To Whom It May Concern,

I would like to submit some information in response to the call for inputs on conversion therapy and share my work in which I have touched on it.

I primarily describe the situation in Thailand, which I have researched for the past 12 years. Conversion therapy in Thailand seems rare but there are isolated reports of related practices taking place. For my 2010 master’s thesis (Ojanen, 2010) in Counseling Psychology, I interviewed nine psychologists and psychiatrists in Bangkok as well as seven gay male and transgender women clients. Of the practitioners, one said that he engaged in conversion therapy, and added that other mental health practitioners in Thailand do not do it. This psychologist was over sixty years old then, but was still practicing at a university counseling clinic; he said that mostly clients would come because their parents forced them to. One of the client participants had been coaxed by a doctor in childhood to “choose to be gay” instead of being a transgender girl, as if this were a matter of choice, so as to resolve conflict with her parents. This would have been some twenty years ago. Other client participants did not have such experiences.

1. What different practices fall under the scope of so-called “conversion therapy” and what is the common denominators that allow their grouping under this denomination?

- The recent reports I have seen in media and other sources suggest that while mental health practitioners are usually not engaging in this type of treatment, non-professionals may arrange activities with similar aims in the guise of tutoring classes or religious camps, for example. Some years ago, an engineer was involved in the former, and monks have been reported to engage in the latter ( <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/thailand/8647239/Buddhist-temple-encouraging-ladyboys-to-be-masculine.html> ) . In both cases, the primary aim is to make feminine boys more masculine; see Ojanen, Ratanashevorn, and Boonkerd (2016). My latest book chapter (Ojanen et al., 2020) opens with an anecdotal report of a gay man, whose parents arranged a spiritual ritual to exorcise feminine spirits from him, in the hopes that he would become more masculine. All these practices reflect the belief that sexual preferences depend on the masculinity or femininity of the individual. Gender expression in this context may also be considered more important than sexual orientation, because sexual orientation can be kept private, whereas gender expression is visible, hence, for example, posing a risk of a family losing face if their offspring express themselves in a non-normative way. Since spiritual/religious practices are often an alternative to mental health treatment, I think that interventions in these domains with aims similar to conversion therapy should also be counted as falling under the concept of conversion therapy in a broader sense.

5. Has there been an identification of risks associated with practices of so-called “conversion therapy”?

Yes, see reports by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2016) and the American Psychological Association (2009).

8. Have any State institutions taken a position in relation to practices of so-called “conversion therapy”, in particular:

a. Entities or State branches in charge of public policy;

In Thailand, when the engineer-run gender expression change classes came into public view, a news outlet interviewed a representative of the Department of Mental Health (under the Ministry of Public Health); the DMH representative praised the classes for providing the public with something that the state could not provide (see Ojanen, Ratanashevorn & Boonkerd, 2016). However, this may have represented the commentator’s personal views rather than official policy, because none appears to exist on this in Thailand.

In my view, these kinds of practices are likely to be rare in Thailand mostly because Buddhism often views related phenomena through a lens of karma rather than sin - hence, non-normative expressions are a consequence of past-life sins rather than a cause of further divine punishment. If this belief holds, there is little motivation to change, unlike in the United States context where some conservative Christians think that a change in sexual orientation is key to living a life in a less sinful way (see the APA report).

Hopefully these comparisons are useful to you. I attach the materials I have mentioned in the text.

Best wishes,

Timo Ojanen

Faculty of Learning Sciences and Education

Thammasat University

Thailand