

Sexuality and Social Work Conference 2016

The Experience of Reparative Therapy for Religious Gay Men in Israel

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Our research focuses on the experiences of gay men who have undergone reparative therapy in Israel. The challenges faced by gay religious people in Israel have been discussed a great deal over the last decade. Many religious gay men find it difficult to reconcile between their religious beliefs and their sexual orientation, and thus they search for different solutions—one of them is so-called "reparative therapy."

This subject relates to the conference's theme regarding religion and sexuality. We believe our research gives new insights to the complex connection between religion, sexuality, culture and modernism. The purpose of our research is to hear the narrative of men regarding the reparative therapy they have undergone. We wished to understand what leads men to pursue reparative therapy, what they experience in the course of such therapy, and how their notions regarding this process might influence our notions regarding society, therapy and policy.

We entered this research aware of the many publications regarding the ineffectiveness and harm reparative therapy can have on individuals. Moreover, we discerned an ethical problem with the notion of purporting to help people to change their sexual orientation. We expected our subjects to be highly critical (in hindsight) of the reparative therapy they undertook. Yet, to our surprise, we found a more complex picture. While some of our participants indeed spoke about the negative effects reparative therapy had had upon them, others told us that the therapy changed their life for the better and enabled them to marry women and "live full lives" Many refused to denounce reparative therapy, including men who told us it did not help them. These findings confounded many of our preconceptions about reparative therapy, sexual identity and orientation. We further understood the complexity of this issue and how sexual orientation and attraction are so strongly connected to culture, individual expectations and beliefs about happiness, freedom and self-individuation.

To conclude, in this research we wish not only to understand the experiences of our interviewees regarding reparative therapy, but also to understand how we, as gender sensitive researchers, can understand some of these experiences which might contradict our own beliefs and moral stances regarding such therapies.