

# **UK Council for Psychotherapy**

## **Ethical Principles and Codes of Professional Conduct: Guidance on the Practice of Psychological Therapies that Pathologise and/or Seek to Eliminate or Reduce Same Sex Attraction**

## 1. Introduction

**1.1** The purposes of this document are to guide training and supervision in the subjects of ethics and sexuality, and to ensure consistent application of the UKCP's Ethical Principles and Code of Professional Conduct in relevant cases, in order to support best practice and reduce harm to clients brought about by bias or selective inattention to research findings regarding same sex attraction.

**1.2** UKCP's Ethical Principles and Code of Professional Conduct (the UKCP Ethics Code) defines generic UKCP ethical principles which UKCP members commit to and maintain. The UKCP Ethics Code must be taken into account (in conjunction with any other ethical documents which may apply) by the Professional Conduct Officer, Professional Conduct Committee, Preliminary Investigating Committee, Fitness to Practise Tribunal and Appeal Tribunal when considering allegations of conduct which may impair a UKCP member's fitness to practise under the Central Complaints Process and Central Final Appeal Procedure.

**1.3** The UKCP Ethics Code will apply when considering complaints related to the practice of any psychological therapy that seeks to eliminate or reduce same sex attraction, irrespective of the name given to the modality of therapy. This document identifies the appropriate provisions of the UKCP Ethics Code, and gives guidance on the appropriate interpretation of these provisions.

**1.4** This guidance has been prepared by the Ethics Committee after close consultation with, and input from, the Diversity, Equalities and Social Responsibility Committee and Forum, has been agreed by those committees and the Board of UKCP.

**1.5** When considering allegations under the UKCP's Central Complaints Process, codes of practice, conduct or ethics or standards of competence or equivalent documents, issued by UKCP and a relevant organisational member can apply (clause 4.1 of the Central Complaints Process). This guidance represents UKCP's position on these issues. It therefore must be taken into account by the Professional Conduct Officer, the Professional Conduct Committee and UKCP (and Organisational Members') panels or committees who are considering complaints of this nature.

**1.6** This guidance must be taken into account by UKCP colleges and organisational members when considering complaints relating to therapies that pathologise and/or seek to eliminate or reduce same sex attraction.

**1.7** This guidance applies to psychotherapists, psychotherapeutic counsellors, teachers on psychotherapy training courses and supervisors.

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## 2. Guidance on Relevant Sections of the UKCP Ethics Code

### 2.1 Section 1 of UKCP Ethics Code: Best Interests of Client

1.1 The psychotherapist takes responsibility for respecting their client's best interests when providing therapy.

Guidance:

- a) Research has shown that offering, or agreeing to the client's request for, therapy for the reduction of same sex attraction is not in a client's best interests. (Drescher, Shidlow and Schroeder, 2002).
- b) An ethical response to a request by a client for psychotherapy to reduce same sex attraction would be to establish a clear contract with the client regarding the nature of psychotherapy as a process rather than an outcome, and to share with the client basic information on the findings of research on therapy that aims to change or reduce same sex attraction, which is that research does not suggest this therapy is effective, although sometimes limited effect has been reported. There is overwhelming evidence that undergoing such therapy is at considerable emotional and psychological cost.
- c) A competent first response to a request by a client for psychotherapy to reduce same sex attraction would be to establish where the pressures are coming from for the client to seek making such a change
- d) If the therapist feels that they do not have sufficient competence to work on these issues they should inform the client, and where possible make a referral to an appropriate practitioner.

1.3 The psychotherapist undertakes not to abuse or exploit the relationship they have with their clients, current or past, for any purpose, including the psychotherapist's sexual, emotional or financial gain.

Guidance:

- e) It is exploitative for a psychotherapist to offer treatment that might 'cure' or 'reduce' same sex attraction as to do so would be offering a treatment for which there is no illness.
- f) It is exploitative to offer treatment to reduce same sex attraction when various studies bring into question whether such treatments change a person's sexuality.

1.7 The psychotherapist undertakes to respect their client's autonomy.

1.8 The psychotherapist undertakes not to harm or collude in the harming of their client or a client of others.

Guidance:

- g) It is not a sufficient defence for a therapist to argue that in attempting (or expecting as an outcome of therapy) reduction of same sex attraction they were acting in the client's best interests, or according to the client's wishes and autonomy, as offering such therapy would be contributing to and reinforcing their externalised and internalised oppression and likely to cause harm to the client, or extend their existing distress.

## 2.2 Section 2 of UKCP Ethics Code: Diversity and Equality

The psychotherapist undertakes to actively consider issues of diversity and equalities as these affect all aspects of their work. The psychotherapist accepts no one is immune from the experience of prejudice and acknowledges the need for a continuing process of self-enquiry and professional development.

Guidance:

- h) This includes internal competencies of self-awareness, understanding and tolerance of difference and awareness of one's own limits of experience, and openness regarding the limits of research in establishing definitive causes or fixed types of sexual orientation.
  - i) This includes sensitivity to possible differences in form and intensity of oppression, that may range from fears of ridicule, to loss of community, to genuine threat to life, and which may be influenced by a person's age, family role, profession, geography or cultural and religious ties and attachments
  - j) This also includes appreciation of various culturally located, non-pathologising resources and bonds in the client's existing social framework and support of the client's choices in how they benefit from these.
  - k) This may include informing the client of the range of LGBT services available to people from their social grouping.
  - l) Psychotherapists who are members of faith groups (or are of no faith) must commit to the same ethical requirement of respect and sensitivity towards all people and to their understanding and knowledge of beliefs, practices and cultures different from theirs.
- 2.2 The psychotherapist undertakes not to allow prejudice about a client's sex, age, colour, race, disability, sexuality, social, economic or immigration status, lifestyle, religious or cultural beliefs to adversely affect the way they relate to the client.
- 2.3 The psychotherapist undertakes not to engage in any behaviour that is abusive or detrimental to any client or colleague based on the above factors.

Guidance:

- m) To approach psychotherapeutic practice from the basis that same sex attraction is a psychopathology is to hold prejudice in relation to a client's sexuality and thus could be detrimental to the client.
- n) To seek to identify pathological causes for a client's same sex attraction, and/or to seek to identify the client's same sex attraction as the root cause of their unhappiness or distress would be to contribute to and reinforce a client's externalised and internalised oppression.

## 2.3 Section 5 of UKCP Ethics Code: Professional Knowledge, Skills and Experience

5.3 The psychotherapist commits to recognise the boundaries and limitations of their expertise and techniques and to take the necessary steps to maintain their ability to practice competently.

5.5 The psychotherapist commits to adhering to the UKCP policies on standards of education, training and practice.

5.6 The psychotherapist commits to an on-going process of professional and personal enquiry and challenge, commonly referred to as "Continuing Professional Development". The psychotherapist commits adhering to the Continuing Professional Development policies held by UKCP and the relevant section of the UKCP that the psychotherapist is a member of.

Guidance:

- o) Many psychotherapists completed their initial training while same sex attraction was still categorised as a mental health condition. However, this would not be a defence to an ethical breach, as a psychotherapist commits to a process of ongoing professional and personal enquiry, and to maintain their ability to practise competently.
- 5.7 If it becomes clear that a case is beyond a psychotherapist's scope of practice, the psychotherapist commits to inform the client and where appropriate offer an alternative psychotherapist or other professional where requested.
- 5.8 The psychotherapist accepts responsibility to ensure that they are competent and have sufficient supervisory arrangements and other necessary support to enable them to meet their psychotherapeutic obligations to any client. This includes the responsibility of ensuring the very careful consideration of how best to refer a client to another psychotherapist or professional should it become clear that this would be in the client's best interest.

Guidance:

- p) The ethical response of a psychotherapist who is not sufficiently experienced or trained to work with issues of minority sexuality would be to act in the client's best interest by recognising the limits of practice and where possible refer the client to another psychotherapist.
- q) The ethical response of a psychotherapist whose personal, theoretical or religious beliefs precludes them from working in a non-judgmental way with a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender client or one who is experiencing same sex attraction, would be to act in the client's best interest by recognising the limits of practice and where possible refer the client to another psychotherapist.
- r) An appropriate referral in such a case would be to a psychotherapist who is qualified in working with matters of sexuality based on training that has covered the diversity of human sexuality, the range of theoretical models and practice methods, based on a breadth of research, and not on the basis of a training that prescribes one outcome for clients based on one theory of human sexuality or a theory which pathologises same sex attraction.

### 3.4 Section 11 of UKCP Ethics Code: Advertising

11.3 The psychotherapist undertakes not to make or support unjustifiable statements relating to particular therapies or therapists or include testimonials from clients in any advertising material.

Guidance:

- s) Advertising treatment to reduce same sex attraction would be an unjustifiable statement, in the same way that it is unjustifiable to advertise any psychotherapeutic treatment as providing a specific result.

## 3. Conclusion

**3.1** Based on the above considerations of ethical practice it may be generally concluded that the following are incompatible with UKCP's Ethical Principles and Code of Professional Conduct:

- i. Practising, or offering to practise psychotherapy which supports within its tenets that homosexuality, bisexuality, resistance to labelling one's sexual orientation, fluidity of sexuality, or same sex attraction are psychopathologies or symptoms of a psychopathology.
- ii. Offering 'Sexual Orientation Change Efforts' (also called SOCE, 'reparative', 'conversion' or 'reorientation' therapy) or similar therapies by other names.
- iii. Practising any other form of psychotherapy that seeks to eliminate or reduce same sex attraction in their clients (whether by stated intention, or in practice.)



- iv. Knowingly referring a client to a psychotherapist or other professional whose practice aims to eliminate or reduce same sex attraction on the basis of prejudice against minority sexuality as immoral, unnatural or pathological.
- v. Teaching material on training courses and/or when supervising psychotherapists which promotes or seeks to justify therapy that pathologises same sex attraction.

**3.2.** A psychotherapist who practises, teaches, supervises or makes referrals to practitioners of any of the forms of therapy referred to above acts in breach of UKCP's Ethics Code pursuant to, but not limited to, the following sections of the code:

- 1. Best Interests of Client
- 2. Diversity and Equality
- 5. Professional knowledge, skills and experience
- 11. Advertising

**3.3** It is recognised by UKCP that a client's attraction to a person or persons of the same or opposite sex may increase or decrease while they are receiving psychotherapy. In itself this does not suggest (still less prove) unethical conduct by the psychotherapist.

**3.4** It is recognised that all modalities of psychotherapy are based on texts which were written in specific historical and cultural contexts and which may express or imply prejudice against people with same sex attraction. In itself this does not suggest (still less prove) ethically incompatible psychotherapy. Practitioners are required to consider all such texts from a position of reflective critique. Trainers and Supervisors are required to use opportunities presented by these texts to engage Trainees and Supervisees in processes of professional and personal enquiry, increasing awareness of Diversity and Equality issues.