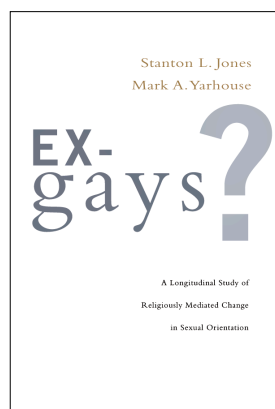


AUTHOR Q & A



Ex-Gays? by Stanton L. Jones
& Mark A. Yarhouse

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Ex-Gays?

A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation
Stanton L. Jones (Wheaton College) and Mark A. Yarhouse (Regent University)

Overview:

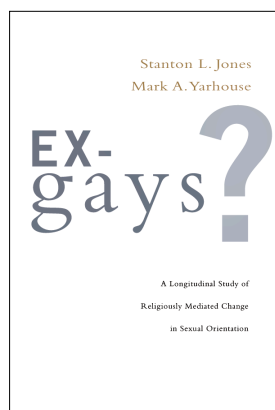
Numerous “authorities” today proclaim that homosexual orientation is impossible to modify or change, and that the attempt to change is necessarily or usually harmful. Such pronouncements are made on the websites and in the official resolutions of such major professional organizations as the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association, and as recently as this month, psychiatrist Jack Drescher derided the effectiveness of attempts to change and pronounced the attempt often harmful. Drescher said, “Does it [the change attempt] work? The little scientific study done is not encouraging. Most who try do not change—and no long-term studies show that those claiming change remain heterosexual.”¹ It was precisely to fill this gap of the absence of long-term studies that Jones and Yarhouse conducted and report on a study of individuals attempting to alter their sexual orientation through involvement in one of the groups associated with the religious ministry Exodus, a Christian group that views homosexual practice as immoral and the homosexual condition as changeable. This study is the most scientifically rigorous study of the possibility of sexual orientation change to date, following participants over time from early in the attempted change process over repeated assessments, using standardized measures of sexual orientation and of psychological distress. The authors report empirical evidence that change of homosexual orientation appears possible for some through involvement in Exodus ministries, either in the form of (a) an embrace of chastity with a reduction in prominence of homosexual desire, or (b) a diminishing of homosexual attraction and an increase in heterosexual attraction with resulting satisfactory heterosexual adjustment. Further, the authors found little evidence of harm incurred as a result of the involvement of the participants in the Exodus change process. These findings would appear to contradict the commonly expressed view of the mental health establishment that change of sexual orientation is impossible and that the attempt to change is highly likely to produce harm for those who make such an attempt.

Frequently Asked Questions:

Is the book anti-gay?

No. The book, in terms of its findings, is prochoice. It says that people should not be denied the opportunity to attempt to change by those who say they can’t change and shouldn’t change, who say that they should never try to be anything different than what they are right now. This is a book that offers hope to people who want to change. Not everyone wants to change, of course. And those people should not be forced to change. But those who do desire

¹<http://www.tennessean.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070816/OPINION01/708160395/1008>



to be different shouldn't be prevented from attempting to change their experience of sexual attraction and lifestyle. This book opposes a particular gay ideology. But it is very supportive of and sympathetic to all gay people.

We do embrace the traditional moral teaching of the Bible on homosexual practice, which is that such behavior is not in line with the best God has in mind for people and contrary to the explicit moral commands of the Bible. The Bible also calls for Christians to respect the dignity of all people as infinitely valuable because all are made in the image of God. Some Christians haven't followed the Bible in this way, and we deplore that.

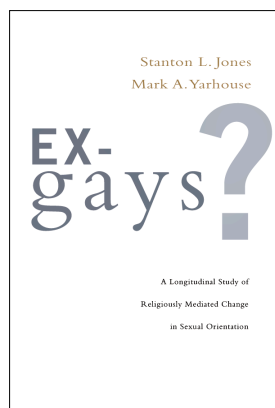
When you began the study, did you expect to find that sexual orientation change is possible?

We thought that change of sexual orientation might be possible, but not common, a position that brought us criticism from a number of people within the evangelical Christian community who said we lacked faith in God's power to change people and that we were too skeptical. Our experimental hypothesis, however, was that the mental health care establishment's position—sexual orientation change is impossible and attempting to change is harmful—was correct. Our study falsified that hypothesis on both counts by showing that change is indeed possible for some and by finding little evidence of harm in the attempt to change.

Sexual orientation change is clearly difficult and requires a serious commitment on the part of the person attempting change. It is likely impossible for some, but clearly seems possible for others. And for the participants in our study, the attempt to change sexual orientation, whether successful or unsuccessful, did not impair psychological and emotional functioning on average.

If the research is funded by ex-gay organizations, doesn't that mean the results are biased?

Researchers rarely are completely neutral toward and disinterested in their findings. Increasingly, much of the research published on sexual orientation is conducted by GLBT researchers and funded by GLBT-affirming organizations, and Jones and Yarhouse do not regard that research as intrinsically biased. The more appropriate question is whether the research is solid and the authors honest. Further, much of the medical and pharmaceutical research on which we depend is funded by drug companies themselves. Research will be biased when researchers are dishonest and do not observe proper scientific standards. We pledged from the beginning to publish the true findings of the study regardless of how positive or negative (for Exodus) the findings might be, and the written report is scrupulously honest about positive and negative findings, as well as about the strengths and limitations of the study.



Isn't homosexual orientation genetic?

Genetics have been shown conclusively to be at most a weaker contributing cause to homosexual orientation; this research is discussed in passing in the book.

Is the research scientifically rigorous?

This study is the most scientifically rigorous to date, focusing on ninety-eight subjects thought to be representative of those seeking change through Exodus, following them prospectively (from early in the process) and longitudinally (over multiple assessments), using multiple measures regarded as “industry standards,” and reporting explicitly on all aspects of the findings. Previous studies have suffered from using idiosyncratic measures of change, from looking at selective samples and from looking at subjects only at one moment in time (a cross-sectional “snapshot”). No scientific study is perfect, but this study uses the most rigorous methods to date.

Isn't a study of ninety-eight subjects very small? Can any valid conclusions be drawn from such a small sample?

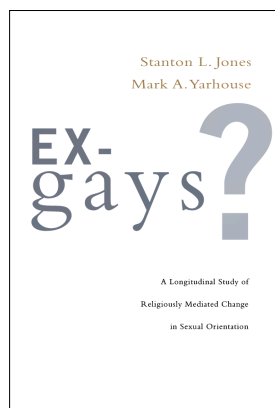
Research samples have to be large enough to answer the questions of the study. The sample in this study is too small to provide conclusive information about which variables are associated with success and failure to change, but then this was not the focus of the study. The hypotheses of the study were the ones proposed by the major mental health groups: that change of orientation is impossible and the attempt to change harmful. The sample size of ninety-eight was and is sufficient to provide very meaningful data relevant to these questions.

If this was really a scientific study, wouldn't it be published in a scientific journal or by a scientific publisher rather than by a religious publisher?

We determined to publish their results in a book rather than as a series of scientific journal articles in order to better be able to present the study as a whole in all its complexity. They sought publication of their manuscript by nonreligious publishers, but found that those publishers would not consider the project due to ideological sympathies with the GLBT community and fear of negative repercussions of publishing a study that would likely be spun as “anti-gay.”

Given the politically incorrect nature of the study, why did you undertake it?

The primary reason is that it has great intrinsic scientific interest. The study goes to the heart of a debate that is raging today and that is not being investigated fairly. Is sexual orientation utterly fixed and unchanging for all persons, or is change possible for some? The strident argument that change is impossible seemed to us driven more by ideology than by science. As scientists, we were excited to tackle such a big, important question.



Beyond that, we were struck by the contradiction between the decrees by professional associations in psychology and the mental health field generally, such as the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association, that sexual orientation change is impossible, and the anecdotes of success in changing sexual orientation that we were hearing in our church communities. Because there were no hard data to indicate that the view that change is impossible is correct, we designed a study to track a group of subjects over time as they attempted to change their sexual orientation. The study is the first on the subject of sexual orientation change to be done in accordance with rigorous scientific and ethical standards, and it is the first to produce reliable hard data on whether it is possible to change sexual orientation through the interventions delivered by religious ministry organizations.

Are you concerned that they will suffer professionally for asking taboo questions?

Others who have taken on such questions have been hindered in their involvement in professional organizations and become persona non grata at conferences and symposia. We hope that that will not be our experience, and that other scholars will judge our work with an open mind. We are also concerned for our colleagues and institutions; it is not impossible that the intense criticism our study could provoke will make life difficult for our respective departments.

What does your study tell us about nonreligiously mediated therapy, such as reparative therapy, that aims at changing sexual orientation?

The participants in our study were involved with a variety of Exodus-related organizations using a variety of methods to seek change. Some of the methods used in a few of these groups might be called psychotherapy more broadly or even reparative therapy, but most should not. Most of the methods used were religiously grounded. Our results say nothing direct about nonreligiously mediated therapies to alter sexual orientation. Finding out whether “secular” methods like reparative therapy work, and whether what went on in these Exodus groups works better or worse than that, would require a much larger study. Our study was of change produced through involvement in Exodus ministries and not of any kind of nonreligious therapy. Because of the diverse methods used by these groups, we cannot even say anything definitive about which of the methods used by these groups were the most effective. Our study had one objective: to test whether the mental health care establishment’s hypothesis is correct that sexual orientation change is impossible and that the attempt to change is harmful. In establishing that this hypothesis is false, our study lays a foundation for future studies of all aspects of sexual orientation.