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Can gays be 'cured'? Controversial practice attempts just that

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14-17 minutes

There's a skeleton in the closet at Brigham Young University: painful electric shock therapy of gay students as part of a 1976 psychology experiment to literally straighten them out. The patients were students who didn't want to be gay.

BYU officials say similar studies were conducted at other universities at the time, and the experiments have not been conducted since. Still, the shock treatments and attempts to "cure" homosexuals are worth attention as part of a continuing dialogue about treatment of gays by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Even as the church fought for passage of Proposition 8, the ban on same-sex marriage, the church disputed claims that Mormons are homophobic or biased against gays. That claim, however, is insulting to gays who feel they are being discriminated against, and especially by those who went through electric shock.

More than three decades later, the experience continues to haunt John Cameron. Cameron, 58, is head of acting in the drama department at University of Iowa and was a patient in the 1976 BYU study. He was raised a devout Mormon but left the church 30 years ago. He is still gay.

Before the therapy, he and 16 other men who wanted to be straight signed papers informing them that damage to tissue or organs may occur, that they would be looking at sensitive materials (pornographic photos) that may be contrary to their values, and that BYU would be released from responsibility for any damage. Something similar to a blood-pressure cuff, called a "plethysmographic measure," was attached to each man's genitalia. If they became aroused by gay photos, their bodies were shocked

by electrodes.

“For a year I thought (the electroshock) had some effect — I convinced myself that such was the case,” Cameron says. “But it didn’t change anything except increase my self-loathing. I didn’t know the ramifications of the experiment until years later.”

He repressed his experience for decades, and when he finally shared it, went through a three-year depression. A few years ago, Cameron wrote a play about his therapy experience and has produced it at the University of Iowa, Kent State University and the Salt Lake Acting Company.

“It’s not a play about victimization,” Cameron says. “I don’t think I’m a victim since I willingly participated in what happened. A lot of people made a lot of mistakes. I wrote the play just so people would know, and would think.”

Not common knowledge

Few people do know, even though a dissertation detailing the study can be purchased from a third-party academic company BYU refers people to when prompted. The dissertation, “Effect of Visual Stimuli in Electric Aversion Therapy,” was written by Max Ford McBride, who worked under the direction of then-BYU psychology professor D. Eugene Thorne. Both are current Mormons.

BYU is owned by the LDS Church and is the largest religious university in the nation. About 98 percent of its 34,000 students are members of the church, according to BYU officials, and church leaders have strong influence over the school’s activities. Whether LDS leaders sanctioned or knew about experiments on gays is not publicly known.

The program used reparative therapy (also called change therapy), but that is not physical. Aversion therapy, a system for punishing undesired behavior, is where the electroshock was used. Each patient was subjected to 22, 50-minute sessions. The average duration of treatment was three months.

The dissertation says the shocks would result in “pain and anxiety,” and ranks the jolts on a numbered scale. They’re described with labels such as discrete, intense, tolerable and intolerable. Each patient started with lower levels and then graduated to more intense levels of pain as the experiment continued.

“At that time, such techniques were being studied at other

universities and institutions,” BYU spokeswoman Carrie Jenkins says. “Studies of this type have not taken place at the university since then.”

“This methodology,” she added, “was an outgrowth of the behaviorist movement, which believed that any behavior could be modified. Our understanding is that most behaviorists no longer believe this is an appropriate treatment for those who are seeking change.”

Historian and former Mormon Connell O’Donovan, an administrator at UC Santa Cruz, says he went through aversion therapy at BYU, but as part of a program separate from the 1976 doctoral experiments. O’Donovan was born into the Mormon church and, at 15, told a leader he was gay. He was sent to counseling with his bishop and stake president.

“It was summer and school was out so they told me that I needed to go down to BYU for this program that would help me to become heterosexual,” O’Donovan says. He didn’t want his parents to know he was gay, so church leaders arranged it to look like he was going to genealogy research camp, he says. He stayed in BYU dorms.

“They explained to me that they would place a heparin lock in my wrist and hook an IV up to that, and I would be put in a room alone with a plethysmograph on my penis that would measure my physical arousal so that when I got an erection they would know,” O’Donovan says. — ... They were going to show me this gay pornography, and using the IV they would inject a drug into me during the gay pornography to make me start vomiting. Then they would switch the pornography over to heterosexual sex and inject a euphoric drug into me to get me to associate euphoria with heterosexuality.”

Early in his treatment, he stopped showing up.

“I told them I couldn’t do it, and they gave me a ‘shame’ letter which I had to hand-carry back and give to my stake president telling him that I had refused to go through with the Lord’s program for my cure,” he says.

That particular program is not confirmed by BYU, but electric shock did take place at BYU, university spokeswoman Jenkins says.

Evergreen International

Others continue to practice reparative therapy.

In 1989, 11 Mormon men started a group called Evergreen International, a nonprofit religious and educational organization that provides resources in 20 languages for gay people around the globe. For unknown reasons, most of the resources are slanted toward men.

Evergreen describes itself as “the most complete resource for Latter-day Saints on same-sex attraction” and coordinates therapy for interested members. Whether that therapy has ever included aversion techniques, such as electric shock, is disputed. Evergreen officials say they have never used those methods, but men who have been through the program claim they were subjected to painful treatments.

Official church publications praise Evergreen, saying it is appropriate for LDS Church members struggling with same-sex attraction. LDS hierarchy has instructed bishops and stake presidents to refer gays to this group through education, passing along contact information and in some cases, making appointments. However, church spokeswoman Kim Farah says Evergreen is not associated with the church, and directs questions about its practices to Evergreen.

“The church does not support or recommend aversion therapy,” she says.

All Evergreen funding comes from private donations, and some of those benefactors are private foundations with church ties, says David Pruden, Evergreen executive director.

“It is no secret that Evergreen works closely with the church and church organizations (such as LDS Family Services), church universities and church members,” he says. “That is what we do.”

Discussions on homosexuality and treatment — and, in fact, Evergreen — need to be respectful, Pruden says.

“This organization was founded by and is very much controlled by LDS folks with homosexual attractions, and we resent being misrepresented as a self-hating group of people,” he adds.

Pruden takes great offense to allegations that Evergreen has referred people to therapists who conduct aversion therapy.

“Can you even find a licensed professional who uses aversion therapy? I don’t know of one,” Pruden says. “Never have, and I have been in this work for 15 years. I think you are dealing with an

urban myth or at least a myth in the last 20 years, since behavioral aversion therapies went out of style after their heyday in the 1960s.”

One man, Jayce Cox, who lives in Helena, Mont., says he went through aversion therapy in 1995, when he was 18, and emphatically stands by his allegations. He says his bishop referred him to Evergreen, and that Evergreen sent him to a program carried out in the basement of the Smith Family Living Center on BYU’s campus. Cox says he paid about \$9,000 for the program, and that he signed a form that released Evergreen, the church and BYU from responsibility.

“They put me in a chair and attached electrodes on my arms, torso and penis,” he says. “They put on a gay porno, and every time I got an erection, they would shock me.”

He says his sessions lasted five months and that he now has scar tissue on his arms, torso and genitals.

“My truth is my truth and I have been honest about what happened. If I had made it up, I couldn’t have lived with myself,” says Cox, now 34, a suicide preventionist. He is still gay and is not Mormon anymore.

Pruden isn’t buying Cox’s claims.

“Let me state clearly, this individual is either a liar or is mentally ill,” Pruden says. “I can’t be more offended. This never, never happened and I would willingly go to court to prove this. If this happened, why haven’t they done something about it? I would. I would sue.”

Cox says he never considered suing.

“It’s not right to sue and take money from people who gave tithing to the church, and I don’t want to be seen as money hungry,” Cox says. “Christ taught that we should forgive and that’s what I’ve done.”

Another man, a 33-year-old former Mormon of Hurricane, Utah, who did not want his name published, says he went through aversion therapy via Evergreen in 1997. The man is withholding his identity because he says people would pester him about his experiences, which would prevent him from moving on.

He says his therapy ordeal entailed a two-hour blindfolded van ride to an undisclosed facility that he believed was in Ogden, Utah. He

claims he was picked up with other therapy members and was told to not talk to any of the passengers.

“They hooked a little blood-pressure cuff to my penis and an oxygen tube in my nose,” he says. “It scared the holy-living (expletive) out of me.”

The nurse put a gay porn movie in the VCR and told the patients to watch it, he says, adding that every time he became aroused, ammonia sprayed from the tube into his nose.

“To this day, if I even use Windex, I’ll throw up because of the smell,” he says.

Others say they had positive therapy experiences with Evergreen and BYU.

Clark Pingree, 34, a longtime Walnut Creek resident who has left the Bay Area temporarily, went through two years of reparative counseling (talk therapy that did not include physical aspects such as electric shock) at BYU when he was a student 10 years ago. He is no longer Mormon.

“I dated women, I went through counseling, I was faithful, I prayed all the time and did everything I was supposed to do,” Pingree says. “I finally realized that I remedied every other problem in my life, I now had fantastic study habits and didn’t drink Coke, but nothing with my sexuality changed. “... I realized that I am the only person who can determine my authentic happiness. I thought it just needed to be between me and God.”

Pingree says his BYU counselor was a “great person to talk to,” but that some other people he knows had negative experiences, especially those who went through aversion therapy.

An unpopular practice

Bay Area News Group randomly contacted more than a dozen Bay Area therapists, and all are opposed to reparative therapy, and especially aversion therapy.

Michael Halyard, a San Francisco therapist, says electric and ammonia therapy is torture.

“At the least, the treatments were humiliating to the participants, at the very worst they were traumatic,” Halyard says. — ... Further, since the treatments didn’t work, people undergoing so-called ‘reparative therapies’ typically feel a sense of shame about not

being able to change their sexual orientation, and some even resort to suicide since they feel they failed by not changing.”

According to Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons, a support group for gay Mormons, 57 percent of gay Mormon survey respondents reported having thoughts of or attempts at suicide sometime during their lives. In 2000, on the steps of the Los Altos stake center, gay Mormon Henry Stuart Matis, 32, shot and killed himself because he could not reconcile his gayness with his religion, according to a 2010 San Jose Mercury News article that covered a vigil commemorating the 10-year anniversary of the event.

Michael Quirke, a therapist who practices in San Francisco and San Mateo, says reparative therapy has no scientific basis.

“I have worked with many men and women who have suffered psychologically and physically from these tactics,” Quirke says. “These are at best unethical and ineffective. At worst they are traumatizing and abusive, and can result in struggles with depression, anxiety, substance abuse and trauma symptoms.”

Some ex-Mormons are content to step away from the church quietly, while others benefit from a formal exit. According to James Guay, a San Francisco psychotherapist, “Severing their membership, not being counted as a Mormon in their statistics and confronting church bishops as part of the ex-communication process has been helpful for some but not necessary for all.”

reparative therapy

Reparative therapy, sometimes called conversion therapy, change therapy and reorientation therapy, attempts to change people from homosexual or bisexual to heterosexual. The therapy can be carried out through several means, ranging from prayer to counseling sessions, and can sometimes include aversion techniques. This may involve chemicals, shocks or other methods, depending on the practitioner. Reparative therapy has been denounced by the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association.

ABOUT THE SERIES

This is the second of a two-part series on gays in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

March

13: The fractured history between gays and the church.

Today: Reparative therapy and church attempts to "cure" gays.

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