice” often found in public debates do not do justice to the complex and multidimensional nature of sexual desire.

### **Scientific Findings and Public Advocacy**

In one of the most interesting and almost confessional sections of the article, Diamond and Rosky address the relationship between science and gay advocacy. They ask why the immutability premise continues to be a staple of public discourse on sexual minority rights and conclude that it does so because advocates believe such claims are necessary for effective advocacy. This is likely the ultimate reason why sexual orientation immutability will have a quiet death. The authors are to be lauded for their honesty in acknowledging that advocacy interests have trumped an objective reading of the science, which has subsequently led to an environment where public figures who question immutability arguments are reflexively considered homophobic.

The authors conclude with an accurate summary with which most if not all Alliance members would agree: “Yet these examples simply underscore the fact that immutability arguments have more to do with dueling cultural values than they have to do with science. Not only has the relevant science been misrepresented by both sides, but immutability arguments rely on unspoken legal and moral premises whose validity must be questioned” (p. 11). Although many people across the sociopolitical spectrum know this to be true intuitively, it is still a stunning admission for LGB academicians of Diamond and Rosky’s stature.

## **Immutability Is Unnecessary: Legal Analysis**

Diamond and Rosky next turn their attention to reviewing legal cases that they contend had important implications for sexual minority civil rights. They contend that although earlier case law addressed immutability arguments favorably, “it is remarkable to see just how few of these victories have depended on the immutability argument” (p. 13). The authors point out five ways (which actually appear to be six) that litigants have commonly prevailed without having to rely on immutability claims:

### **It’s Just a Factor**

Diamond and Rosky note that the Supreme Court has historically treated immutability as a factor to be considered rather than a requirement to be fulfilled in Equal Protection Clause applicability. Thus, immutability is not required to advance such legal arguments, and neither has it been necessary for applying “heightened scrutiny” standards for such protections.

### **Redefining Immutability**

Here the authors report that in the course of case law, the legal definition of immutability has been altered in significant ways. No longer is the relevant question, “Can LGB individuals change their sexual orientation?” but rather “Should they be impelled to do so?” The accompanying legal answer is now an unmistakable “no.” This legal redefinition is one in which immutability no longer connotes a trait that cannot change but rather a trait that is central to a person’s identity, which the authors view as an improvement while admitting that it can also have shortcomings.

### **Sex Discrimination**

Because the concept of sexual orientation depends on the concept of sex, Diamond and Rosky contend and the courts have more recently agreed that laws related to sexual discrimination are relevant for legal consideration of sexual minority civil rights. They state, “Because it is impossible to make distinctions based on sexual orientation without making distinctions based on sex, every act of discrimination based on sexual orientation can be defined as sex discrimination” ( p. 15). For

example, they assert that laws against same-sex marriage, while intending to discriminate against gay men and lesbians, achieve this result by classifying couples based on sex.

### **Casting Moral Disapproval as Animus**

Since 1996, the Supreme Court has recast moral disapproval as a form of anti-gay animus, rather than a legitimate state interest, which thereby removes any need to determine whether sexual orientation warrants suspect class status on the basis of its immutability. Diamond and Rosky believe that this is a very effective strategy for fighting laws they deem to be anti-gay. “As the Court has ruled,” they affirm, “laws that seek to injure, stigmatize, or marginalize a group of people—even on the basis of deeply held moral convictions—are impermissible, regardless of the characteristics of the group in question” (p. 16).

### **Harm to Children (of Same-sex Couples)**

Traditionalists have asserted that laws affirming and protecting heterosexual marriage were justified as they further the government’s interest in promoting childrearing by a mother and a father and thus benefited children. However, the Supreme Court has essentially turned this argument on its head to rule that such laws actually harm and humiliate the children of same-sex couples. Such an argument does not remotely depend on homosexuality being immutable, only on the fact that some same-sex couples are raising children. “Advocates, lawyers, and scientists can now effectively argue that the children who need protection are *the children of LGBT individuals*, who are harmed and ‘humiliated’ by laws that codify anti-gay animus” (p. 17; authors’ italics).

### **The Liberty to Choose**

Diamond and Rosky further observe that when the Supreme Court struck down the Texas sodomy law under the Due Process Clause rather than the Equal Protection Clause, they opened up another path around the immutability argument. The issue at stake became the liberty and freedom to choose same-sex relations and relationships, which was later effectively employed to argue that laws against same-sex marriage violate an individual’s right to marry. The authors lament that the *Obergefell* decision did reference immutability in its reasoning, which they view as completely unnecessary. They rhetorically ask the question, “Now that same-sex marriage is legal for everyone,

what is the harm if the Supreme Court has a view of sexual orientation that is several decades out of date?" (p. 17). In the final section of their article, the authors focus their attention on addressing this very question.

### **The Injustice of Immutability Arguments**

The concluding portion of Diamond and Rosky's article sheds light on the underlying rationale for their work. They perceive that bisexuals in particular are not served well by immutability arguments; in fact, they contend that reliance upon immutability for sexual minority rights actually marginalizes and stigmatizes those who do not experience their sexuality as fixed, which they speculate may account for higher levels of stress-related mental health problems among bisexuals. Within this framework, bisexuals are legal victims of essentialist thinking on sexual orientation, as they are implicitly deemed less deserving of legal protections.

Also harmed by immutability assertions are individuals who claim to have chosen their same-sex sexuality. In a not-so-subtle rebuke to the APA, the authors observe that, "Both scientists and laypeople commonly claim that same-sex sexuality is rarely or never chosen (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2008), and individuals who claim otherwise (or who imply the capacity for choice by using terms such as *sexual preference* instead of *sexual orientation*) are often interpreted as misguided, insensitive, or homophobic. Yet similar to bisexuals, individuals who perceive that they have chosen some choice in their same-sex sexuality are more numerous than most people think" (p. 20; authors' italics).

A final group putatively harmed by immutability arguments is that of individuals who prioritize other identities over their sexual experience. This includes ". . . sexual minorities from ethnic, cultural, or religious backgrounds that do not share the contemporary Western conceptualization of sexual orientation as a defining status. Such individuals may believe that their status as an ethnic or religious minority is more critical to their sense of selfhood than their status as a sexual minority. . ." (p. 21). The authors, unfortunately, did not discuss the phenomenon of the ex-gay in this context, though their prior reasoning would appear to give credence to such a designation, provided this identity was only arrived at through a spontaneous (non-therapeutic) process.

At its core, Diamond and Rosky contend, the immutability argument concedes the point that same-sex sexuality is fundamentally inferior to heterosexuality, and bases LGB civil rights on the grounds that these individuals are born with and therefore cannot control their condition. The authors take umbrage at the inherent premise that sexual orientation should be controlled, which is the premise they encourage activists to challenge, since “there is no legal or moral basis for states to ‘contain’ same-sex sexuality and to actively promote and enforce heterosexuality among children and adults” (p. 22). By way of contrast, they give an affirmative nod to queer theory and identity, which questions and disrupts sexual categories and hierarchies as well as acknowledges the dynamic and flexible nature of sexuality. “If there is no reason for societies to control and contain the expression of same-sex sexuality,” aver the authors, “then there is no reason to invoke scientific research on the nature and cause of same-sex sexuality to justify or challenge such policies” (p. 22).

### **Concluding Observations and Commentary**

There is much to be appreciated about Diamond and Rosky’s contribution to the literature on sexual orientation immutability. Not only is their review of the relevant science a seminal effort that should end any notion of sexual orientation as inherently immutable, but their work also allows a peek into the oft-denied reality of science being compromised to suit the dictates of political advocacy. At the same time, the authors’ treatment of certain aspects of the scientific literature is clearly wanting, and I will address a few of the more egregious shortcomings below.

#### **Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE)**

It is a testimony to the power of ideology that Diamond and Rosky expend such effort to dismantle the sexual orientation immutability argument and affirm the ubiquitous occurrence of naturalistic sexual orientation fluidity but are unable to even entertain the possibility of sexual fluidity within the context of a professional psychotherapeutic process. Their conclusion as regards SOCE seems to me likely to reflect a philosophical (and perhaps LGB subcultural) predilection rather than a scientific mandate. Their analysis of the research displays little of the depth and critical analysis that they evidence in their treatment of other aspects of the literature germane to immutability. There is no discussion of the significant limitations of this research as noted by the APA Report (APA, 2009) and

others (Jones, Rosik, Williams, & Byrd, 2010; Rosik, 2012, 2013), the LGB identities of almost the entire APA task force who created the Report (Nicolosi, n.d.), or the complete lack of an academic and scientific culture conducive to conducting needed bipartisan research in an area that has become so heavily politicized (cf. Duarte et al., 2015; Rosik, 2014a; Rosik, Jones, & Byrd, 2012).

Diamond and Rosky's treatment of the APA Report is deficient on many grounds. They describe SOCE as ineffective and "psychologically damaging." The Report only uses the term "damaging" twice—once in a quotation from a 2000 policy statement by the American Psychoanalytic Association that refers to the damaging effects of internalized homophobic attitudes (APA, 2009, p. 24) and again in describing an article by Haldemann that alleged some men as a part of their SOCE were taught that homosexuality made them less masculine, a belief that was damaging to their self-esteem (p. 62). And while the Report speaks often of the potential for harm—a risk common to all forms of psychotherapy (Lambert, 2013)—the Report is clear that we have no idea what that risk prevalence is for professional SOCE or whether it is greater than for psychotherapy in general. "Thus, we cannot conclude how likely it is that harm will occur from SOCE. However, studies from both periods indicate that attempts to change sexual orientation may cause or exacerbate distress and poor mental health in some individuals. . ." (p. 42). Qualifiers such as "may" and "some" fail to find their way into the Diamond and Rosky's analysis of SOCE, replaced by inflated terms such as "often" and "stark."

Furthermore, the Report concludes that, "There are no scientifically rigorous studies of recent SOCE that would enable us to make a definitive statement about whether recent SOCE is safe or harmful and for whom" (p. 83). Since more contemporary forms of professional SOCE are the only forms being currently practiced by professionals, this conclusion of the Report renders Diamond and Rosky's definitive statements against SOCE misleading and ill advised. Finally, like the APA Report before them, these authors fail to make any distinction between SOCE provided by licensed mental health professionals and that conducted by unlicensed and unregulated religious counselors. Nor do they acknowledge that rates of harm and efficacy might be quite different between these types of practitioners.

Diamond and Rosky also charge that the APA Report concludes the practice of SOCE by therapists to be unethical. I found no basis for this claim in my review of the APA Report. For example, the conclusion to the Report's chapter on ethical concerns states only that, "LMHP are cautioned against promising sexual orientation change to clients. LMHP are encouraged to consider affirmative treatment options when clients present with requests for sexual orientation change" (p. 70). To my reading, promoting responsible goal-setting and encouraging affirmative treatment options are hardly statements of ethical censure against SOCE, though they are admittedly not endorsements either. In fact, the APA seriously discussed a resolution to declare that "sexual orientation conversion therapy" could not be ethically practiced in the mid-1990s. This resolution was eventually withdrawn due in part to advice from its legal counsel (James L. McHugh) that such a statement could run afoul of restraint of trade laws and leave the APA legally vulnerable unless virtually unimpeachable evidence existed that the resolution was scientifically and professionally correct. Since the 2009 APA Report concluded that no such evidence actually exists regarding SOCE, it seems unlikely the APA would want to revisit the issue again without a change in the legal landscape. Thus, it is difficult to comprehend Diamond and Rosky's depiction of the Report as declaring SOCE unethical as much more than wishful thinking.

It is also of interest that Diamond and Rosky appear to have unwittingly undermined the APA Report's definition of affirmative therapeutic practice, as one of the three foundations of such practice is a conviction that only "sexual orientation identity, not sexual orientation, appears to change via psychotherapy, support groups, or life events" (p. 86). Clearly, in their aforementioned examination of sexual orientation fluidity (including sexual attractions), life events do give rise to spontaneous changes in the components of sexual orientation with some frequency and mostly in the direction of greater heterosexuality.

With regards to SOCE or, more specifically, what I now prefer to describe as *sexual attraction fluidity exploration therapies (SAFE-T)*, Diamond and Rosky appear to maintain a resolute determination to not go where the data could logically proceed. They acknowledge that "the formation of emotional attachments may facilitate unexpected changes in sexual desire" (p. 8). Even more directly, they observe that, ". . . one possibility is that a conscious choice to consider same-sex

sexuality is necessary for some individuals' biological capacities for same-sex sexuality to become manifest" (p. 10). I see no reason, however, why the reverse could not be even more probable, i.e., that conscious choices to consider opposite-sex sexuality (along with the pursuit of certain emotional attachments) could activate some individual's biological capacities for opposite-sex sexuality. This is what could be termed as one's heterosexual potential. Even though more research is needed to confirm such a potential, to deny this would seem to be much more a matter of ideological compulsion and/or the fear of collegial opprobrium than it is one of theoretical or scientific implausibility.

### **The Compromising Alliance of Sexual Orientation Science and Advocacy**

One intriguing premise of Diamond and Rosky's work appears to be that cultural acceptance and civil protections for LGB people has now advanced to the point where researchers and activists can finally begin telling the truth about sexual orientation immutability. Their observations that many advocates continue to use immutability arguments in public discourse about LGB rights—not to mention the general silence on this matter in the public pronouncements of the scientific community—implies a significant element of disingenuousness in this movement. While the science on sexual orientation immutability may have been nebulous a generation ago, this is no longer the case, and there is no reason other than political calculation why the malleability of sexual orientation should not be prominently acknowledged by professional associations and gay activists in their public pronouncements and legal briefs.

One example alluded to by Diamond and Rosky has to do with the effect same-sex couples may have on their children's sexuality. Though long denied by gay activists, there is a growing acknowledgment that in fact these children do have higher prevalence of LGB identities and behaviors than children from heterosexual couples (Schumm, 2014). With the greater cultural acceptance of same-sex sexuality, the authors affirm, children of same-sex couples ". . . may have been even more willing and able to consider—and positively evaluate—their own propensity for same-sex sexuality. Of course, this is exactly what anti-gay activists have long warned about . . ." (p. 9). I have long questioned why gay activists expended so much energy to show no differences in

sexual orientation between children of same-sex and opposite-sex couples while also maintaining same-sex attractions are a positive and normal feature of human sexuality. There is a disconnection here that few activists and researchers (Diamond and Rosky being a welcomed exception) seem prepared to acknowledge. The authors help lift this curtain a little and show how inconvenient scientific facts that have been suppressed can finally be acknowledged when the sociopolitical and moral conditions are more favorable and are not perceived to threaten the advocacy goals.

Diamond and Rosky also make mention of the Academy of Science of South Africa's (ASSAf, 2015) recent report, *Diversity of Sexuality*, which they acknowledge perpetuates an "overinterpretation of scientific evidence that has long characterized immutability debates, concluding that 'all sexual orientations are biologically based, largely innate, and mostly unchangeable'" (p. 10). I admit to being pleasantly surprised that the authors concur with the Alliance's opinion on this aspect of the report (Alliance for Therapeutic Choice and Scientific Integrity (ATCSI), 2015). Diamond and Rosky contend that this "overinterpretation"—which might be considered a sanitized term for scientific deception—is justified on the grounds that belief in immutability in the African context will save lives of LGB Africans. I would like to believe that this is true, but I wonder if this is primarily a rationalizing of scientific dishonesty in the interest of changing public policy. I wonder this in part because it would seem to me that such reasoning is quite insulting to the average African, appearing to assume that Africans are so culturally backwards that they would not be able or know how to access this information on the Internet. Are not Africans with such inclinations likely to be even less sympathetic to Diamond and Rosky's concerns when they learn that they have been lied to by the ASSAf? In this regard, I prefer the Alliance's position that, "The granting to LGB persons of basic human rights and the ability to live free from harassment or violence should not be conditioned by any scientific finding about sexual orientation" (ATCSI, 2016, p. 406). This would appear to me to be a more culturally transformative value position to promote in Africa than one that simply teaches that the ends justify the (scientifically dishonest) means.

### **The Clash of Moral and Sexual Worldviews**

Finally, apart from political considerations, I suspect that one cannot fully understand Diamond and Rosky's work without giving attention to the underlying moral worldview that appears likely to animate them. A highly parsimonious theory of moral processing is that of Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) (Haidt, 2012). MFT integrates anthropological and evolutionary accounts of morality to identify and explain the standards by which liberals and conservatives formulate their moral frameworks (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). MFT has amassed a wealth of empirical data to suggest that although conservative and liberal/progressive individuals share some similar moral concerns (relative to the rights and welfare of individuals), conservatives also are motivated by moral concerns that liberals may not recognize and that emphasize the virtues and institutions that bind people into roles, duties, and mutual obligations. The language of rights, equality (of outcomes), and justice tends to be the dominant parlance of moral argumentation among those on the left, and their most sacred value tends to be that of caring for victims of oppression. Conservatives, by contrast, balance their concerns for harm and fairness with some mix of social cohesion, institutional integrity, and divinity concerns. They generally believe the institutions, norms, and traditions that have helped build civilizations contain the accumulated wisdom of human experience and should not be tinkered with apart from immense reflection and caution. For conservatives, the most sacred value tends to be the preservation of the institutions and traditions that sustain a moral community.

Utilizing the lens of MFT, and making a rather educated guess that Diamond and Rosky are left-of-center scholars, I offer some tentative ways of comprehending their analysis. MFT would suggest that these authors are morally animated by the defense and protection of oppressed individuals—sexual minorities in particular. In addition, they would not be expected to morally resonate with concerns about the integrity of social institutions or cultural and religious traditions that undergird them, especially when these are viewed as in some way harming LGB individuals. Diamond and Rosky's apparent sexual ethic, whereby any sexual activity between consenting adults is equally moral and desirable as long as it is not perceived to be harmful *to the individual*, fits neatly within MFT. Here sexual desires are to be pursued and gratified without particular reference to the historical constraining influence on sexuality that social institutions and religious traditions have exercised in the past, the weakening of which conservatives typically view to be harmful *to the*

*society*. Within the authors' moral template heavily weighed toward care for the oppressed, such sexually constraining forces are likely to be construed simply as agents of oppression rather than builders of a stable civilization. Moreover, privileging these constraining influences by affirming their embedded values (i.e., male-female marriage, sexual exclusivity) as the aspirational sexual ideal for individuals and societies makes no moral sense and is instead likely to be experienced as offensive (e.g., heterosexist; cf, Rosik, 2014b for a more detailed analysis). These moral factors seem especially in play with the assessment of SOCE.

I think the stark contrast between Diamond and Rosky's bold recognition of spontaneous sexual orientation fluidity and their staunch refusal to grant any plausibility to SAFE-T makes a good deal of sense within this MFT framework, where the sacred values of a group are said to both "bind" group members together and "blind" them to the questions and concerns of those sharing different sacred values (Haidt, 2012). Much about SOCE, even when provided through the most professionally conducted mainstream therapeutic modalities, grates quite disturbingly against left-of-center moral intuitions and their associated sacred values. SOCE consumers typically presume an ideal standard of sexual expression that prioritizes opposite-sex sexual expression and is often based on traditional religious values and faith community standards. Yet heterosexuality and traditional religious institutions are not given favored status within a left-of-center moral palate that gives sacred status to caring for victims of oppression; rather, they are viewed as dominant groups who are historically privileged and oppressive to disadvantaged sexualities. For progressives, the perceived victim receives the compassion and moral privilege and the perceived oppressor gets the animosity and moral condemnation, and it goes against progressive moral sensibilities for there to be victims within the designated "oppressor" group or oppressors within the designated "victim" group. This can lead to the differential application of moral standards to similar acts from members of these two groups. For example, progressives may view self-determination as laudable in the interest of the unfettered expression of minority sexualities but abhorrent for SOCE clients engaging in SAFE-T regarding unwanted same-sex attractions.

None of this analysis is to deny that majority groups can often promote intolerance of minority groups that can result in genuine harm. However, the question rarely asked within the social

sciences today is whether there is a point at which sexual liberty might best be restrained (not by legal force but by the promotion of certain behavioral ideals) for the social good and whether this can be accomplished merely within the progressive moral matrix that relies mostly on considerations of harm and consent. This is the cultural flashpoint within which discussions of SOCE are entrenched. Within the MFT framework, one would expect progressives to perceive SOCE clients to be striving toward a heterosexual ideal they consider historically oppressive. This is a far cry from a SOCE consumer's moral narrative that views such striving as an admirable effort to uphold religious sexual ideals that strengthen families and societies. MFT thus anticipates that Diamond and Rosky's left-of-center moral intuitions and resultant sacred values will lead them to conceive of SOCE—with its consumers' idealization of heterosexual sexual expression derived from adherence to values championed by religious institutions—as at best a morally dubious endeavor and at worst a collusion with client oppression. This is not an intuitive moral basis upon which one would expect them to treat the limited and inconclusive science surrounding professional SOCE in an objective or even-handed manner.

## **Conclusion**

Despite their ostensible blind spot concerning the plausibility of professional SOCE in terms of SAFE-T, Diamond and Rosky deserve immense affirmation for taking a professional risk and providing a vigorous challenge to the conventional wisdom of sexual orientation immutability. In doing so, they go further in their review by highlighting (approvingly) how the science of sexual orientation can be compromised in the service of political advocacy. Their work renders it crystal clear that the essentialist view of sexual orientation as fixed and unchangeable is no longer a scientifically tenable assertion. Therefore, claims of sexual immutability can now be considered a means of distinguishing the activist from the scientist.

Unfortunately, Diamond and Rosky were unable to fully liberate themselves from the belief in sexual orientation immutability, since it appears their ideological and moral commitments kept them from acknowledging (i.e., blinded them to) the plausibility of therapy-assisted sexual attraction fluidity in the context of SOCE. While the political, legal, and cultural climate may now have become conducive to the acknowledgment of spontaneous change across all dimensions of sexual orientation

by these and other scholars, the final frontier of acknowledging the plausibility of therapy-assisted sexual attraction fluidity within SAFE-T remains strictly off limits. This is politically understandable during a season where legal attempts to ban SOCE are in vogue, even as it is scientifically rather despicable. Based on Diamond and Rosky's analysis, I cannot help but wonder: Were SOCE to become completely prohibited, would these authors then finally be freed to acknowledge that it sometimes was effective? Until the goal of prohibition is achieved, I suspect that sexual orientation immutability will continue to die a quiet death.

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