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How Does Psychoanalysis View Homosexuality?

Part of the Home Page of Dr. [Niclas Berggren](#)

Having recently run into representatives of an organization called NARTH, which views homosexuality negatively and which claims to be able to change people's sexual orientations on the basis of psychoanalytic therapy, I decided to get in touch with the American Psychoanalytic Association to find out if the general position of psychoanalysts nowadays is in accordance with that of NARTH. Below, you can see my letter and the response I received from Ralph Roughton, MD. I was happily surprised by what Dr. Roughton wrote. If you have any questions regarding the position of the American Psychoanalytic Association, please contact [Dr. Roughton](#) via e-mail. Dr. Roughton would especially like to hear from anyone who has data or experience of gay men and lesbians applying to be candidates in psychoanalytic institutes and whether there are any gay/lesbian faculty members in analytic institutes.

This is my letter:

- Dear Sir/Madam,

As I have encountered an organization called NARTH (The National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality), which presents a rather negative view of homosexuality on the basis of psychoanalytic approaches, I would like to inquire with you about your assessment of this organization. Is it recommendable and trustworthy, as viewed from the perspective of mainstream psychoanalysis? I thank you in advance for your kind assistance!

Sincerely,
Niclas Berggren, Ph.D.

And this is Dr. Roughton's reply:

- Dear Dr. Berggren,

Your query to the American Psychoanalytic Association about NARTH was referred to me for response. I have just completed my 6 year term as Chairman of the Committee on Issues of Homosexuality and have quite a bit of knowledge about NARTH.

There is no connection between the American Psychoanalytic Association (APsaA) and NARTH. However, several of the officers of NARTH are psychoanalysts and

are members of APsaA. We do not censor members for their beliefs or disagreements, only for unethical practice; therefore they have remained members even though their views about homosexuality may differ sharply from the majority of our members. However, the APsaA has taken two actions that indicate our official position:

(1) Because Charles Socarides (President of NARTH) misrepresented the position of the APsaA in a published paper and in a court affidavit, the Executive Committee of the APsaA instructed our attorney to write a letter to Dr. Socarides insisting that he cease this misrepresentation, and threatening legal action if he continued. (His misrepresentation was to make it appear that his own views about pathology and treatment of homosexuality were consistent with those of the APsaA. He did this by quoting something written in 1968, which supported his views and which he called the "official position" of the APsaA, while ignoring a 1990 revised statement that drastically contradicted his views; he also failed to mention our only "official" policy, which was a 1991 statement of non-discrimination.)

(2) The newsletter of the APsaA has decided no longer to print advertisements for the meetings of NARTH, because that organization does not adhere to our policy of non-discrimination and because their activities are demeaning to our members who are gay and lesbian.

Those are the two official actions. However, there is more that will give a clearer picture of what NARTH stands for and how that differs from the majority of our members.

NARTH's official position is that homosexuality is "a treatable disorder." Dr. Socarides has repeatedly stated in writing that "the homosexual, no matter his or her level of adaptation and functioning in other areas of life, is severely handicapped in the most vital area -- interpersonal relations." He strongly opposed the adoption by the APsaA in 1991 of a resolution that required the selection of analytic candidates and faculty to be based on factors other than sexual orientation. He has written in newspaper articles that the gay rights movement is destroying society, he has supported attempts to overturn gay rights laws in various states, and this fall he and other officers of NARTH will testify as expert witnesses in the state of Louisiana in favor of upholding laws making oral and anal sex between consenting adults illegal. Increasingly, NARTH seems to be attracting membership and financial support from members of the radical religious right, who use their pronouncements as "scientific" backing for their bigoted anti-homosexual activities.

The Executive Director of NARTH, Joseph Nicolosi, PhD, has stated in a printed editorial that he will not work with a homosexual patient who does not want to change his sexual orientation. Dr. Socarides' treatment attempts have been described in the past as being more educative and manipulative than analytic. It is my understanding that he no longer identifies himself in publications as a psychoanalyst, but rather as a psychiatrist. Dr. Nicolosi is a psychologist who has not had psychoanalytic training and works out of a religiously oriented counselling center.

They approach treatment of gay and lesbian patients with the goal of changing their sexual orientation -- clearly not an analytic stance. It is my own personal belief that many of their so-called successful conversions occur in either people with bisexual potential, or as "transference cures" in those who have severe psychopathology with little sense of identity and who are very maleable, or in those who have a strong desire to avoid dealing with their homosexuality and a strong wish to please the authoritative therapist. It is of course possible to learn to inhibit one's sexual desires and to control one's behavior. Another criticism of their claims is that they offer almost no long-term followup data. Many of us know of cases that ended conversion treatment as "cured" in whom the change did not last.

Even if we take their claims for success at face value, they report success rates of only 35 % at best. They do not discuss the 65% who do not change, except to emphasize that those who are highly motivated to change are more likely to be successful. There are growing anecdotal reports from other analysts that they frequently see those patients who attempted such "conversion" therapy and who have suffered serious adverse effects, such as depression, lowered self-esteem, increased shame and self-hatred -- and many who, under the belief that they had "changed," have married and now have children.

There are many analysts, psychiatrists, and psychologists that would like for our organizations to declare this "conversion" or "reparative" therapy unethical. However much some of us might feel this to be true, it also raises questions of state control over freedom to practice therapy and is hampered by lack of valid statistical data to prove that overall the treatment is harmful. We have anecdotal evidence, but not yet statistical data.

Even though we are not in a position to take such prohibitive action against conversion/reparative therapy, we believe that the majority of psychoanalysts and the leaders in the APsaA now accept the idea that homosexuality is not necessarily a manifestation of psychopathology and that treatment for gay men and lesbians should be approached with neutrality and respect for the person's individuality, with no preconceived idea of the outcome, nor any coercive attempts to change sexual orientation -- just as we approach any other patient.

Although the APsaA has no official position beyond the non-discrimination policy, we have officially moved forward with encouraging the acceptance of gay and lesbian candidates for analytic training and the appointment of gay and lesbian faculty members, including training analysts. There are now probably 30 to 40 openly gay and lesbian candidates in training in institutes affiliated with the APsaA. Nearly half of our institutes also have faculty members who are gay or lesbian, and two institutes have a gay or a lesbian training analyst. So you see, by this data, that our organization is strongly opposed to the repressive and negative ideas that NARTH represents, even more than any official statements or actions that have been taken.

Perhaps the most positive indication of support from our organization is the fact that in December 1997, the Executive Council of the APsaA overwhelmingly and

without significant dissent voted to endorse a resolution supporting same-gender marriage.

I would be happy to correspond further with you and supply any information that you might wish, including references to back up what I have written here. On a more personal note, I also happen to be a member of the House of Delegates of the International Psychoanalytic Association, and I plan to introduce a resolution opposing anti-homosexual discrimination in the institutes and societies of the IPA. I would be glad to hear from you about the situation in Sweden. Do gay men and lesbians feel free to apply for psychoanalytic training? Do you know if any have been accepted? Do you have any information about the official position of the Swedish Psa Society? Please feel free to contact me directly at:

1175 Peachtree Street, NE Atlanta, GA 30361 e-mail: 76501.2034@compuserve.com

Ralph Roughton, MD

copy to: Susan Vaughan, Chair, Committee on Issues of Homosexuality
Ellen Fertig, Administrative Director, APsaA

In addition to this letter, the following news story from 1997 reveals that the American Psychoanalytic Association endorses same-sex marriage:

"On December 18 the American Psychoanalytic Association (APA) endorsed Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund's Marriage Resolution, which maintains that states should not interfere with couples of the same gender who wish to marry. Marvin Margolis, M.D., Ph.D., president of the APA, expressed his enthusiastic support for the resolution. Ralph Roughton, M.D., chair of the Association's Committee of Issues on Homosexuality added "[A]s psychoanalysts, we are proud to join the many prominent national organizations and individuals which support the efforts for gay and lesbian civil rights in the area of marriage and family, spearheaded by the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund." For more information, contact Leon Hoffman, M.D. (American Psychoanalytic Association) at (212) 249-1163."
