

JOIBS: September 2025. ISSN 2992-9253

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Review of “Perceived Effectiveness and Risk of Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE): Perspectives of a US Sample of 125 Male Clients”

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Funding: None.

Competing interests: None.

Citation: Salmon, C. (2025). Review of “Perceived effectiveness and risk of sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE): Perspectives of a US sample of 125 male clients.” *Journal of Open Inquiry in the Behavioral Sciences*, 4(4). <https://doi.org/10.58408/issn.2992-9253.2025.04.04.0003>

This study examines the results of sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) in terms of effectiveness and whether there are any psychosocial results, positive or negative, of such treatment programs in a sample of highly religious men from the United States attempting to reduce their homosexual attractions/identity/behavior. For me, reviewing this, I have a number of questions, some of which the authors may be able to answer with their data or elaborate on, some of which might require future work.

On the question of efficacy of SOCE, “If efficacy is interpreted as full homosexual to heterosexual change, less than one in five SOCE participants (18.5%-19.2%) achieved full reduction of unwanted attraction or identification, and more than one in three (36.6%) experienced full reduction of unwanted homosexual sex behavior. For a substantial proportion of respondents, however, SOCE exposure was associated with no effect (27-47%) or even an increase (4-10%) in unwanted same-sex orientation.” The relatively high level of no effect (and the small increase group) raises some questions about efficacy and what influences efficacy. Did you look at what variables predicted these differences between what one could call responders vs non-responders? For example, the high level of religiosity in the sample would suggest that religious beliefs may be a primary motivator for trying to change their orientation to one more in line with their religious beliefs. Does your data allow you to look at that? Or any other predictors? Grubbs’ work on the effect of religiosity on guilt over pornography consumption is, perhaps, relevant to whether this kind of program can cause change or not for specific individuals but also to predicting positive or negative psychosocial consequences... which might be related to self-perceived success and decreased moral incongruence. This moral incongruence research on the topic of pornography consumption seems relevant here to both efficacy and psychosocial impact. Also any ideas why that increase is happening for some men?

What would your response be to someone suggesting that, well, the majority of these men were bisexual in orientation and SOCE influenced their recognition of these, perhaps decreasing their interpretation of themselves as homosexual because they are attracted to men? So the

post SOCE responses were just a more accurate view of themselves? Or it didn't cause change in sexual orientation but a more accurate perspective of their desires? Is there a way to test this? You do mention the bisexuality aspect a little with regard to Bailey's work in the discussion. I also think this is interesting with regard to identity (and pre intervention identity as a predictor of efficacy) as identity seems to be, in some studies, more flexible than orientation.

I also appreciate that the authors note the limitation of self-report in terms of a possible positive bias recall, as this is something that influences willingness to participate as well as the desire to resolve the moral incongruence I mentioned earlier, and this highly religious subsample might be more vulnerable to that. But they also might be more likely to change behavior and articulated identity to lessen their existing distress due to their religiosity. This highlights the importance, that you also note, of examining the samples, who they are, motivation for desiring change, and what exactly SOCE is changing (is it changing orientation or something else?). Are there studies of SOCE that look at physiological arousal to images pre-post? Because these factors are also likely to play a role in whether the effects of SOCE from a psychosocial perspective are positive or negative. And might speak more strongly to whether this is shaping bisexuality rather than changing sexual orientation.

I also might have liked to see a little more discussion on theories of sexual orientation, this is mentioned very briefly in the discussion, but how this treatment fits into our understanding of what shapes sexual orientation would be useful for many readers, I think.