

**Book Review of James E. Phelan's *Successful Outcomes  
of Sexual Orientation Change Efforts:  
An Annotated Bibliography***

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## *Book Review*

James E. Phelan has done a service to the profession in *Successful Outcomes of Sexual Orientation Change Efforts: An Annotated Bibliography*. As is evident from the title, in this short (130 pages) book Phelan has compiled research that documented positive outcomes in change-oriented psychotherapeutic intervention for unwanted same-sex attractions, behaviors, and identity. Relevant studies are grouped in separate chapters by therapeutic modality (psychodynamic, cognitive and behavioral, group, etc.) and are briefly outlined in chronological order. Of course, most of these studies were conducted during the heyday of such research—the fifties through the seventies—before cultural and professional changes declared such research entirely politically incorrect and therefore much more difficult to conduct and fund, despite today’s more methodologically sophisticated designs. But this is one reason why it is important to have a compendium of this research available for scholars and those in the public who want to quickly familiarize themselves with this literature. The book’s alphabetical bibliography section at the end also provides a handy reference for all source materials.

Beyond the value of documenting successful sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) studies, I found it worth the read to realize that many studies, even in the mid-twentieth century, were defining success as occurring on a continuum of change as opposed to strictly categorical notions of SOCE—a definition NARTH (2012) has affirmed formally in recent years. Also worth the price of the book is Phelan’s discussion of the factors associated with successful outcomes as well as the ethical issues involved in SOCE, including clients’ right to self-determination of their treatment goals and modalities.

It should also be noted that Phelan apparently compiled his information as part of the process of coauthoring NARTH’s response to the American Psychological Association’s (APA) pre-2009 critiques of SOCE (Phelan, Whitehead, & Sutton, 2009). His annotated bibliography expands somewhat on details of the successful SOCE research presented in the NARTH response while sacrificing the broader contextual discussion that the NARTH report provides. Phelan acknowledges that his aim is to report only on successful SOCE literature. It is clear that he does not intend a thoroughgoing

critical review of these studies, nor does he intend to lay out the broader professional landscape that makes this successful SOCE literature important. For example, little comment is given to the fact that many studies define success in behavioral terms rather than as a change of sexual attractions.

Readers interested in the critique of this literature from a more skeptical perspective will have to look elsewhere, and I would recommend the APA's (2009) *Report of the APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation*. The APA's report provides what could be viewed as a hypercritical stance, dismissing nearly all of the literature Phelan reviews on successful SOCE as equivocal at best, despite the fact that most of these studies met the acceptable professional and methodological standards of their era. While the APA's approach to the literature is transparently self-serving to those who understand their advocacy against SOCE, proponents of SOCE nevertheless would do well to know the arguments APA makes against such psychological care. To his credit, Phelan does offer a concluding chapter where he acknowledges that even the successful SOCE literature contains methodological limitations.

Perhaps the best summary statement Phelan makes of the successful SOCE literature occurs on page 95:

Overall, the research literature is limited by sampling, assessment, and follow-up issues, however despite the methodological limitations of individual studies, there is nevertheless [a] compelling body of evidence that some individuals can shift identity and/or behavioral components of their sexual orientation after undergoing some type of intervention, or none at all.

This modest truth, testified to by a multitude of individuals across the globe, is what NARTH and others are diligently trying to preserve in a professional climate that often finds such statements inconvenient to certain advocacy goals. We can thank Phelan for making an important contribution to this effort.

## **References**

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