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RULES: Entries accepted thru 3/20/03. Drawing to be held on the 1st day of Spring (March 21st). Tickets are \$25 or five for \$100 and only 300 tickets will be sold. All non-winning entries are considered tax deductible gifts. You can clip and mail the entry form from the paper or download an entry form from our web site. We will accept checks, money orders, and credit cards as forms of payment. Tickets can also be purchased from MPM Board members. All prizes will be mailed USPS so we need a valid mailing address as well as an email for award notification.

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arts

An Unconvincing Look at 'Conversion Therapy'

BY LARRY RUDIGER

Sexual-orientation conversion therapy. What a topic. As a church-going psychologist, it's all there for me: sex, religion, scientific controversy, the politics of academia, slick marketing triumphs, and public-relations nightmares. Juicy! But it's not just a multimedia blood sport, what with ex-gays and ex-ex-gays duking it out on talk shows. As you read this, there are real people, probably in some church basement, who are truly suffering as they struggle with the conflict between their homosexual lust and deeply held religious convictions.

Though conversion therapy has been around for a while, it's been far more visible in the past few years. In 1998, John and Anne Paulk, a respectable-looking married couple, appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*. Their claim? They'd each conquered their homosexuality; why, John had even been a drag queen! The story was not only sensational, but also well funded and cunningly packaged by a coalition of conservative Christian organizations, who continue to pursue the campaign.

The ensuing (and ongoing) debate boiled down to the notion of choice: could a motivated individual replace homosexual desire with heterosexual? How might it be done? If 'conversion' fails, does that mean it was impossible? Or, is same-sex attraction like an addiction that the sick homosexual refused to face and correct? In the wake of these events, a special issue of *The Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy* was published as this stand-alone volume.

I can't recommend this book. It's not exactly a page-turner, and that's puzzling, given the topic. As can be the case with the editor's approach (get a diverse group of authors to address the same topic), the results are uneven. Many chapters were written in the worst sort of sloppy academic slang, with equal measures of jargon and imprecision (there is such a thing as good scientific writing, and a multi-author work like this can be well written; it just takes more coordination).

The best chapter (by far) is an excerpt from Martin Duberman's excellent 1991 book *Cures, A Gay Man's Odyssey*, an account of his years of trying to overcome his homosexuality through psychotherapy. A similar, and poignant (but less artful) contribution is from Richard Isay, MD, who was one of the first gay psychoanalysts (which means therapy in the Freudian style: four to six sessions a week. Imagine!).

Sexual Conversion Therapy: Ethical, Clinical, and Research Perspectives

Edited by Ariel Shidlo, Ph.D., Michael Schroeder, Psy.D., & Jack Drescher, M.D. The Hayworth Medical Press (2001)

Being somewhat familiar with the major figures of this story, I was intrigued by Paul Moor's therapy recollections because his psychiatrist was Irving Bieber, who authored an influential book on the alleged sickness of homosexuality.

Though now largely discredited, Bieber's work is still touted by the ex-gay crowd. If you recognize the name, then you'll probably get a kick out of Moor's sad, somewhat weird tale. But I wonder how many readers would really be that interested in these three rather similar stories about a time (1960s and '70s) and a place (New York City, mostly) that has passed. Instead, I'd suggest Duberman's fine book — the whole thing — which is also a skilled piece of first-person social history (befitting an admired historian).

Most of the other chapters are far less well written; their points can be readily summarized. Conversion therapy is currently the exclusive purview of conservative Christianity. To the degree it draws on research, it does so selectively and deceptively. It probably causes far more harm than good. Its practitioners may fail to warn their patients of the potential risks (deeper psychological distress — suicidal impulses, clinical depression, or increased anxiety) and the dearth of evidence that real change is possible. After decades of highly political wrangling, nearly all professional organizations have explicitly disavowed conversion therapy. Unfortunately, these points are made and repeated over and over. The lack of communication between the different authors (and the lack of editorial involvement) is impossible to miss and a little maddening.

End of story? Not quite. The current ethical quandary (discussed in a couple of the book's chapters) is this: do patients have a right to receive conversion therapy — warts and all — and, if not, is that choice for therapists to make? Isn't that really a matter of the therapist's values trumping those of the patients? Is this not a failure to recognize and respect religious teaching? Here, conversion-therapy proponents are turning our own arguments back on us: it's all about choice, inclusion, patient-empowerment, all that good stuff. What are pro-gay therapists afraid of?

There's more. In a canny

adjustment to reality, the ex-gay crowd seems to now acknowledge the fact that true conversion is unlikely, probably impossible. John Paulk didn't help matters when, after the *Newsweek* cover, he — oops! — was spotted buying drinks for other single (well, married, but the wives weren't around) men in a Washington DC gay bar (and didn't lose his job with Focus on the Family. What, one wonders, would he have to do to get canned: Judy? Liza? Both at once?)

So now the ex-gay crowd puts it like this. You aren't heterosexual because you lose homosexual desire. No, you're heterosexual because that's how God made you and wants you (and everybody) to be. If you have gay lust, it may be your cross to bear. But it doesn't make you gay unless you let it. So don't. And, oh yes, no amount of therapy, prayer, or both is likely to ever replace it with raw, straight desire, so, at best, you're probably going to become asexual, really.

This somewhat tortured line of thought is (rather indirectly) presented in Lee Beckstead's chapter on Mormons. Not to pick on him, but this was taken from his (otherwise unpublished) master's thesis, and it shows. Extensive quotations from his research subjects, though, are quite thought provoking and often articulate, in stark contrast to his I-just-got-to-graduate-school prose (though it's not that much worse, really, than most of the book, much of which is quite slap-dash). Beckstead says conversion therapy worked for him. And his writing's gotten a bit better.

During the civil-unions backlash, I traced some out-of-state agitators back to the academic front men for the religious right (so much of what's covered in this book was pretty familiar). These people are smart (co-opting the language of inclusiveness is pretty sneaky, and coaching the would-be ex-gays to say the right words). They're quietly building a sort of parallel establishment. They're organizing symposia at mainstream academic conferences (again, justified by the "academic freedom" thing); they're writing in their own journals. If you're interested in the topic I'd suggest some web surfing (you'll be astounded at the amount of material out there). What you'll find is also more current, as the issues continue to evolve. This story is far from over. ▼

Larry Rudiger is a social psychologist living in Burlington.

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