

Heterosexual Identities, Sexual Reorientation Therapies, and Science

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Despite overwhelming opposition by the most respected scientific and professional mental health organizations (e.g., American Academy of Pediatrics, 1983; American Psychiatric Association, 1999, 2000; American Psychological Association, 1998a, pp. 934–935; National Association of Social Work, 1997), there appears to be increasing momentum behind attempts to sanction the credibility of sexual reorientation therapies (e.g., Nicolosi, 1991; Throckmorton, 2002; Yarhouse & Burkett, 2002). For the most part, these efforts are directed by a small number of vocal individuals associated with conservative political and religious movements (e.g., Exodus International, the Family Research Council, and the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality). One provocative aspect of Spitzer's article is that he has not been associated with these organizations, and instead was a central figure in the removal of homosexuality as a mental disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (see Bayer, 1981). Thus, his research has fostered extensive fanfare among those who promote sexual reorientation therapies (e.g., Nicolosi, 2001). In this article, I provide a critique of Spitzer's work, articulating a number of scientific and conceptual flaws that result in serious concerns about the validity of his conclusions.

Is This Science?

There are a host of flaws in the research methodology, drastically limiting the types of conclusions that can be drawn from the data. Yet, Spitzer extended his analysis far beyond the data and drew conclusions that result from faulty, nonscientific logic. The numerous flaws include but are not limited to (1) a sample intentionally selected to include only individuals who reported change in sexual attraction after participating in reorientation therapy, and were likely to have an investment in reporting positive outcomes of reorientation therapy; (2) a transparent, self-report, retrospective design that relied on subjective comparisons of pre- and posttherapy outcomes that provided no protection against participant biases; (3) failure to fully describe the wide-ranging types of reorientation therapy experiences that had occurred across decades, some of which was ongoing and others which had been terminated many years before the study; (4) demand characteristics inherent to the research procedure that were

likely to prompt responses suggesting positive outcomes of reorientation therapy; and (5) lack of adequate operationalization of the variables and a high likelihood that measurement was both unreliable and invalid.

Although I could spend the remainder of the space allotted on a detailed explication of these points, instead I will attend primarily to additional conceptual issues that interact with these methodological flaws and seriously undermine the validity of the data and any conclusions drawn from it.

Defining and Measuring Sexual Orientations and Identities

Any researcher intending to address the potential for change in sexual orientation must first provide an accurate definition of the construct under study, and operationalize the construct within some method of measurement. Spitzer never effectively defined any of the variables under study, and never provided reliability and validity information about his measures. *Sexual orientation* refers to "an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to [(an)other person(s)] . . . that ranges from exclusive homosexuality to exclusive heterosexuality and includes various forms of bisexuality" (American Psychological Association, 1998b). Recognition, acceptance, and identification with one's sexual orientation can be collectively understood as *sexual orientation identity*, which is only one facet of a broad concept of *sexual identity* (Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002).

Spitzer only implicitly acknowledged the distinction between sexual orientation and sexual identity, and expressed the belief that both were measured via the retrospective, self-report interviews conducted over the telephone with his participants. Measurement of the various constructs that converge on sexual orientation identity is a formidable task, and problems in measurement will frequently result in misleading research outcomes (Worthington & Navarro, 2003). It has long been known that it is extremely difficult to obtain accurate self-reports regarding sexual contact, arousal, attraction, and fantasy (Masters & Johnson, 1979), which therefore diminishes our ability to simply and easily disentangle sexual orientations from the sexual identities of research participants, in part due to the influence of personal and societal homonegativity. As Spitzer pointed out, physiological methods result in much more reliable and valid measurements for sexual arousal, one of the key elements of sexual orientation. Thus, irrespective of a participant's intent regarding deception, sexual orientations and sexual identities are inherently intertwined when self-report instruments are used.

Since Spitzer did not adequately measure sexual orientation, he was unable to answer the central research question used in his title, "Can some gay men and lesbians change their sexual orientation?" In fact, there is an abundant literature that demonstrates that sexual orientations are highly impenetrable to a wide variety of interventions, from the seemingly benign to the most distastefully heinous (for a thorough review, see Murphy, 1992). Even some proponents of sexual reorientation therapies have begun to acknowledge that research clearly demonstrates that sexual orientations are relatively immutable, and instead have begun to target sexual orientation identity as the object of change (e.g., M. Yarhouse, personal communication, December 2, 2002). On the basis of this conceptual analysis, we must reach the conclusion that Spitzer's data did not contain acceptable evidence of sexual orientation change. As such, we are left with the question, "Can some individuals with a history of same-sex attraction, arousal, and behavior change their sexual orientation *identity* and lead functional heterosexual lives?" Before attempting to address this question, we must further disentangle heterosexual identities from sexual orientation identities more broadly.

Heterosexual Identity Development

Worthington et al. (2002) described a model of heterosexual identity development that provides a framework by which Spitzer's conclusions can be further analyzed. We defined *heterosexual identity development* as the individual and social processes by which heterosexually identified persons acknowledge and define their sexual needs, values, sexual orientation, and preferences for sexual activities, modes of sexual expression, and characteristics of sexual partners. Careful reading of Spitzer's article demonstrates that he has confounded group membership identity, preferences for characteristics of sexual partners, preferred sexual activities, preferred modes of sexual expression, and sexual values with sexual orientation and sexual orientation identity. For example, few, if any, of these individuals were likely to have ever achieved a completely gay or lesbian group membership identity (e.g., Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), primarily because it is apparent that they did not desire to do so. Despite the fact that Spitzer labeled his participants as "gay men" and "lesbians" who became "heterosexuals," it is apparent that the participants in Spitzer's sample had probably always perceived their group membership as "heterosexual" despite recognizing and acknowledging their history of same-sex arousal, fantasy, and attraction (sexual orientation identity). Therefore, at best Spitzer's sample comprises a group of individuals of unknown sex-

ual orientation, who probably always identified their group membership as heterosexual, and thus cannot be said to have changed their sexual orientations or sexual orientation identities in any verifiable way.

Furthermore, Worthington et al. theorized that the highest level of identity integration or *synthesis* entails congruence among all sexual identity dimensions, which requires active exploration of sexual needs, values, orientation, and preferences for characteristics of sexual partners, modes of sexual expression, and sexual activities. Spitzer implicitly acknowledged the importance of congruence in his selection of the variables of interest, yet he left this important variable uninvestigated. Instead, Spitzer relied heavily on self-reported dyadic adjustment in the context of a heterosexual relationship as evidence for "good heterosexual functioning," but he neglected to address two important issues: (a) that the data presented tell us nothing about the extent to which individual participants achieved congruence among various dimensions of sexual identity, and (b) that the process of reorientation therapies seemed to intensely *discourage* active exploration of important components of sexual identity, thus making synthesis highly unlikely among his participants. To the degree that individuals experience incongruence among various dimensions of sexual identity, there is little hope that they will truly achieve an undistorted sense of good heterosexual functioning. As such, Spitzer's claims for good heterosexual functioning among his participants were based on overly simplistic notions of what it means to be heterosexual in the face of tremendous complexity in human sexual functioning.

Conclusion

In this commentary, I have argued that there are a host of scientific and conceptual flaws inherent to the work reported by Spitzer. From this analysis, I believe that the only valid conclusion we can draw from Spitzer's data is that it is possible to locate 200 individuals who are motivated to retrospectively report changes in their sexual functioning as a means of promoting the use of sexual reorientation therapies. Despite all of the numerous assertions that he believes the data to be useful and untainted, credible behavioral science cannot be based solely on the persuasive power or reputation of a single researcher. There are substantial dangers involved in the publication of Spitzer's article because of the politically charged atmosphere within which the findings and conclusions are presented. It is unfortunate that the provocative nature of the article might continue to result in widespread publicity and fanfare that ignores the lack of scientific rigor and conceptual flaws described herein.