Review of Reparative therapy of male homosexuality: A new clinical approach by Joseph Nicolosi

I. Reed Payne

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BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by I. Reed Payne, PhD, Brigham Young University

Early one morning, several years ago, I found a plain brown envelope which had been slipped under my office door at the clinic before I arrived. In the envelope was a fifty-two page, perfectly typed, single-spaced paper from an anonymous donor, a tirade accusing me of insensitivity, gross error, cruelty and injustice—in reference to comments made in a college course. The topic was homosexuality. Selected research in the paper focused on two conclusions regarding homosexuality: (1) "we are born homosexual;" and, (2) "homosexuality cannot be changed." I disagreed then and I disagree now.

One thing I like about Nicolosi’s book—*Reparative Therapy of Male Homosexuality* (1991)—is that it also disagrees with these two major premises promoted by the homosexual community. From Nicolosi’s book one might frame two counter-assumptions: (1) the homosexual condition often has developmental and dynamic underpinnings involving male-identity failure; and, (2) clinical evidence clearly demonstrates optimism by confirming the change process.

While most people might view this book as a signal of hope or a banner of encouragement, one must realize a significant segment of our society will automatically assume an opposite stance. Conversation with Nicolosi revealed instances of persecution and a flood of hellacious opposition from those who would promote the biological basis and no change premises. As homosexuality becomes more politicized, there is less and less inclination to consider data or facts that questions the gay lifestyle as a natural state of affairs. Research has virtually been stopped and completely thwarted over the last several years although recent renewed efforts are being seen, of which this account by Nicolosi is one example.

A brief note regarding Nicolosi can characterize him as a personable and accommodating scholar. He has made himself available not only for formal presentations but for more searching examinations of the problems attendant to treatment of homosexuality. He received his training in the California School of Professional Psychology and is Clinical Director of the Thomas Aquinas Psychological Clinic. As a lecturer and author he is in demand. In this volume he brings a wealth of direct experience in both individual and group psychotherapy. Therefore, his accounts are sparkling with examples of clinical expertise making the book a tutorial adventure. While written from a professional perspective, both those inside and outside the profession can appreciate the clear presentation of diagnosis and treatment.
Nicolosi’s approach is geared toward the ego dystonic homosexual male who desires help in moving toward a normal heterosexual lifestyle. He makes no appeal to the homosexual who is exclusively identified and satisfied with the gay lifestyle. There is no crusade here, only an honest, forthright offering of hope to individuals who are desirous of making adjustments involving their identity, sexual feelings, and personal and social growth. He addresses issues of alienation. This is seen in documented difficulties where males have problems with non-erotic male friendships resulting from defensive detachment from other males. Assertiveness deficits and sexualization of dependency and aggression are focal points in the therapeutic arena. These elements of conflict are at the root of gender-identity issues. The author does not ignore opposition to his position and lays out the arguments pro and con.

Mental health professionals are taken to task in this book for neglecting the non-gay homosexual. This reviewer can readily confirm that the professional attempts to support the liberation of gays has simultaneously pushed the non-gay homosexual underground and, as Nicolosi states, “it has cast doubt on the validity of this group’s struggle” (p. 6). Because of their conservative counter-struggle, this group of non-gay homosexuals, desiring change, proceed in a quiet and discrete manner without the hoopla, parades, and demonstrations characteristic of the gay community. It is ironic that those who are most vocal about gay rights would be so suppressive and hostile towards homosexuals who would desire treatment and even more so towards those who would offer the needed help.

As one tracks Nicolosi through the developmental labyrinth, blame is set aside in favor of appreciating the critical turns where deficits occur and relationships fail in their outcomes. Nicolosi does much to demystify the developmental sequence. Not only is the relationship between a boy and his father a telling one, a person’s relationship with himself is of equal moment. The theory is buttressed with a plethora of quotes, comments, and observations of clients and professionals that are convincing and clarifying.

Critics will stab at the short shrift given physiological factors in homosexuality. Even so, Nicolosi does not dismiss the biological predisposition. He acknowledges, “There could possibly be some physiological factor that predisposes a man toward gender deficit and consequent homosexuality, but not one that predetermines homosexuality” (p. 91). An analogy with alcoholism is drawn. Major research on the biological theories of homosexuality reappraised is supportive of these conclusions. For example, Byne and Parsons (1993) state, “Critical review shows evidence favoring a biologic theory to be lacking” (p. 228). The biologic appeal seems to emanate from dissatisfaction of psychosocial explanations rather than from convincing data.
One comes away from Reparative Therapy understanding gay sexuality as well. There is no sidestepping of the assumptions of the gay liberation arguments. These are confronted and criticized point by point. Issue is taken with the gay affirmative philosophy. Terms like homophobia are examined and questioned. Nicolosi is not shy about presenting his own philosophy. He states, “I do not believe that any man can ever be truly at peace in living out a homosexual orientation” (p. 149).

The positive thrust here details treatment and movement towards developing healthy male relationships. With this in mind the involvement of female therapists may be useful but ultimately a male therapist is needed to complete the therapeutic effort. The logic of this is consistent with the understanding of homosexual needs. This developmental and dynamic approach is in the mainstream therapeutic usage. The insight-growth aspects of therapy are found in the statement, “Full humanity is not acquired by distilling, compromising, or denying characteristics of our original gender” (p. 156). Therapy addresses deep seated antipathy towards the father that blocks acceptance. The power of transformation lies within the individual. Empowerment must come from the therapeutic encounter. Patience and acceptance of the ongoing struggle is a necessity. While some men may ultimately choose a celibate life, others have gone on to become fathers, husbands, and successful heterosexual people.

As would be expected, issues of transference and resistance are highlighted. The therapist is characterized as mentor, leader, and coach being both supportive and confrontive, “like a salient father.” The reader is quickly divested of any magical cures, shortcuts, or other easy answers. Heterosexual romantic relationships are regarded as having little or no value in therapy until the latter stages.

The cautious, fearful, and avoidant experiences of the non-gay homosexual desiring change are best addressed in a group setting. Accepting responsibility is more readily understood and experienced. The natural support of sharing common problems and experiences is hard to duplicate in individual sessions. The object relations backdrop anticipates the inevitable splitting that occurs. Ambivalence of despair and hope are not unusual. A walk through the steps of individual and group therapy brings a sense of familiarity and comfort even though one might be relatively uninitiated in the treatment of homosexuality. Nicolosi is not Polyannish in his depiction of the therapeutic struggle. He seems wise in pointing out that clients with borderline features and narcissistic tendencies tend to do poorly.

If there is a major flaw in the story of reparative therapy it is that it is too brief and much is left unsaid. All questions are not raised and all answers are not given. However, the attempt at thoroughness is encouraging
and the account is manageable. For therapists who have been persuaded away from being available to the homosexual person who desires help, this courageous effort offers a viable justification for extending human rights to a neglected group of individuals who are found in a different closet.

References