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Nicholas Cummings and Conversion Therapy

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The purpose of this report is to provide background for the Advisory Board and the staff of the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology on the role of Dr. Nicholas Cummings (1924-2020) in sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE), sometimes called “conversion therapy,” “re-orientation therapy” or “reparative therapy.”² Evaluation and acknowledgement of Dr. Cummings’ role in supporting SOCE must be done with care and nuance, and with respect for Dr. Cummings’ many contributions to the profession. Serving as APA President in 1979, his long career was focused on the development of a model for short-term psychotherapy, the integration of psychological interventions into the health care system, the expansion of mental health care coverage, and the establishment of the first free-standing Professional School of Psychology (see Austad, 2022).

Dr. Cummings argued that therapy to change sexual orientation was legitimate *for those who requested this goal*, that it was not harmful, and that treatment had been successful in “hundreds of cases” at Kaiser Permanente in San Francisco under his directorship as chief psychologist from 1958-1980 (Cummings, 2010).³ Cummings rejected the idea that these efforts

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² Note the implication that the condition requires “repair,” and is therefore a defect. Although borrowed from other uses in medicine, the term “reparative therapy” for homosexuality was popularized in the 1990s by Joseph Nicolosi (1991), who died in 2017. He viewed homosexuality as a developmental failure of gender identification due to faulty family dynamics.

³ Given that Cummings never made reference to bisexual, transgender, queer, and other identities until his video in support of the Trevor Project (see below), and the literature on conversion

were a “cure,” and instead argued that the treatment allowed some men to lead heterosexual lives and others to achieve a more satisfying adjustment as homosexuals. He presented no evidence for these claims. By 2005, he became a strong public advocate for the opportunity to choose or provide such therapy, despite growing evidence of ineffectiveness and harm, and he later became a severe critic of the APA (2009) stance on this and many other issues. The aims of this report are to examine what Nicholas Cummings said and wrote regarding sexual orientation and reorientation therapy, and to analyze how his work was used by individuals and groups promoting reorientation. These groups frequently opposed the normalization of homosexuality and the legal protection of same-sex marriage and parenthood.

As APA President in 1979, Cummings supported the 1973 removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM). Arguing against employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, he hired gay and lesbian therapists to provide services for gay and lesbian clients at Kaiser Permanente. In 1981 he outlined the pervasive sexism in psychological practice and argued that “all professional psychologists have a responsibility and a role in promoting equality” (Sobel & Cummings, 1981, p. 177). Over the next twenty years, with his career focused on the development of managed care through his company, American Biodyne, on the promotion of integrated health care, and then on the work of the Cummings Foundation, he did not provide therapy or write specifically on issues of homosexuality or the AIDS epidemic, as far as I have been able to determine.⁴

therapy focused on homosexuality, parts of the discussion here will use the terms “gay,” “lesbian,” and “homosexual” rather than LGBTQ+.

⁴ By his own count, Cummings authored and edited over 450 articles, notes, chapters, and books. In addition to examination of the works with obviously relevant content, a full search of relevant keywords was made for Cummings using PSYCINFO, Google, Google Scholar, and archive.org.

Gay rights activism and the drive to end pathologization, criminalization, and discrimination accelerated in the 1960s. At the same time, therapy to change sexual orientation, remained a mainstream practice among psychiatrists and psychologists such as Albert Ellis (1956). In the early 1970s, Gerald Davison, a pioneer of aversive behavior therapy for homosexuality, repudiated his past work and became a supporter of gay rights and opponent of conversion therapy on the grounds that offering SOCE in itself condoned prejudice. Therapists do not, he argued, have an abstract responsibility to provide any treatment a client requests. Instead, they have an ethical responsibility to consider the oppression that produced the request for SOCE (Davison, 1976, 1978; see also Gersema, 2019; Haldeman, 2022;).

The formation of the Association of Gay Psychologists in 1973 and the continuous efforts of gay and lesbian psychologists eventually led to the creation of APA's Division 44, now named *The Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, in 1985 (Kimmel & Browning, 1999). Hegarty (2017) documented the growing professional recognition of *stigma* for understanding the experiences and problems faced by gays and lesbians. Arguments for therapy that affirmed rather than changed gay identity became more frequent in the 1980s (Byers, Vider & Smith, 2019). Despite these developments, a 1986 APA task force indicated that it was "exemplary practice" to attempt to change sexual orientation *if* strongly desired by the client. The diagnosis of homosexuality as a mental illness remained in the International Classification of Diseases of the World Health Organization (ICD-9) until 1990. The DSM still provided a classification of "ego dystonic homosexuality" for those distressed by their "condition," until 1987 (see Hegarty, 2017, p. 17). This category, also included in the ICD until 2019, helped legitimize SOCE (Drescher, 2017).

In the 1990s there was increased activism in the APA to set clear standards for treatment of gay and lesbian clients, culminating in the Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients (Division 44 Task Force, 2000). Official efforts in the APA to declare conversion therapy ineffective, unnecessary, harmful and unethical began in 1997 (see Haldeman, 2003, 2022). Additional evidence of harm appeared over the next decade, and an APA (2009) Task Force produced a full review of the SOCE research literature, cautiously concluding that “efforts to change orientation are unlikely to be successful and involve some risk of harm.” The APA was not the first professional organization to express strong concerns regarding SOCE. Official opposition to conversion therapy came from The American Psychiatric Association in 2000, the American Academy of Pediatrics in 1993, and the American Psychoanalytic Association in 1999, and the National Association of Social Workers in 2000. Many other professional groups, including the American Medical Association, the American Counseling Association, and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry issued similar policy statements by 2015, based on both scientific and ethical concerns (APA, 2021). A 2020 United Nations Human Rights Council report called for a global ban on conversion therapy, concluding that “Practices of ‘conversion therapy,’ provoke profound psychological and physical damage in lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or gender-diverse persons of all ages, in all regions of the world” (Madriral-Borloz, 2020, p. 21).

This progress in depathologizing and affirmation was not uniform across sexual minorities, and transgender children remained particularly at risk (Hegarty, 2017). The promotion of reparative therapy, especially among religious groups, intensified during the 1980s and 1990s, often under the umbrella of the “ex-gay” movement. As documented by Erzen (2006), ex-gay ministries frequently aimed for abstinence or reduction in homosexual urges

through religious transformation rather than a complete and permanent “conversion” to heterosexuality. The “ex-gay” movement also incorporated psychoanalytic theories of homosexuality as a failure of normal development requiring prevention and early treatment. These efforts were supported by what Minton (2001) termed a “research infrastructure... antithetical to the interests of gay and lesbian rights” (p. 268). Minton cited the 1990s work of psychologist Paul Cameron and his “Family Research Institute.” Cameron claimed that his surveys showed homosexuals were at high risk for molesting children and were a menace to public health.⁵ Some mainstream figures continued to support SOCE. Psychiatrist Robert Spitzer’s widely publicized 2003 telephone study in which some participants self-reported successful orientation change helped keep professional debate alive. After intense methodological criticism, Spitzer (2012) retracted the study and apologized to the gay community for “unproven claims of the efficacy of reparative therapy” (p. 757). When Nicholas Cummings began to write about homosexuality and conversion therapy in the early 2000’s, he did so in the context of major changes in the professional and scientific consensus and historic legal changes, such as the end of sodomy laws by the Supreme Court in 2003 and the passing of state anti-discrimination laws. These changes also provoked major efforts to resist the full acceptance of sexual minorities and to keep SOCE viable.

Nicholas Cummings’ writings on homosexuality

In 2005, Wright and Cummings edited *Destructive trends in mental health: The well-intentioned path to harm*. In the second chapter co-authored with psychologist William

⁵ Cameron, a strongly anti-gay activist who proposed concentration camps for sexually active homosexuals, was expelled from the American Psychological Association for failure to cooperate with an ethics investigation of his work, and his claims were strongly rejected by the APA and the American Sociological Association (Schlatter, 2012).

O'Donohue, Cummings decried what he called the "surrender" of psychology to political correctness, and the domination of the profession by an intolerant left-wing ideology that demonized conservatives and religion. As an example of how the APA abandoned the principle that advocacy should be based only on established scientific findings, and otherwise psychologists should only speak as private citizens, Cummings cited the case of therapy for homosexuality:

Is Treating Homosexuality Unethical?

Although the APA is reluctant or unable to evaluate questionable practices and has thus avoided addressing the issue of best practices, this did not prevent its Council of Representatives in 2002 from stampeding into a motion to declare the treatment of homosexuality unethical. This was done with the intent of perpetuating homosexuality, even when the homosexual patient willingly and even eagerly seeks treatment. The argument was that because homosexuality is not an illness, its treatment is unnecessary and unethical. Curiously, and rightly so, there was no counterargument against psychological interventions conducted by gay therapists to help patients be gay, such as those over many decades by leading psychologist and personal friend Donald Clark (the author of the best-selling *Living Gay*) and many others. Vigorously pushed by the gay lobby, it was eventually seen by a sufficient number of Council members as runaway political correctness and was defeated by the narrowest of margins...Although the resolution was narrowly defeated, this has not stopped its proponents from deriding colleagues who provide such treatment to patients seeking it. (O'Donohue & Cummings, 2005, p.15)

The references to the “intent of perpetuating homosexuality” and the “gay lobby” are noteworthy, in that they mesh with the destructive homophobic discourse of “gay conspiracies.” Ideas of a wealthy and powerful “homosexual conspiracy” aimed at creating more homosexuals and controlling America became an increasing theme of anti-gay literature in the 1980s and 1990s, (Herman, 1997; see also Friedersdorf, 2012). Of particular importance is that Cummings and O’Donohue made no mention of the growing literature documenting the harm from attempts to change sexual orientation. This literature was cautiously cited in the 2009 APA resolution which *did not* declare SOCE to be categorically unethical, but only that “there is insufficient evidence to support the use of psychological interventions to change sexual orientation” (APA 2009).⁶

Cummings and O’Donohue (2008) repeated the charge that political correctness was destroying the integrity of psychology, that psychologists had become unscientific advocates and violated a principle of “therapeutic neutrality”:⁷

A violation of this principle of therapeutic neutrality is reflected in a therapist who believes homosexuality is morally wrong and endeavors to transform every gay patient into a straight one. The opposite is also a violation of therapeutic neutrality: a gay therapist who subscribes to the ideology that treating a gay patient who wants to go straight is unethical and nontherapeutic. Both positions reflect ideology and have no legitimate presence in the treatment room. Unfortunately, there are religious therapists

⁶ For the full report of the task force, including discussion of possible harm of change efforts, see <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response.pdf>

⁷ Cummings and O’Donohue presented the belief in global warming as an additional example of how political correctness has corrupted science leading to false beliefs (p. 188). The population explosion and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* were also cited as examples. Cummings’ discussions of political correctness showed no awareness of how this concept was regularly used to deflect criticism of and defend scientific racism (see e.g., Winston, 1996).

who believe they are justified in treating the gay lifestyle as pathology, while the gay and lesbian lobby seems determined to make unethical the treatment of homosexuals who seek change. (Cummings & O'Donohue, 2008, p. 222).

Their position faulted religious proponents of conversion therapy as well as gay activists. Cummings and O'Donohue (2008) also criticized the APA endorsement of gay marriage as lacking supporting scientific evidence, even though Cummings supported gay marriage in principle. Unfortunately, this statement was misused by strong proponents of conversion therapy and opponents of gay rights to falsely show that an important psychologist appeared to *oppose* gay marriage. Cummings' writings were cited in a 2019 amicus curiae brief to the Supreme Court in *R. G. & G. R. Harris Funeral Homes Inc. v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*. In this case, an employee was fired after revealing that she was a transgender woman, leading the courts to a debate about whether Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act provided protection to gay and transgender people. Cummings' writings were cited as evidence for the claim that the provision of "special rights" for homosexuals was due to political correctness rather than strong supporting evidence. The term "special rights" is used in lawsuits by anti-LGBTQ+ groups to oppose the claim for *equal* rights and *equal* protection under the law. The idea that LGBTQ+ groups seek "special rights" was often presented with the pernicious mythology that gays and lesbians were both wealthy and powerful therefore needed no protection under the law (see Herman, 1997).⁸

In a subsequent edited volume, Cummings, O'Donohue, and Cummings (2009) declared that psychology was engaged in a "war on religion" and that religious beliefs were a legitimate reason for seeking change in sexual orientation. The idea of clash between psychology and

⁸ See also <https://www.aclu.org/other/rights-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-people>

religion was not a new issue for Cummings. During his APA Presidency in 1979, he vigorously resisted all attempts in the APA to prevent certification of graduate programs that required a religious “creedal oath” from students and faculty, arguing that such action would constitute discrimination, violation of religious freedom and was a clear example of bias against religion (Cummings & Cummings, 2009a, pp. 31-32). He did not address the argument that the creedal oath requirement meant that faculty hiring and student admissions were discriminating on the basis of religion, and thus in conflict with clear APA anti-discriminatory principles. Despite the claim of a “war,” APA reached a compromise that allowed certification of doctoral programs with a creedal oath.

In a chapter entitled “Psychology’s war on Protestants,” Cummings and Cummings (2009b) argued that “Christianity is the main object of psychology’s war on religion” with Islam receiving “a free pass ...thanks to misapplied multiculturalism and political correctness.” Inquiry into the importance and value of religion was said to be prevented by this hostility, “fueled in part by the strong gay movement in psychology that regards Christianity as a threat to gay and lesbian civil liberties” (p. 168). No recognition was given to the way in which religious groups directly and actively opposed gay and lesbian rights (see Herman, 1997). Although some chapters in the book were primarily concerned with promoting understanding of religious beliefs, others, such as Byrd (2009), claimed that the APA ignored or suppressed evidence that children raised by same sex parents were more likely to engage in a homosexual relationship and suffered from more social and emotional difficulties. Byrd (2009), a member of NARTH, also argued that court testimony on lesbian parenting by noted researcher Dr. Charlotte Patterson was biased

by her own lesbian identity.⁹ Similar specious claims are used to challenge same-sex adoption and parenting in court by implying that gay and lesbian researchers cannot possibly carry out legitimate investigations on sexual orientation whereas heterosexual investigators are assumed to be “unbiased.”

Cummings (2010) repeated his views on treatment of homosexuality in the APA Division 1 newsletter, *The General Psychologist*. He did this in the context of his previous discussions of the “Leona Tyler Principle” that the APA position on public policy and social issues should “only be from science and professional experience” and repeated the warnings that political correctness was destroying science. He highlighted his own results in changing sexual orientation, with “a minority of the number who expressed a desire for change achieved it” and “none” were harmed, whether the change was successful or not. It is critical to note that no data or archival records were referenced, and no peer review of this claim has ever taken place.

Although Cummings (2010) may have been the first appearance of the claims of success in print, Cummings also discussed these results in a 2007 interview with psychologist Warren Throckmorton on the Faith and Freedom website sponsored by Grove City College. In this interview (<https://www.faithandfreedom.com/homosexuality-and-psychotherapy-an-interview-with-dr-nicholas-cummings/>), Cummings noted that in the many thousands of homosexual clients “we did not see any more mental health problems than we did in a straight population,” a position not shared by many promoters of reparative therapy. He reported that clients were most likely to “change attraction” if they had a “strong, internalized value system which contradicted homosexual behavior or they had developed a homosexual adaptation through a childhood of

⁹ Charlotte Patterson received an APA Distinguished Contribution to Research in Public Policy for this work in 2009.

abusive life experiences.” In this interview he provided specific results that I have not seen elsewhere:

Of the universe of gays we saw in Kaiser, 67% had good outcomes. Of those, 20% were successful in reorientation, with the remaining 80% pursuing sane, sexually responsible gay lives. The other third of our clients were not helped much at all. This was a much higher failure rate than for other problems. These people seemed to be sexually compulsive, frequently with obsessive compulsive disorder and substance addictions.

There was an addictive quality to their behavior. They could not seem to go a day without sex. We tried many things and nothing seemed to work.¹⁰

Again he argued that therapists should accept that their clients may desire to align their sexual feelings with “deeply held beliefs,” and that the APA had been rigid and unscientific in rejecting any possibility of change in sexual orientation. However, the APA made no such claim.¹¹

Cummings and NARTH

By 2005, Cummings’ position had attracted the attention of NARTH, the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality.¹² Formed in 1992 in response to the depathologizing of homosexuality in psychiatry, the NARTH position was that homosexuality is a disorder or at least a “developmental failure,” contrary to the position adopted by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 and affirmed by the American Psychological Association in

¹⁰ I have been unable to find any description of the “many things” that did not work. There is no evidence that Cummings used the aversive conditioning techniques that came under severe criticism as early as the 1970s.

¹¹ I can find no statement in the APA documents that such change was “impossible.”

¹² For the role of NARTH in encouraging anti-gay activity, see the 2012 Southern Poverty Law Center report by Ryan Lenz at <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2012/narth-becomes-main-source-anti-gay-%E2%80%98junk-science%E2%80%99> and other material on NARTH on the SPLC website.

1974. Absent fathers and overbearing mothers were often cited in NARTH literature as major causes of homosexuality. NARTH founder Joseph Nicolosi claimed the “homosexual agenda” of rights to marriage and parenthood was a dangerous and destructive trend, to be countered by parenting that would prevent homosexuality and treatment that would “repair” it (see Erzen, 2006). In his *A Parent’s Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*, Nicolosi (2002) noted that “traditionalists (including most people of faith)...wince at the mental images conjured up by the thought of what homosexuals do in the act of intercourse...they still cannot help but see such acts as perverse and in fact, unnatural” (p. 42). This blatant homophobia in Nicolosi’s writings did not prevent him recruiting the help of more mainstream psychologists.

Cummings and his coauthor Rogers Wright both addressed a NARTH conference of 100 participants as keynote speakers in 2005, according to Joseph Nicolosi’s website.¹³ They are reported to have spoken about their conclusions in the *Destructive Trends in Mental Health* volume, with a strong critique of the APA positions that they argued were not based on evidence, and the charge that the APA was now dominated by “social activist groups...exploiting the stature of the parent body to further their own social aims.” Potential contributors to their volume were said to fear the “gay lobby,” which used “homophobia as intimidation.”¹⁴ Cummings was said to discuss the APA’s near decision to declare treatment of sexual orientation unethical.

Another speaker at the 2005 conference, psychiatrist Jeffrey Satinover, alleged “appalling”

¹³ <https://www.josephnicolosi.com/collection/psych-association-loses-credibility-say-insiders>
Robert Perloff, 1985 APA President, addressed the NARTH conference in 2004, offering his support. Perloff and Cummings worked closely together in the APA. At the 2001 APA Convention, Perloff discussed the issue of conversion therapy: “It is considered unethical—that’s all wrong....First, the data are not fully in yet. Second, if the client wants a change, listen to the client. Third, you’re barring research.” (Murray, 2001). Both Perloff and Cummings received a “President’s Award” from NARTH.

¹⁴ These quotes are Nicolosi’s version of Cummings statements, and cannot be verified, but are consistent with more carefully worded statements in Wright and Cummings (2005).

ethical breaches by gay, activist scientists who ignored all evidence of problems and maladjustment in homosexuals.

Cummings was invited as a keynote speaker for NARTH again in 2011. His hour-long address is available on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rC8SSADF3zA> . After describing the wrongful criminalization of gays and lesbians, he asserted that in San Francisco in the 1970s “we went in the other direction, we flip-flopped and laws were passed that not only allowed people to cross-dress, now the law said you cannot be fired for cross-dressing at work....it got to the point where the chief of police wore a dress to the office every day...we went from criminalization to ridiculousness.”¹⁵ By implication, Cummings did not recognize the right to dress according to one’s gender identity. Then he described gay culture in San Francisco during the pre-AIDS 1970s and 1980s, when you often “could not tell women from men.” He gave explicit accounts of anonymous sex and gay bathhouses, claimed that urinating on others was “very popular,” and used judgemental terms such as “profligate,” “promiscuity” and “cesspool.” He described how he “honored” the aim of patients who wished to achieve a more “sane” homosexual life, and helped gay and lesbian couples preserve their relationships. For gay patients who “wanted to change,” and whose cultural background taught them that “this was not the way to live...we would tell them this was very difficult and would go overboard to discourage them. If they were determined, we would honor that... We saw hundreds who

¹⁵ Cummings appeared here to conflate sexual orientation with gender identity and gender expression. The law that “you cannot be fired for cross-dressing at work” was very likely a reference to changes in the California State Code in 1980 that prohibited discrimination in the workplace on the basis of sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, age, or sexual orientation See https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=GOV&division=3.&title=2.&part=2.8.&chapter=6.&article=1. Earlier San Francisco city policies did not prohibit discrimination based on “gender expression,” which implied clothing. I have been unable to find any confirmation of a cross-dressing police chief or fire chief mentioned by Cummings.

changed and achieved very happy heterosexual lives,” Of those who “stuck with it” in their efforts to change, “we had over half of the ones who started achieve their goal.” But, he argued, without specific evidence, that proper research and treatment were now controlled by political correctness. To illustrate the extremes of political correctness, he claimed incorrectly that San Francisco had legally banned the selling of goldfish and the practice of circumcision, proposals that were never passed. For this audience, the speech was likely to be effective in discrediting any statement by the APA or other professional groups on gay and lesbian issues. He ended the question period by saying “I would like to see an organization like this get up a war chest and sue” for violations of civil rights of those who supported sexual orientation change. “If we are going to confront this issue, we’ve got to have balls.”

NARTH also posted an interview in which Cummings described how the gay rights movement “captured the APA” and charged that “straight white males are underrepresented in the APA today.”¹⁶ He also stated his support for gay rights and gay marriage, and his opposition to attempts to “cure” homosexuality, noting that his views differed from NARTH. Cummings subsequently made a brief video repudiating this interview, charging that it had been edited down from two hours and edited in ways that made him appear “anti-gay.”¹⁷ The new video did not mention his two keynote speeches to NARTH, but he now “emphatically disavowed the organization and all that it stands for.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Available on Youtube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPgq1c4TYi4&list=PLEc3Z0CdMShrESAU1VBvB_CCscG8veSYt

¹⁷ Available on Youtube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UD1tg1a2_88

¹⁸ The addresses to NARTH were also not mentioned in the *American Psychologist* obituary by Austad (2022).

In about 2014, the NARTH organization and its journal, the *Journal of Human Sexuality*, became part of a larger group, The Alliance for Therapeutic Choice and Scientific Integrity, <https://www.therapeuticchoice.com/therapeuticchoice>. On its current page of “Distinguished Alliance Conference Keynote Speakers,” both Nicholas Cummings and 1985 APA President Robert Perloff are listed with photos, noting that “We are proud to count these distinguished individuals as friends.” The first of the three “guiding principles” of the Alliance is “client self-determination: Mental health clients have the right to explore, with the assistance of a supportive therapist, questions or issues in their lives that may be causing them concern or distress and to participate in the setting of counseling goals that are compatible with their freely chosen personal or religious values” (<https://www.therapeuticchoice.com/three-guiding-principles>). The wording is completely consistent with that used by Cummings starting in 2005. Avoiding any specific religious commitments, the Alliance nevertheless “acknowledges a priori the biologically based male-female human design as the foundation for optimal psychosexual functioning.” Recent articles in their journal, which is self-published by the Alliance, emphasize evidence of successful orientation change without harm, usually referred to as “unwanted same sex attraction;” the allegedly unscientific, politically correct basis of the position of professional organizations on reorientation; and most significantly, evidence said to demonstrate increased likelihood of homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual outcomes in children of same-sex parents. Such discredited claims are used to delegitimize same-sex families.

Additional Public Comments by Nicholas Cummings

Cummings’ views on homosexuality received additional public attention when he wrote an opinion piece in *USA Today* in 2013. Titled “Sexual Reorientation Therapy not Unethical,” Cummings (2013) was responding to the New Jersey lawsuit filed by the SPLC charging that

JONAH, Jews Offering New Alternative for Healing, engaged in fraud by promising to change sexual orientation. Cummings repeated many of the same points described above, including success in the hundreds for changing sexual orientation, out of 18,000 treated by himself and his staff. He did not give the specific numbers described in the 2007 interview with Warren Throckmorton. Cummings attributed these outcomes to “being selective in recommending therapeutic change efforts only to those who identified themselves as highly motivated and were clinically assessed as having a high probability of success.”¹⁹ In describing the work of JONAH as “a group that offers to help gay people change their orientation,” Cummings did not mention that the young men who were plaintiffs in the JONAH case had “treatment” for their “disorder” using such techniques as beating effigies of parents, forcing young men to stand naked with a counselor, and touching and “cuddling” with counselors. Full change in orientation was promised (SPLC, <https://www.splcenter.org/seeking-justice/case-docket/michael-ferguson-et-al-v-jonah-et-al>).²⁰ It is unknown whether Cummings was aware of the form of JONAH treatment or considered it irrelevant to the principle of the freedom to practice reorientation therapy. Cummings did not discuss the special issues involved in reorientation therapy for minors, the focus of most legislative efforts to ban reorientation.

Cummings also had direct involvement in the Ferguson v. JONAH case. In 2013, he submitted an affidavit to the court through the lawyers of the “Freedom of Conscience Defense Fund.” In seven pages, he outlined his credentials and experience, reiterated his views on the rights of clients to request reorientation therapy, and described the successful reorientation of

¹⁹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2013/07/30/sexual-reorientation-therapy-not-unethical-column/2601159/>

²⁰ See also Dubrowski (2015).

“hundreds” of homosexuals. Much of the material was identical to that in the Division 1 Newsletter in 2010 and in the *USA Today* piece.²¹

Some of Cummings’ later efforts show a different emphasis. The Cummings Foundation posted a five-minute video, apparently made in 2015, endorsing the Trevor Project, a long established, widely respected platform for LGBTQ youth, emphasizing suicide prevention.²² He described how the Cummings Foundation had become a supporter, and urged others to join him. He noted that he had personally seen how LGBTQ youth often cannot turn to their families, friends, teachers or ministers for the non-judgmental help they need, help that they can receive from the Trevor Project hotline. The Trevor Project website (www.trevorproject.org) explicitly rejects conversion therapy. The current relationship between the Cummings Foundation and the Trevor Project is unknown.

In 2022, the Cummings Graduate Institute for Behavioral Health Studies (CGI) posted a podcast with CGI co-founder Dr. Janet Cummings interviewed by Dr. Cara English, CGI CEO. The introduction of the interview by English emphasized the damaging effects of current anti-LGBTQ+ legislation on the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth and a discussion of the support of CGI for gender affirmation. In the podcast, Janet Cummings discussed her father’s position on sexual orientation and reorientation therapy and stated that his position has been misrepresented. Outlining Nicholas Cummings’ history of support for gay rights, she argued that the misunderstanding had arisen from the single brief interview posted by NARTH. She indicated that Cummings was suffering from mild dementia at this time, and this explained some of the

²¹ The full affidavit submitted to the court is available at <http://files.eqcf.org/cases/1-5473-12-21-cummings-certification/>

²² Available on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SbHBgeLtjk&t=2s>

statements he made. The two addresses to the NARTH conferences in 2005 and 2011, the Division 1 Newsletter, the *USA Today* editorial, and the material in *Psychology's War on Religion*, which Janet Cummings co-edited, were not discussed.

In 2023, The Cummings Family published on the Cummings Foundation website an open letter to the LGBTQIA+ community apologizing for “statements made by Dr. Cummings which may have been used to promote the now discredited and dangerous practices used with the LGBTQIA+ community...This included ‘sexual reorientation therapy’ and ‘reparative therapy’ – all of which we refer to as ‘conversion therapy’ (<https://cummingscfbh.org/lgbtq-support/>). The letter asserts that Cummings “strongly condemned all forms of conversion therapy” but indicates that he practiced a form of “sexual reorientation therapy” that was used to help LGBTQIA+ individuals “with identifying and accepting their sexual orientation.” Cummings’ statements were said to be “misconstrued, taken out of context and manipulated” by anti-gay groups. The letter strongly condemned efforts to change sexual orientation or gender identity. However, Cummings’ repeated public claims of successful sexual reorientation were not addressed.

Groups using Cummings’ statements on Reorientation.

Over the past three decades, Nicholas Cummings’ writings and public statements have been used to support harmful practices and policies impacting LGBTQ+ communities. In addition to NARTH and the Alliance for Therapeutic Choice discussed above, several additional examples will illustrate the uses of his work. MassResistance (<https://www.massresistance.org>) opposes all LGBTQ+ rights and promotes gay conspiracy theories of recruitment and perversion

of children.²³ The “gay agenda” is viewed as a catastrophic threat to the family and society. Their website states that the public have been lied to:

Misinformation: They (activists) are also claiming that the American Psychological Association (APA) issued a statement “condemning conversion therapy.” The facts: But they don’t tell you that a past president of the APA, Dr. Nicholas Cummings, told reporters that the APA is intimidated and harassed by the ‘gay rights’ movement and “does not allow open debate” on this issue. Moreover Dr. Cummings said publicly that he used this therapy and saw it to be successful.

Cummings is cited nine times on their website.

LifeSiteNews, a Canadian anti-abortion, anti-covid restriction, anti-gay extremist website suspended or banned from Twitter, Youtube and Facebook for misinformation, featured Cummings three times in 2012. With a headline of “Former president of APA says organization controlled by ‘gay rights’ movement. Dr. Cummings originally introduced the motion to declassify homosexuality as a mental disorder, but now believes ideology has trumped science in the APA.”²⁴ The article featured a large picture of Cummings, a copy of the briefer NARTH interview, and a detailed discussion of his views, including that he “is not in opposition to the homosexual movement, including ‘gay marriage.’” Other postings on LifeSiteNews attack Pope Francis for appearing liberal on homosexuality (the site claims to be Catholic) and decry “special rights and privileges for those involved in the practice of sodomy” (Mar. 15, 2012).

²³ The name “Massresistance” is likely a reference to the “Massive Resistance” to integration in the South following the *Brown* decision.

²⁴ <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/former-president-of-apa-says-organization-controlled-by-gay-rights-movement/>

A group of 600 physicians and other health care workers organized under the name of the “American College of Pediatricians,” (acped.org) opposes abortion rights, same sex marriage, same-sex adoption, gender affirming treatment for transgender children and promotes reorientation therapy for minors. In a discussion of psychotherapy for “unwanted homosexual attraction among youth,” Rosick and Cretella argued that APA guidelines to avoid homophobia were biasing research on sexual attraction and cited Wright & Cummings (2005): “According to Dr. Nicholas Cummings, a past President of the American Psychological Association, the result has been a political correctness that tethers the intellect and a politically correct culture that is more punitive than McCarthyism.”²⁵ This paraphrase of page xv of Wright and Cummings (2005) was not a misrepresentation. The public might easily confuse the official sounding “American College of Pediatricians” with the 67,000 member American Academy of Pediatrics, which declared in 2018 that reparative or conversion therapies “should not be part of any behavioral health treatment of children and adolescents.”²⁶ The American College of Pediatricians cited Wright and Cummings for support in their amicus curiae in *Welch v. Brown*, a 2016 challenge to the California law prohibiting licensed therapists from engaging in sexual orientation change efforts with minors.²⁷

Cummings was also cited for providing evidence of successful reorientation by the journal of the conservative think tank, The Witherspoon Institute. With strong opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, their website hosts arguments for gay predation: “those driving

²⁵ <https://acpeds.org/position-statements/psychotherapy-for-unwanted-homosexual-attraction-among-youth>

²⁶ https://www.aacap.org/aacap/Policy_Statements/2018/Conversion_Therapy.aspx

²⁷ https://acpeds.org/assets/briefs/Amicus.Brief_.WELCH_v_BROWN.9th-Cir.13-15023.Feb-2013.pdf

the LGBT movement are now not even trying to hide their grooming. They really are coming for children” (www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2022/03/81314/). Other groups citing Cummings include the Center for Religious Expression <https://crelaw.org/public-speech/outlawing-wise-counsel/> and Voices of Change (<http://www.voicesofchange.net/apa-president-dr-nicholas-cummings.html>)

Conclusions

Nicholas Cummings publicly supported the legitimacy and appropriateness of providing reorientation therapy when requested by clients from approximately 2005 to 2013, long after he had ceased to work as a therapist. He provided this support in the context of his broad allegation that psychology was being perverted by unscientific ideology and political correctness. Although urging a more scientific approach to sexual orientation, he offered no data or records to support his claim of successful reorientation without harm. He did not engage with the growing research literature on the ineffectiveness and potential harm of SOCE, such as that presented in the APA (2009) Task Force report. He formulated the issue as an absolute *right* of individual therapists and patients to determine treatments and treatment goals. This view ignored the ways in which treatment decisions are always constrained by professional guidelines and standards. As Haldeman (1994) noted early in the debates over SOCE, “Psychologists are obliged to use methods that promote the dignity and welfare of humankind. Conversion therapies fail in this regard because they are necessarily predicated on a devaluation of homosexual identity and behavior” (p. 226). In other words, SOCE implied that something should be changed even if homosexuality was not viewed as an illness. Nicholas Cummings never suggested that sexual orientation *should be* changed. But he rarely, if ever, acknowledged that those who requested reorientation might be under tremendous pressure to do so from family and religious

communities and from the threat of discrimination, rejection, and physical harm. Nor did he acknowledge the role of internalized self-loathing and shame in seeking orientation change, an issue highlighted in the APA Division 44 (2000) treatment guidelines published in the *American Psychologist*.

Cummings' writings were and currently are used and cited by NARTH and other groups seeking to restrict gay rights or bring homosexuality to an end, aims that Cummings *did not* support. His rhetoric of a "takeover" of the APA by activists meshed with highly destructive myths of "gay conspiracies" and an excessively powerful "gay lobby." As a former APA President, he spoke both as an insider and an "outsider" critic of the APA, making his work extremely useful in de-legitimizing any position statement made by the APA or other professional bodies regarding sexual orientation. His claims of successful change were a powerful rhetorical weapon and were used in court cases.²⁸ The affidavit for the JONAH case shows that he sometimes played an active role. Cummings' consistent statements from 2005 to 2013 were sometimes taken out of context, but generally he was *not* misquoted. His words and his stature gave legitimacy and encouragement to anti-LGBTQ+ organizations. Given that efforts to roll back LGBTQ+ rights have increased sharply in recent years, Cummings' public statements on sexual orientation retain the potential to cause harm, despite his stated intention to help his clients.

²⁸ Cummings' claims of successful reorientation were cited in *amicus* briefs in appeals to overturn the legalization of gay marriage in California, *Perry v. Schwarzenegger* in 2010 in a brief submitted by NARTH, and in Michigan in *DeBoer v. Snyder*, 2012.

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