

Change in Homoerotic Behavior and Feelings is Possible: Genetics Play Only a Weak and Indirect Role

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There are a limited but growing number of current empirical studies that address the question of the potential for change in same-sex attraction and behavior. In the interest of brevity, this analysis will focus on the most prominent of these studies. The reader seeking to gain further education in this literature is encouraged to review other studies that provide background and research data on attempts to modify same-sex attraction and behavior (Byrd & Nicolosi, 2002; Nicolosi, Byrd, & Potts, 2000; Rosik, 2001, 2003; Shaeffer, Hyde, et al., 2000; Schaeffer, Nottebaum, et al., 2000; Throckmorton, 1998).

Spitzer's Research

The first landmark study in this area was conducted by Robert Spitzer (2003). This study is important in many respects. The first point has to do with the background of the author. Spitzer is widely recognized as the architect of the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) 1973 decision to remove homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). He only decided to study the issue of change in sexual orientation after talking with several ex-gays who were protesting the APA's stance opposing change efforts at the 1999 APA convention. Prior to his study, Spitzer believed that while homosexual behavior could be resisted, no one could really change his or her sexual orientation. He now believes that some **people can and do change**. Moreover, Spitzer has described himself publicly as an "atheist Jew." Given all these facts, it is impossible to view his study as being the product of antihomosexual, self-serving, political or religious bias, common terms used to dismiss most of the other relevant studies supportive of change efforts. Spitzer's data, however, align nicely with what prior studies have reported.

Secondly, Spitzer's (2003) study significantly improved on the earlier research by carefully assessing for the emotional components of homosexual experience (e.g., subjective ratings of sexual attraction, sexual fantasies during masturbation and heterosexual sex). He also limited his subject pool to individuals reporting at least five years of sustained change from a homosexual to a heterosexual orientation, obtaining a sample of 200 eligible respondents who he personally interviewed. Using fairly strict criteria, **Spitzer found 66% of male participants and 44% of female subjects had achieved good heterosexual functioning**. Of the 33 men who rated most extreme on the homosexual indicators, a surprising 67% achieved good heterosexual functioning. While 20% of the sample reported being heterosexually married prior to change attempts, 76% of the men and 47% of the women reported being married at the time of the interview. Even though 42% of the men and 46% of the women reported their sexual attraction to be exclusively homosexual before change attempts, 17% of the men and 55% of the women indicated exclusive heterosexual attraction upon interview. Depression was indicated as a problem prior to change efforts by 43% of the men and 47% of the women, while these statistics had fallen to current levels of 1% and 4%, respectively.

Jones and Yarhouse Research

More recently, Jones and Yarhouse (2007) summarized the initial findings of their important study on change of unwanted homosexuality, which followed 73 participants involved in Exodus International affiliated ministries over a three year period. This longitudinal research design allowed for stronger conclusions to be made about causation than can occur with typical correlational studies. Across several respected measures of sexual experience, the authors concluded that on average, significant change away from homosexual orientation and toward heterosexual orientation was documented. They further observed that the average movement away from homosexual orientation was medium to large, while the average movement toward heterosexual orientation was somewhat smaller. **Contrary to the prevailing wisdom, participants who reported the strongest degree of same-sex attractions also reported the**

most significant changes toward heterosexual functioning. No meaningful evidence of harm from participants' attempts to change was discovered.

Nature, Nurture and the Church's Ministry

For the most part, subjects who report experiencing improvement in heterosexual functioning are devoutly religious and often indicate that their relationship with God is an important factor in their ability to change. The best integrative theories about the causes of homoerotic attraction suggest that several interacting factors are involved to varying degrees in any one individual. The primary influences are thought to be of genetic, biological, developmental, and psychosocial origin. This has implications for understanding the issue of change. It suggests that many homosexual persons, especially men, cannot simply choose to feel heterosexual attraction. **Change takes courage, motivation, and perseverance.** Even then, some will probably have to contend with a certain degree of homosexual feelings throughout their lives.

Yet it is also incorrect to say that people are born gay, lesbian or bisexual, at the very least in terms of being anatomically designed for homoerotic behavior. Human sexuality is much more complex than eye color, and developmental, social, and cultural influences cannot be left out of the equation. The best twin studies now indicate that **genetics play only a weak and indirect role** in the development of homosexuality (Bailey, Dunne, & Martin, 2000; Bearman & Bruckner, 2002). Identical twins have identical genes and upbringing, but the odds are only about 1 in 10 that both twins will report same-sex attractions. **Even the American Psychological Association has now gone on record as endorsing the perspective that sexual orientation is not determined by any particular factor but likely includes influences from both nature and nurture (APA, 2008).** The studies by Spitzer (2003) and Jones and Yarhouse (2007) underscore that change in same-sex attraction is a viable outcome for some and that for many others less than complete modification of homoerotic feelings still results in significant improvement in psychological well-being and spiritual satisfaction.

Those within our denomination who desire to increase their heterosexual potential deserve our compassion and assistance in the journey, not our complicity in the untruth that real change never occurs.

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