

Gay Conversion Therapy: A Nation's Shame

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Conversion therapy" also called "reparative therapy" is a practice with the aim to change the sexual orientation or gender identity of a person identifying oneself to a heterosexual identity. (See Table 1) This practice that has recently been nationally and internationally discredited. Different programs use prayer or attempts of a religious nature to attempt to change a person's natural identity to that which the therapy deems more appropriate, that is heterosexual identity.

This article will discuss this practice through a historical perspective to the now modern general distain of this kind of therapy.

WHAT IS CONVERSION THERAPY?

Conversion Therapy attempts to influence a change in an individual's sexual orientation, gender expression or gender identity. Some additional terms for Conversion Therapy are

Sexual reorientation efforts

Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE)

Eliminating, reducing or decreasing frequency or intensity of unwanted Same-Sex Attraction (SSA)

Reparative therapy

Sexual Attraction Fluidity Exploration in Therapy (SAFE-T)

Sexuality counseling

Promoting healthy sexuality

Encouraging relational and sexual wholeness

Healing sexual brokenness

Ex-gay ministry

Addressing sexual addictions and disorders

Those in favor of conversion therapy confuse the attempts made in this therapy to a treatment for an "illness" or "disorder". Much of the language affiliated with the therapy's desire to change one's approach to sexuality as a "curing" of something that is unnatural in a human's state of mind.¹

¹ The GLADD ORGANIZATION intends to shape a narrative and create a conversation concerning the LGBTQ community and those opposed to it. <https://www.glaad.org/conversion> <https://www.glaad.org/conversiontherapy>
GLADD ORGANIZATION "Leading the conversation. Shaping the media narrative. Changing the culture. That's how GLAAD accelerates acceptance for LGBTQ people."

HISTORIAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE PRACTICE

Some members of the military have always been gay. One of the earliest known military heroes in the U.S. was Baron Friedrich von Steuben. He was a Prussian military man who was hired by George Washington to train the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. Known for his bravery, historians also think he was homosexual. He served in the military which viewed sex between men punishable as a crime.²

By the post-World War II era, there was in the U.S., a cultural shift represented by suburban living and earlier marriage. Joseph McCarthy, during this time, pushed the concept of being gay as the “Pansy Craze”. However, drag balls never entirely went away. Moreover, it would be decades later before there would be a publicly flourishing of LGBTQ life.³

As early as the 19th century, doctors and psychiatrist looked at same-sex desires as something that needed to be reversed medically.⁴ German psychiatrist, Albert von Schrenck-Notzing reported at a conference on hypnosis that he had turned a gay man straight. Saying that it took only 45 sessions of hypnosis and trips to a brothel, he claimed that he successfully manipulated a man’s homosexual impulses from the patient’s interest in men to a desire for relationships with women.

“Conversion therapy”, as it was later dubbed, was practiced widely in the 20th century, resulting in pain, self-hatred and shame in the minds of patients of this type of therapy. Calling homosexuality and same-sex relationships “sinful and deviant”, some countries labeled it as “criminal” in their laws and started looking for ways to reverse this “criminal behavior”.⁴ Dr. Eugen Steinach, an Austrian pioneer of endocrinology, theorized that homosexuality was “rooted in a man’s testicles”. As a result, experiments in the 1920s led to testicle transplantation, a surgical treatment in which gay men were castrated and then given “heterosexual testicles. By studying sex hormones and how those hormones work on mammals, Steinbach experimented on mice by removal of their testicles and then implanting them in other parts of the body. His conclusion? Testicular stromal cells produce male hormones.⁵ However, a controversial debate began, and it was concluded in 1938 that there were no results of this kind of implanting. And in the next 20 years, those in the psychiatric and medical fields determined that same-sex behavior as a “clear and relatively stable sexual orientation.”⁶

Sigmund Freud classified homosexuality as a psychological disorder, claiming that people were born innately bisexual, and that conditioning created homosexuality in people. New psychiatric interventions then began to be used to “cure” gay people.⁷ This was done through different methods from electroconvulsive therapy to actual lobotomies. Other treatments administered shocks through electrodes that were implanted in the brain. One New Orleans psychiatrist, Dr. Robert Heath, not only used the treatment of shocks through the brain to implanted electrodes but added the methods of subjecting patients to heterosexual pornography and the hiring of prostitutes to change sexual orientation. Later Heath’s methodologies were criticized and challenged by the medical and psychiatry professions.⁸

However, offshoots of these methods of conversion therapy continued. One such technique was introduced as “aversion therapy”.

² Blakemore, Erin. “The Revolutionary War Hero Who Was Openly Gay”, HISTORY, <https://www.history.com/news/openly-gay-revolutionary-war-hero-friedrich-von-steuben>, 14 June 1918, updated 6 February 2020.

³ Pruitt, Sarah. “How Gay Culture Blossomed During the Roaring Twenties During Prohibition, Gay Nightlife and Culture Reached New Heights—At Least Temporarily”, HISTORY, 10 June 2019, updated 12 June 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/gay-culture-roaring-twenties-prohibition>

⁴ Id.

⁵ Gao, Ganshi, “A History of Conversion Therapy: A Pseudo-Scientific Method Lasted for Over A Century to Cure Sexuality, LIFE360 (November 1, 2021), <https://cardiffjournalism.co.uk/life360/the-history-of-conversion-therapy-a-pseudo-scientific-method-lasting-for-over-a-century-to-cure-sexuality/>.

⁶ Id.

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id.

The theory of this technique was that if the LGBTQ person became disgusted with homosexuality, then the person would not engage in that behavior in the future. Individuals were shown photographs of their loves and given chemicals to make them vomit. Another method was that when an individual looked at gay pornography or if they cross-dressed, they were given electrical shocks, sometimes to the person's genitals.⁹

The "Roaring Twenties" ushered in a new area in the gay culture in the United States. Men, known as "fairies" and Bohemians who were from Greenwich Village in New York were often difficult to be distinguished from women. Wearing wigs, powdering their faces and wearing gorgeous evening gowns was a new mode of expression for men. There were masquerades and balls, often referred to as "drag balls" had begun as early as 1869 and continued through the Prohibition era. Gay, bisexual, transgender and lesbians emerged from various social circles.¹⁰

However, in 1969, The Stonewall Riots, also called the Stonewall Uprising and the Stonewall Rebellion, were demonstrations by gay community members that was a response to a police raid at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village in New York City. Gay bars, such as the Stonewall Inn was often owned by the Mafia. The tensions increased throughout the day. Lesbian and gay patrons at gay bars fought back the police, resulting in increased violence. This event was the beginning EW marches which took place in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. This was followed by the LGBT Pride events that were an annual even in June, to honor the effects and awareness created by the Stonewall Riots.¹¹

Hollywood, often sensitive to the perceived "norms" of society, would ensure those norms" were followed by getting their gay actors married in order to hide their sexual orientation from the public eye. Dubbed as "Lavender marriages," these arrangements would adhere to "moral clauses" issued by studios at the time.¹²

One of the earliest speculated lavender marriages was that of the early sex symbol, Rudolph Valentino, who married the actress, Jean Acker, who was rumored to have been a lesbian. They were soon after divorced.¹³

TABLE 1 Terminology/Glossary

(As Found in The GLADD ORGANIZATION which intends to shape a narrative and create a conversation concerning the LGBTQ community and those opposed to it. <https://www.glaad.org/conversion> <https://www.glaad.org/conversiontherapy>

GLADD ORGANIZATION "Leading the conversation. Shaping the media narrative. Changing the culture. That is how GLAAD accelerates acceptance for LGBTQ people.") See Note 1.

- **Cisgender:** Describes a person which gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth.
- **Gender Dysphoria:** Clinically significant distress caused when a person's sex assigned at birth is not aligned with their gender identity.
- **Gender Expression:** External manifestation of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behaviors, mannerisms, dress, etc.
- **Gender Identity:** One's innermost sense of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither. A person's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.ⁱ

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ *Supra*, Note 3.

¹¹ . "[Heritage / 1970 Christopher Street Liberation Day Gay-In, San Francisco](#)". SF PRIDE, June 28, 1970. Archived from [the original](#) on October 22, 2014. Retrieved June 28, 2014.

¹² Ashabi, "Jean Acker and Rudolph Valentino, Who Were Reportedly Gay Had a Record-Breaking Marriage", GISFEST, <https://gistfest.com/jean-acker-rudolph-valentino-reportedly-gay-record-breaking-marriage/>, 23 November 2021. Having never been , it was said to be the shortest Hollywood marriage. Morgan, Thaddeus, "When Hollywood Studios Married Off Gay Stars to Keep Their Sexuality a Secret", HISTORY, 10 July 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/hollywood-lmarriages-gay-stars-lgbt>.

¹³ Id.

BANS ON CONVERSION THERAPY

Because of the dangers of conversion therapy, many leaders and organizations have called for a ban of these practices. For instance, in February of 2016, Governor Andrew Cuomo promulgated regulations to prevent gay therapy. New York restricted such treatment and the banning of conversion for minors, and other states such as New Jersey, Illinois, Oregon, California, Vermont and the also the District of Columbia have bans on this therapy as well.

The American Psychological Association has sent advice to families has urged social support. It “opposes any psychiatric treatment such as reparative or conversion therapy which is based upon the assumption that homosexuality *per se* is a mental disorder or based upon the *a priori* assumption that a patient should change his/her sexual homosexual orientation.”

The American Psychological Association “advises parents, guardians, young people, and their families to avoid sexual orientation change efforts that portray homosexuality as a “mental illness or developmental disorder.” The American Academy of Pediatrics stated that: “Therapy directed at specifically changing sexual orientation is contraindicated, since it can provoke guilt and anxiety while having little or no potential for achieving changes in orientation.” In addition, the Pan American Health Organization, which is a regional office of the World Health Organization, stated the conversion therapies “lack medical justification and represent a serious threat to the health and well-being of affected people.”

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has stated: “Specifically, conversion therapy—efforts to change an individual’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression —is a practice that is not supported by credible evidence and has been disavowed by behavioral health experts and associations. Conversion therapy perpetuates outdated views of gender roles and identities as well as the negative stereotype that being a sexual or gender minority or identifying as LGBTQ is an abnormal aspect of human development. Most importantly, it may put young people at risk of serious harm.” And they also stated: “The overwhelming scientific evidence demonstrates that conversion therapy, especially when it is practiced on young people, is neither medically nor ethically appropriate and can cause substantial harm.”¹⁴

ALAN TURING – A TRAVESTY OF HISORY

Alan Turing was born in London in 1912. He studied both at Princeton and Cambridge universities and was a brilliant mathematician. When WWII broke out, he was working part-time at the British Government’s Coe and Cypher school. After the war erupted in 1939, Turing worked full-time at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire. It was there that he began his ground-breaking work to decipher the military codes that were used by Germany and its allies. The focus of his work was cracking the ‘Enigma’ code. The code, used by the German armed forces as an enciphering machine in sending messages. At the outbreak of the war, Germans increased its security. Part of this security was to change the ciphering system daily, making it difficult to understand an already difficult code. ‘

German U-boats were creating heavy losses on Allied ships. The U.S, captured the German Enigma material and Turing worked in the development of a technique (called ‘Barbarisms’) enabling the messages to be read beginning in 1941. Turing carried out cryptanalysis of all of the signals of the German navy. His role in this was extremely important in assisting the Allies during the Battle of the Atlantic.

In December 1942, Turing then travelled to the United States and advised the U.S. military intelligence and shared his knowledge of Enigma. He continued his work in cryptanalysis in March 1943. He then created a scrambling device that he named ‘Delilah’. As a result of this incredible work during the wartime, he was awarded an OBE (Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire), which is the second highest ranking Order of the British Empire awards).

¹⁴ Valeria Jarrett, Advisor to the President of the United States, Government Positions on Conversion Therapy: Ending Conversion Therapy: Supporting and Affirming LGBTO Youth. Ending Conversion Therapy: Supporting and Affirming LGBTQ Youth U.S Department of Health and Human Services, SAMSHA (Substances Abuse and Mental Health Services Association)Publication ID, SMA15-4928, October 2015, <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Ending-Conversion-Therapy-Supporting-and-Affirming-ornLGBTQ-Youth/SMA15-4928>,

In 1952, Alan Turing was found guilty of ‘gross indecency’ due to his homosexuality, which at that time in Britain was illegal. Long after his death this conviction was overturned in 2013. Before that time, he was able to avoid a prison sentence by agreeing to chemical castration. Unable to continue with this detrimental treatment, he committed suicide by cyanide poisoning.’

Alan Turing’s life’s work was manifested after his death The impact he made on computer science was unsurpassable at the time. The ‘Turing Award’ has become the highest honor in computer science and is awarded annually since 1966. By breaking the codes, it is estimated that the war was shortened by several years, saving vast numbers of human lives and determined the final outcome of the war.¹⁵

HARMS TO PARTICIPANTS OF CONVERSION THERAPY

An enduring question is why would someone want or try to change another’s sexual identity? Gay conversion training can have detrimental results to participants. Sometimes the participant will be psychologically impacted with negative results. Other times, such training can result in a trainee's physical harm to himself/herself. The risks of this kind of therapy are self-destructive behavior, depression, self-hatred, and anxiety. The APA (American Psychological) released information concerning homosexual and bisexual issues and stated that “there is no published scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of reparative therapy’ as a treatment to change one’s sexual orientation.” Furthermore, the risks of this kind of therapy would include self-destructive behavior, self-hatred and even suicide.¹⁶

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¹⁵ IWM, an Independent Research Facility. How Alan Turing *Cracked the Enigma Code*, 2016.

(<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-alan-turing-cracked-the-enigma-code>).

¹⁶San Francisco State University, The Lies and Dangers of Efforts to Change Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity, Human Rights Campaign (HRC) <https://www.hrc.org/resources/the-lies-and-dangers-of-reparative-therapy>.