

An Interview with Neil Whitehead, Ph.D.

Christopher H. Rosik, Ph.D

Dr. Whitehead is a research scientist from New Zealand who was employed by the New Zealand Government for 24 years, by the United Nations for another 4 years and more recently has worked as a scientific research consultant. Dr. Whitehead has lived and worked in New Zealand, the United States, France, Japan and other countries. He is coauthor along with Briar Whitehead of the very important book, *My Genes Made Me Do It - Homosexuality and the scientific evidence*, and over 150 published scientific papers.

Recently, former Alliance President Christopher Rosik spoke with Dr. Whitehead about his peer-reviewed, just published research examining the reported efficacy of sexual attraction fluidity exploration in therapy (SAFE-T) as well as stated benefits and harms in a sample of men with unwanted same-sex attractions.

Rosik: Neil, on behalf of the Alliance, I want to express our deep appreciation for your efforts in shepherding this research into the light of publication. Given all the legal and professional opposition that SAFE-T is receiving currently, your study could not be timelier. Please tell us a little about the research.

Whitehead: This study was very similar to the Jones/Yarhouse etc study (Jones & Yarhouse, 2011). In a doctoral thesis survey (P. L. Santero, 2011), started late 2010 but only published in a journal 7.5 years later (P. Santero, Whitehead, & Ballesteros, 2018). Santero surveyed good and bad experiences of those who had been through therapy for unwanted same-sex attraction.

I am a research scientist involved in the derivation and interpretation of results in many fields. I have published over 150 papers, in a span of 50 years research, but I have to say this has been the most difficult paper to publish of any.

Rosik: What was your role in the research?

Whitehead: I was recruited to help with statistical aspects and served as the corresponding author with the journals to which we submitted the paper. An account of getting the research published is quite a saga. The tale is mixed and tortuous, and it is not clear if there are major villains, though the hostile milieu certainly was one factor.

Rosik: Tell us about the hostile milieu?

Whitehead: Most of my papers have been in the hard sciences – biochemistry, nuclear chemistry and physics, and geological fields, but about 2 dozen were about same-sex attraction and closely related issues. The latter were not directly on politically sensitive issues. The Santero paper was, being directly opposed to the recommendations of the APA. In their 2009 Task Force report (American Psychological Association, 2009) they recommended against helping people who had unwanted same-sex attraction, because there was perhaps a risk of harm, and they doubted any change occurred.

In practice this has resulted in various organisations banning the therapy and sometimes depriving practitioners of their livelihood, which is an unwarranted extrapolation from the relatively mild statements in the Task Force report. In perhaps the most recent case a South

African author has been forbidden to speak publicly about the subject by their Human Rights authority (<https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2018-07-19-christian-author-gretha-wiid-told-to-stop-talking-about-homosexuality/>)

Rosik: What are some of the important results from the research?

Whitehead: The major outcomes, as found in previous surveys, was that there was real change, little harm, much good, completely opposite to the findings of the APA report, but very close to the findings of Jones and Yarhouse.

Another finding was the very strong endorsement of religious issues being the reason for seeking help, with family social pressures being very minor. Distaste for experiences of the gay lifestyle was also a very minor factor.

The greatest question in a survey of the effects of therapy is usually over samples. Are the people who have persevered through therapy different from the general population? Can this therapy apply to anyone at all? It turned out that the people in this survey had a religiosity very much higher than the general population. However, they were quite diverse – non-denominational Protestants, Jews, Mormons, a few Catholics, and a few traditional Protestants – no Atheists!

The paper showed each set of results in both visual and table form, because it seemed there would be one class of people who just wanted the overall message fast, and a second class who might want to check every number carefully!

Rosik: What did you find as pertains to fluidity and change in sexual attractions?

Whitehead: The degree of change was variable. A number changed a dramatic extent – from nearly completely same-sex attraction to nearly completely opposite sex attracted. About 2/3 moved a significant amount, and the rest mainly did not show any change. A very few actually became more same-sex attracted. However, it was rather remarkable how much therapy was found to be very beneficial, even among those who did not change. One can surmise they had lots of help for other issues and found real fellowship in the support groups.

It was possible to use statistical tests to show same-sex attraction had changed and was not statistically consistent with zero change, but although that is important, it is not enough – one must also show a strong effect. For example, if a drug decreased mortality by 1% it might be a statistically real effect, but it would be far better if it could be shown the drug had a statistically real effect and also reduced mortality by 10%. The percentages are effect sizes and are important. So, one wants to show a significant effect of therapy. This was certainly possible to calculate although the statistics are less well known than usually encountered. Furthermore, the strength of the effect sizes of the therapy were very comparable to other therapies for unrelated issues. For this group the therapy works and quite well.

Rosik: What seemed to help in the process of shifting attractions?

Whitehead: A rather remarkably wide range of techniques had been tried by the respondents. But when asked about whether techniques were helpful or harmful, all techniques received a surprising amount of support, and none were downright harmful. The moral seemed to be that whatever one tried had some positive effect.

Rosik: And what did you learn relevant to the ever-present claims of harm from SAFE-T?

Whitehead: Because of accusations that therapy might be damaging to mental health, questions in the survey asked about several issues, such as suicidality, depression and self-esteem. Again, there were real positive effects of a good effect size, in fact somewhat stronger than for same-sex attraction. So, although before help, respondents had an average of three mental health issues, though not severe, there was lots of help from the therapy and the support groups they attended.

Rosik: Did you encounter any particular challenges in analysing the data?

Whitehead: As usual the complaint of statisticians is that they wished they had been involved in the preliminary planning. The hypotheses requiring testing in some cases caused much thinking to decide the most appropriate statistical approach, not least because there was such a high degree of approval and so few negative reports. It seemed blatantly obvious there was a profound difference between the positive and negative side, but testing that was tricky - many tests do not react well to having zero people endorsing some survey question! Good tests were ultimately found.

The survey questionnaire had more than 90 questions, and the amount of data generated from 125 participants was immense.

Rosik: Are there any important questions that remain?

Whitehead: The question remains – was this a self-selected group? If so the main common factor was religion, and this is remarkably paralleled by the experience of AA who insist that the help of a Higher Being is essential.

Rosik: It is a testament to your perseverance that it took what I know to be an inordinate amount of time for this research to finally get published. What were the reasons for such a long delay?

Whitehead: The *Journal of Men's Studies* had previously published a similar report (Karten & Wade, 2010) but this time declined to consider the paper, it seems because they did not want to get involved in that controversial area.

Another journal not averse to controversy gave some excellent comment, both on the statistics and text, and the paper was significantly improved. However, they then asked for the names of a couple of competent referees outside the highly polarised Western milieu and this took quite some weeks. In the interim the journal was sold to another publisher, and a very tight deadline was given for finding the referees. They said if it could not be met, the paper would be rejected and treated as a completely new submission because the new publisher wanted a clean slate. We could not meet the deadline and withdrew the paper.

A submission to another journal was much more positive and received an acceptance from the editor. However, another unexpected change led to lots more delays. The journal while retaining its character had a change of editor, and a change of software system for manuscripts, and house style for preparation. The editor redid the acceptance process to satisfy the requirements of the system, which meant complete change of citations particularly, which led to a major crash of the citation software and forced reconstruction of the whole manuscript from scratch because the file was irredeemably digitally corrupted. There was also a forced reversion to manual input of citations which was very time-consuming. This is a very rare occurrence.

The publication was further delayed because of a special theme issue of the journal which often replaces individual papers.

Copy editing demanded a very tight timetable for response. It rearranged the figures and to my mind placed them in much worse positions than previously and enforced a house style I was ignorant of which seemed to have quite unnecessary features. The mastering of a new kind of proofing based on a new version of Adobe Acrobat proved very difficult due to ambiguities in the instructions. This had to be done and the manuscript returned in two days. Although very familiar with previous versions of Acrobat strange things happened during the two days, and I think many people will have had similar difficulties. I would classify myself as very computer literate, but I reflect this is partly an illusion now. All of us get to know a little corner of some large software suite, and think we know the rest as well, but we don't, and we rapidly get outside a comfort zone.

The end result of all this has been that there was a 7.5-year gap between survey and publication, and this is very long. In fact only 4% of all papers take more than 5 years (Powell, 2016) so 7.5 years might put this paper in the 2% category. But the results in the paper were so clear that it was well worth persevering.

It seems to me that quite a bit of the delay was due to system clashes. I have seen people originate a software system, which was supposed to interact with another system and save time, but in the rare instances where there was a nasty snarl-up, each system confidently and dogmatically blamed the other and the trouble-shooting resources were mostly not available to untangle the mess. I believe this is increasingly happening.

Many scientists complain about the inordinate time it takes to produce a paper. They find that the major conclusions of their papers are not changing in spite of the numerous, protracted, and contradictory reviews and some are turning to various on-line alternatives.

Rosik: Do you have any suggestions for other researchers who might be interested in conducting research in this area?

Whitehead: As expected, the work really confirmed previous work which did not have the same degree of statistical rigour, and the earlier work (for example, Nicolosi et al. 2000) should be treated with more respect than it has received. It might be beneficial to statistically revisit some of the earlier work if possible.

It would also be helpful to keep records of drop-outs – or those who choose not to start therapy and compare these rates with those for other therapies. This would address the issue of whether drop-out rates are unusually high.

Long-term benefits need longitudinal studies which are notorious for logistical difficulty. But hopefully some researchers apart from Jones and Yarhouse will take this on. Perhaps therapists could adopt follow-up as part of their professional standards?

There was internal evidence from the data that change plateaued, but respondents remained in therapy for quite some time thereafter hoping for more. The atmosphere of the support groups was congenial, and they were worth attending even though a plateau was reached. This made the times in therapy seem long, but this is probably pessimistic, and needs more detailed confirmation.

Finally, it was striking how helpful gender-affirmation weekends were, and although known for two decades, this needs examination to see whether new therapy approaches could be gleaned.

Postscript: Some additional observations from Dr. Whitehead's co-author, Paul Santero, Ph.D.:

I am very appreciative that I had an opportunity to have my dissertation condensed and published in a reputable journal. I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Whitehead, not only for helping me with my dissertation, specifically on the statistics end, but also heading up the process of summarizing and transforming the dissertation into a journal article.

In starting the process of transforming the dissertation into a journal article, I did not know what to expect, as it was the first time I had teamed up to undertake a project like this. However, I certainly had no idea the journal article would take longer to complete than the three years it took to write the dissertation. (To my surprise, it took more than twice as long for the journal article to be completed and approved!) The first couple of years working with Dr. Whitehead to write the article seemed like a long time. Doing something for the first time and not knowing what to expect always seems painfully slow. I was very fortunate and confident to have teamed with Dr. Whitehead because of his experience in writing many books and other articles. His knowledge and experience of getting articles written and published was initially very comforting, but as the process dragged on, it just became one of those crosses in life that you embrace with blind faith and patiently hope that things will eventually come to fruition. As the years continued to go by without the finality of publication, my faith in God and belief that He was guiding the process gave me peace and helped me persevere to the end. Again, working with Dr. Whitehead, himself being a God-fearing and humble soul, gave me peace of mind that the journal article would get done and fulfill its purpose. I am very proud and satisfied with the article and feel very blessed to be a contributor of it.

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