

Working definition of conversion practices

If you would like this document in an accessible format, please email info@pcpb.org.uk

Accompanying guidance for the consultation

The working definition of conversion practices provides a shared professional and ethical basis for identifying conduct that may constitute a conversion practice. The definition outlines what constitutes a conversion practice for professional and ethical standards purposes. It is not intended to be a statutory definition or to determine whether conduct meets any threshold for legal liability.

Statutory definitions are designed to determine the scope and operation of legislation, whereas this definition is intended to inform ethical practice. The two may therefore differ in their wording and scope.

The definition should not be read as a summary or interpretation of the recently published draft Conversion Practices Bill. The draft Bill remains subject to pre-legislative scrutiny, and the final form of any statutory definition, including how and in what circumstances it would apply to counsellors, psychotherapists and psychologists, is not yet known. Irrespective of the eventual scope of legislation, conduct that falls outside a statutory definition may nevertheless raise ethical, professional or safeguarding concerns.

Both this document and the GSRD good practice principles are drafts produced for consultation. They are intended to complement, rather than replace, the ethical codes.

Definition

Conversion practices involve conduct directed towards an individual with the purpose of changing or suppressing their sexual orientation or gender identity because one sexual orientation or gender identity is treated as preferable to another.

Principles for applying the definition

1. Purpose rather than label or setting

- Whether or not a practice is a conversion practice depends upon its purpose, content and context rather than how it is described or where it takes place.
- Conversion practices may occur in therapeutic, religious, community, or other settings. A practice described as therapy, counselling, pastoral support, mentoring, guidance, exploration, support, or similar terms may

constitute a conversion practice if its purpose is to change or suppress a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

- The purpose of a practice should be assessed by reference to its overall character and intended outcomes rather than solely by the stated intentions of those involved. The purpose of a practice may be evidenced by its stated or recorded aims, the methods used, the outcomes regarding sexual orientation or gender identity that are encouraged or discouraged, communications with the individual and, where relevant, a pattern of related conduct. These matters should be considered in context, with the weight given to each depending on the circumstances.

2. Predetermined outcomes

- Conversion practices are characterised by a preferred predetermined outcome regarding a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. A predetermined outcome is an outcome that is sought, encouraged or promoted through the practice, whether or not it is explicitly acknowledged or described as its purpose by the practitioner, helper or organisation.

3. Conversion practices are shaped by stigmatising social contexts

- Conversion practices are shaped by wider social contexts in which some sexual orientations and gender identities are treated as more acceptable or desirable than others.
- Documented conversion practices have historically and predominantly sought to change or suppress sexual orientations and gender identities to bring individuals into conformity with heterosexual and cisgender norms.
- Wider social stigma, prejudice, discrimination and normative pressures may help explain both why conversion practices are offered and why individuals undergo them. The interaction of a person's sexual orientation or gender identity with other aspects of their identity and social context, including faith, culture, ethnicity and disability, may shape how conversion practices are offered, experienced and understood.

4. Exploration is not in itself a conversion practice

- Open-ended exploration of identity, experiences, feelings, values, beliefs, relationships, or goals does not constitute a conversion practice where it is not directed towards a predetermined outcome regarding sexual orientation or gender identity.
- However, work described as 'exploratory' may constitute a conversion practice where its purpose is to change or suppress a person's sexual

orientation or gender identity. Consistent with the principles concerning purpose and predetermined outcomes, whether a practice constitutes a conversion practice depends on its purpose, content, context, and intended outcomes.

5. Assessment is not in itself a conversion practice

- Assessment, formulation and diagnosis do not in themselves constitute conversion practices. This includes comprehensive assessment, assessing suitability for a particular intervention, or recommending further assessment before an intervention is offered or undertaken.
- However, assessment, formulation or diagnosis may form part of a conversion practice where it is used to pursue a predetermined outcome of changing or suppressing a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

6. Support for individual autonomy

- Support that assists an individual to make autonomous decisions regarding relationships, sexual behaviour, religious observance or other matters of personal conscience does not in itself constitute a conversion practice. The fact that an individual may choose, for personal, cultural, religious or other reasons, to adopt particular behavioural choices, including choices relating to relationships, sexual activity, celibacy, identity labels, transition, detransition, or non-transition, does not of itself indicate the presence of a conversion practice.
- Whether a decision is autonomous depends on the circumstances in which it is made. Coercion, pressure or undue influence may constrain a person's ability to make and communicate their own decisions freely.
- Support for autonomous decision-making does not include helping an individual to change or suppress their sexual orientation or gender identity.

7. Practices rather than beliefs

- The holding of philosophical, religious, moral, cultural, political or clinical beliefs does not in itself constitute a conversion practice.
- The expression or imposition of beliefs may form part of a conversion practice where it is used to pursue a predetermined outcome of changing or suppressing a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Conversion practices are defined by the purpose, nature and context of actions directed towards an individual rather than solely by the beliefs that may motivate them.

8. Consent and conversion practices

- Whether a person requests, consents to or voluntarily participates in a practice does not, in itself, determine whether it constitutes a conversion practice. Consent remains important to ethical practice and may be relevant to understanding the context, but it does not make a practice directed towards changing or suppressing sexual orientation or gender identity something other than a conversion practice.

Status and relationship to professional ethics and standards

This definition identifies conduct that constitutes a conversion practice for professional and ethical purposes; it is not a statutory definition. Legislation may apply different or additional thresholds, including requirements concerning abusive or coercive conduct and harm, before particular legal consequences arise. This definition is not an exhaustive account of conduct that may be unethical or professionally unacceptable. Conduct falling outside the definition may nevertheless be harmful, discriminatory, coercive, incompetent or otherwise inconsistent with applicable ethical or professional standards. Whether particular conduct constitutes a breach of a professional code requires separate assessment under the applicable standards and procedures.

Glossary

A note on terminology: *The language and identity labels people use may differ between individuals, communities, cultures and generations and may change over time. The terminology used in this document is intended to be inclusive rather than exhaustive. Where possible, practitioners should respect the terms individuals use to describe themselves and their experiences.*

Exploration: Open-ended discussion, reflection, or consideration of a person's experiences, feelings, values, beliefs, identity, relationships, or goals without directing them towards a predetermined outcome regarding sexual orientation or gender identity.

Gender Identity: A person's internal sense or understanding of their gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth and may be understood within or outside binary categories. For some people, this may be experienced as stable; for others, it may be fluid or vary over time. People whose gender identity does not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth may describe themselves using terms such as trans or transgender, non-binary, genderfluid or agender.

Sexual Orientation: A person's pattern of romantic and/or sexual attraction in relation to the sex or gender of those to whom they are attracted. Common sexual-orientation identity labels include heterosexual or straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual and others. Patterns of attraction may be experienced as stable or may change over time. Some individuals may experience little or no sexual attraction and may use sexual-orientation identity terms such as asexual. For the avoidance of doubt, sexual orientation does not include sexual interest in children. Nor does it encompass non-consensual sexual conduct or other unlawful sexual behaviour.

Suppression: Conduct directed towards preventing or inhibiting a person from acknowledging, expressing or living in accordance with their sexual orientation or gender identity because another sexual orientation or gender identity is treated as preferable. Suppression does not include supporting a person to make autonomous decisions about identity, relationships, sexual behaviour, including celibacy, religious observance, transition, detransition or non-transition, or supporting them to manage any emotional, relational or practical difficulties associated with those decisions, provided that the support remains responsive to the person's wishes and is not directed towards a predetermined outcome regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Predetermined outcome: An outcome concerning a person's sexual orientation or gender identity that a practitioner or service regards as preferable in advance and towards which assessment, exploration or support is directed. A goal or aspiration identified with the individual at the outset of the work is not in itself a predetermined outcome in this sense. However, an individual's request for a particular outcome does not justify directing practice towards changing or suppressing their sexual orientation or gender identity.