

Homo-conversion therapy, Sexual fluidity and the Law

A case against legal attempts to restrict the availability of responsible counselling for those who experience movement in their sexual orientation in the direction of heterosexuality. Such restrictions are arbitrary, harmful and discriminatory.

Summary

Academic studies over the last three decades unanimously show that some individuals experience changes in their sexual orientation over time. This change may take different directions. Heterosexuality is the most *stable* sexual orientation identity. Lesbian and bisexual women display the greatest degree of sexual *fluidity*, followed by bisexual men. Homosexual men also report change in their sexual orientation identity but significantly less than women. Studies suggest that between 2% and 3% of the population experience *fluidity* in their sexual orientation over 10 years. For some being part of this minority group can be confusing and very stressful, especially if the movement is undesirable. Every person in this group who would value the company of a coach, mentor or counsellor during this journey of change should have access to support. Those who wish to explore the possibility of belonging to this group who experience movement in their sexual orientation should also have, if desired, access to counselling. Responsible counselling should be readily available regardless of the direction of the client's experienced or desired change. Counselling should always be voluntary, never forced or imposed. Counselling should not seek to induce or direct sexual orientation identity fluidity but rather promote the client's wellbeing. Legislation, if necessary, should *recognize* and *respect* the minority who experience fluidity in their sexual orientation identity and should be *neutral*, that is, should not arbitrarily favour or restrict the availability of counselling based on the direction of change.

Context

Same sex *attractions* were for many years considered a mental disorder, a sickness and morally wrong. At that time there were strong social reasons to convert all sexual minorities into heterosexuals. Over the years government health departments experimented with therapies including shock treatments and heavy medication.¹ Faith-based organizations also experimented with conversion therapies. Studies and testimonies are available that strongly criticize diverse therapies, and there are also studies and testimonies that report change and/or beneficial effects of some types of therapy.

Can the sexual orientation of some people really change? If it is *assumed* that the direction of sexual attraction is *fixed* like our DNA, chromosome structure or blood type, then any report of change will be rejected. Reported changes will be explained as someone 'discovering' their long-suppressed true sexual orientation or as someone who is being 'temporarily untrue' to their real sexual orientation. Such testimonies of change will be ignored or even labelled 'fake, dangerous and damaging' because they may awaken impossible expectations in vulnerable people. In the 1970's and 1980's a number of studies focused on bisexual patterns of behaviour. They reported sexual flexibility. It was noted that women presented greater sexual flexibility than men. In the 1990's the studies for the first time

¹ Faderman, Lillian. *The Gay Revolution – The Story of the Struggle*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, NY 2015.

considered the element of time. It was noted that the direction of sexual desire could change over time. Some also noted that anchoring sexual *attractions* to a sexual *identity* (such as lesbian, gay or heterosexual) created fixed boundaries that could restrict the ability to explore or desire change. Psychologist Roy Baumeister, in year 2000, was the first academic to synthesize existing evidence in support of female sexual variability. In 2008, Lisa Diamond, a lesbian psychologist and feminist, published her influential book on sexual fluidity.² She strongly supports LGBT rights and strongly opposes their popular ‘born this way’ narrative.³

Most Western governments and faith-based organizations no longer seek to turn homosexuals into heterosexuals. In an attempt to completely eradicate any possible unwanted pressure for change on non-heterosexuals, particularly on children and the vulnerable, some countries, including The Netherlands, are considering legislation that would make it *illegal* for counsellors and psychologists to coach or accompany clients that are moving in the direction of heterosexuality and clients who would like to explore the possibility that they belong to such a fluid group. As always, the challenge is to balance ‘protecting the vulnerable’ with ‘respecting their personal rights’.

Definitions

Sexual orientation is typically defined by the direction of a person’s sexual attraction, be it to men, women or both. Some propose a continuum between same sex and other sex attraction – as opposed to discrete categories. While others suggest that sexual attraction is more complex, some describing themselves as asexual or pansexual or reporting sexual attractions directed towards children or animals or certain objects.

Sexual orientation identity usually refers to the label chosen by an individual to describe his or her experienced sexual orientation. The most common are heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual. Some studies add a fourth category, ‘other’, to cover the diversity of sexual orientation identity minorities.

By *Sexual fluidity* most refer to the changes in the direction of a person’s sexual desire, responsiveness or sexual orientation identity. Some studies suggest that between 2%-3% of the population experience sexual fluidity. In contrast, the majority who report no change, are referred to as *sexually stable*.

Research methods

Generally speaking, two types of studies are readily available. *Longitudinal studies* explore changes in sexual attitudes or behaviour over time. These may be based on reported changes in national census data (taken every 10 years) or may follow a small sample of chosen people for a number of years. The other type are the *One-Off studies* which limit their research to information collected at one point in time. Some of these studies ask respondents about their experience of change in the past. These are called *Retrospective studies*. Each type of study has its strengths and limitations. The way you describe your past experience today may differ from the way you would describe it in the past. The degree of sexual fluidity reported by lesbians who volunteer for a survey may be less than that experienced by the lesbian population as a whole. Small samples may contain a bias. General insights are more robust when based on comparing a number of different types of studies. Consider now the corroborating evidence for sexual fluidity from the following studies.

² Diamond, L. *Sexual Fluidity - Understanding women’s love and desire*. Harvard University Press. 2008.

³ Diamond, L. *Why the ‘born this way’ argument doesn’t advance LGBT equality*. TEDx Salt Lake City. 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjX-KBPm4&t=661s>

Evidence for sexual fluidity

Study #1: *Stability and Change in Sexual Orientation Identity over a 10-Year Period in Adulthood*, Mock & Eibach.⁴ 2011

This is a longitudinal study based on the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States. It contained 2,560 participants. Average age was approximately 47 years. In Wave 1 respondents identified as heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. In Wave 2, ten years later, 2.15% reported a different sexual orientation identity. This study shows that heterosexuality is by far the most *stable* sexual orientation identity and that stability is also strongly present among those who report homosexual and to a lesser degree bisexual identity. Lesbians and bisexuals report a high degree of *fluidity* in their sexual orientation identity.

CHANGE	Heterosexual	Homosexual	Bisexual
Male	0.78%	9.52%	47.06%
Female	1.36%	63.63%	64.71%

These results support a longitudinal study carried out by L. Diamond in 2008 using a sample of non-heterosexual women (lesbian, bisexual and other) over a period of 10 years which stated that 67% of these women reported change in their sexual orientation during this time.⁵

Study #2: *Same-sex attraction in a birth cohort: Prevalence and Persistence in early adulthood*, Dickson, Paul & Herbison.⁶ 2003

This is a longitudinal study over 5 years of same-sex and opposite-sex attraction in a national sample of young adults. Sexual fluidity is clearly reported. Comparing this study with Study #1, it would suggest that the changes in sexual orientation experienced during early adulthood are significantly higher than those reported by adults. The exception would be the group of young homosexual women whose level of sexual fluidity appears to remain high into adulthood.

CHANGE	Heterosexual	Homosexual
Young men	5%	35%
Young women	16%	60%

Study #3: *Sex differences in the flexibility of sexual orientation: A multidimensional retrospective assessment*, Kinnish, Strasberg & Turner.⁷ 2005

This is a retrospective study of sexual orientation identity among a group of heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual men and women. 97% of those self-identifying as heterosexual (men and women) recalled and reported no change in their sexual orientation identity. Women with lesbian and bisexual identities self-reported changes similar to those in studies #1 and #2. Men however, in this retrospective study, reported higher fluidity than those reported in the two longitudinal studies above.

CHANGE	Homosexual	Bisexual
Men	39%	66%
Women	65%	77%

⁴ Archives of Sexual Behaviour, 41, 641-648.

⁵ Diamond, L. D. *Female bisexuality from adolescence to adulthood. Results from a 10-year longitudinal study.* Developmental Psychology, 44, 5-14. 2008.

⁶ Social Science and Medicine, 56, 1607-1615.

⁷ Archives of Sexual Behaviour, 34, 173-183.

Discussion, recommendations and conclusion

Publicly available academic research points consistently towards the presence of sexual orientation identity *fluidity* among a significant proportion of the population. The relative stability of the heterosexual orientation identity should not be imposed on those who report a non-heterosexual identity. Those who over time experience sexual orientation identity fluidity may journey in different directions between heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and other sexual identities. This sexual fluidity also includes return journeys. Here follow some common erroneous conclusions:

Error 1: Sexual orientation is a choice: The fact that a person experiences fluidity in their sexual orientation identity *does not* necessarily imply that he or she has personal control over that fluidity. Different measures are used to determine sexual orientation identity, usually a combination of romantic feelings, sexual attractions, fantasies and sexual behaviour. Of these only fantasies and behaviour could be said to be choices.

Error 2: Sexual fluidity can be induced: The fact that *some* people over time experience sexual orientation fluidity *does not* mean that *all* people will or can experience change in their sexual attractions. Most human beings report a stable sexual orientation. No one knows if he or she belongs to that sexually fluid-group until they begin to experience change. Such change cannot be induced, created or guaranteed. This, however, should not preclude everybody's right to seek help to explore their own possibility of change. Perhaps they also belong to that sexually fluid group. I propose that counselling should not seek to change sexual orientation, be in in one direction or another, but to restore and promote the client's integrity and wellbeing.

Error 3: The direction of sexual fluidity can be controlled: Much research has been carried out seeking possible causes for same-sex attraction. To date, studies show that the presence of homosexuality is a complex combination of nature and nurture: biological factors may provide a predisposition, and sociocultural influences and opportunities may also make their own contribution. These biological, psychological and sociological factors may also influence the *stability* and *fluidity* of a person's sexual orientation. The re-visiting childhood experiences, traumas, sexual abuse, and a better understanding of how a sociocultural context influences free choices, may *in some cases*, help reduce or remove a client's sexual orientation confusion. Such counselling can be liberating and enriching even by those who never experience change in their sexual orientation.

Error 4: Sexual fluidity is the experience of an insignificant minority: It is a fact that the great majority of men and women report stability in their sexual orientation. How many people in The Netherlands experience sexual fluidity in their lifetime? I estimate the sexually fluid group in The Netherlands to consist of at least half a million people.⁸

Conclusion: More than 1.5 million inhabitants of the United Kingdom will experience sexual orientation fluidity in their lifetime. People who experience change in their sexual orientation should - if they feel they need it - have access to responsible counselling. Asymmetrical legal restrictions or code of conduct which is designed to restrict or prohibit counselling to those who are experiencing movement (or would like to explore the possibilities) in the direction of heterosexuality, is clearly arbitrary, unjust and discriminatory.

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⁸ If the adult population surveyed in Study #1 is similar to that of the UK, 2,15% of its 66.65 million inhabitants would be expected to experience sexual orientation identity fluidity over a period of 10 years. That is 1.433.000 people. Given that young people experience greater sexual orientation identity fluidity than adults (Study #2), this estimate is rather low. Furthermore, fluidity may express itself outside the 10-year study period. A rough conservative estimate would be that at least 1.5m people in the UK will experience sexual orientation identity fluidity in their life time.