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Psychiatrist's Apology Stands Out From Typical Scientific Regrets

May 18, 2012, 5:00 pm

By [Josh Fischman](#)

Robert L. Spitzer retired years ago but his influence has not. That's why his recantation last month of his own paper, research purporting to show that therapy could turn some homosexuals into heterosexuals, has such extraordinary resonance. The work of Dr. Spitzer, a psychiatrist and Columbia University emeritus professor—who actually got homosexuality removed from the medical list of mental disorders in 1973—rippled across society.

Archives of Sexual Behavior, Vol. 32, No. 5, October 2003, pp. 403–417 (© 2003)

Can Some Gay Men and Lesbians Change Their Sexual Orientation? 200 Participants Reporting a Change from Homosexual to Heterosexual Orientation¹

Robert L. Spitzer, M.D.^{2,3,4}

Robert Spitzer has recanted his paper claiming homosexuality can be changed.

This is not the usual apology for a scientific error. “I believe I owe the gay community an apology for my study making unproven claims of the efficacy of reparative therapy,” Dr. Spitzer has written in a [letter](#) to the editor of the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, which published his paper in 2003 and may publish his retraction. He first expressed his regret last month to writer Gabriel Arana, who interviewed him in [The American Prospect](#) about problems with the study.

Many scientists, when admitting they have been wrong, express much narrower mea culpas. Hwang Woo Suk of Seoul National University, whose breakthroughs in stem cell cloning were shown to be fake in 2006, apologized to his nation and the world while [blaming](#) the problems on his collaborators. In 1998, Bruce Wachholtz, then a radiation scientist at the National Cancer Institute, told the U.S. Senate he was sorry for a 15-year delay in releasing results of a radiation health study, and [said](#) it was because no one had seemed interested in the research. (The data, from Cold War bomb tests, indicated the radiation was responsible for tens of thousands of cancer cases.) And 60 years after a U.S. scientist infected thousands of Guatemalans with syphilis to test various therapies, federal officials [apologized](#) while reassuring the public that times, and research standards, had changed for the better.

The psychologist Diederik Stapel, formerly of Tilburg University, was caught fabricating data in dozens of papers last year, and directed his regret to his colleagues in a statement (translated from the [original Dutch](#) by [The New York Times](#)) that said “I have failed as a scientist and a researcher.”

Dr. Spitzer, on the other hand, has a keen awareness of the larger effects of his work. His study was taken up by anti-homosexual activists and therapists who said they could “cure” patients of their sexual orientation. (Mr. Arana, the *American Prospect* journalist and a gay man, spent years in such therapy.) Dr. Spitzer also apologized to those patients. He said he did not start the study to show that homosexuality could be done away with. He did it, rather, to debunk the claim that “reparative therapy” was completely ineffective in changing sexual orientation.

But he did so with bad science. He interviewed 200 people who said they used to be gay, and asked them if therapy helped them make the switch. There was, he now says, no way to determine if they were telling the truth, and no comparison group of people who didn't undergo therapy. And there was no replication of the study. It didn't validate anti-gay therapy for most scientists, but it did give ammunition to anti-gay groups. So he asked Mr. Arana to print his retraction. Dr. Spitzer wants not only to set the research record straight, but correct a mistaken cultural idea.

Bad science then, but few could say a bad scientist now.

This entry was posted in [social and behavioral sciences](#) and tagged [homosexuality](#), [psychiatry](#), [scientific errors](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

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m_ryall 1 day ago

Typical or not, Spitzer's apology doesn't right the wrongs. His "research" helped to naturalize the idea that homosexuality is an aberration, and has prolonged the injustices that gay people have to endure. That Spitzer now wants to rid himself of guilt over his part in it is really revolting. I for one am not applauding him for suddenly seeing the light. It's way too easy and way too late.

7 people liked this.

Like

Reply



vanandel 1 day ago in reply to m_ryall

And what would you prefer that he do now? Should he remain silent and let the work stand?

26 people liked this.

Like

Reply



anon1972 1 day ago in reply to vanandel

No, but he needs to understand -- and probably does -- that his 'mea culpa' will not automatically allow people to forgive and forget the damage his work caused.

5 people liked this.

Like

Reply



m_ryall 18 hours ago in reply to anon1972

I agree with anon1972. The apology is accepted, It's fitting, appropriate, and overdue. But Spitzer should not expect us to hold a parade for him. His work speaks for itself and the apology is a footnote.

1 person liked this.

Like



panacea 20 hours ago in reply to m_ryall

The retraction will cut the legs out from under the "cure homosexuality" quacks. That, at least, is a good thing.

5 people liked this.

Like

Reply



woodstock 1 day ago

Baloney Dr. Spitzer, no "scientific" research. The gay community forced the APA brass to drop the Homosexuality diagnosis. The occasion was the 1973 APA convention in San Francisco: the gay community got control of the convention site infrastructure and demanded the APA drop the homosexual diagnosis or else no convention. The APA brass complied immediately. Nothing "scientific", but political force.
More to be done with the rest of the APA 300 plus "scientific" diagnosis!!!

5 people liked this.

Like

Reply



big_giant_head 23 hours ago in reply to woodstock

Huh. I had no idea the "gay community" had such power. I wonder when I'll get my secret decoder ring?

9 people liked this.

Like

Reply



panacea 20 hours ago in reply to woodstock

Please prove that statement.

Like

Reply



woodstock 17 hours ago in reply to panacea

Here are few references, plenty more in the Internet.
<http://rmc.library.cornell.edu...>

Like

Reply



woodstock 17 hours ago in reply to panacea

<http://conservativecolloquium....>
<http://www.thisamericanlife.or...>
<http://www.glreview.com/article...>

Like

Reply



lross1 15 hours ago in reply to woodstock

Woodstock, I've read the sources you cite, and they don't support your statements. You seem to be confusing the disruptions that took place at the 1970 APA convention in San Francisco and the non-disruptive events that took place at the 1973 APA convention in Honolulu. There is no reference in any of your sources to any attempt to shut down or otherwise interfere with the 1973 convention. The segment from "This American Life" seemed to be the most detailed and even-handed account of the 1973 events.

Like



salchaktoka 21 hours ago

Even more scandalous than Spitzer's "research" is the fact that a professional journal published it. Yet more proof of the utter intellectual and moral bankruptcy of psychiatry.

1 person liked this.

Like

Reply



11182967 20 hours ago

Bad research--whether careless or poorly designed or intentionally misrepresented or faked--cannot be totally prevented. But it can be kept from publication by knowledgeable and careful peer review. From the description of the research here--no comparison group, no replication, no control for veracity--it seems remarkable that the "research" was published at all. Good for Spitzer that he now apologizes, but what about the journal's role? And has there also been a history--as there should be--of direct challenge to the original article? This seems to be primarily a failure of a research community to appropriately vet and challenge bad research.

7 people liked this.

Like

Reply



borso 19 hours ago in reply to 11182967

Archives of Sexual Behavior, Volume 32, Number 5, October 2003 , pp. 419-468 has an extensive range of peer responses to the paper in the same issue, followed by a response. Peer review in public?

4 people liked this. [Edit](#) [Reply](#)



11182967 17 hours ago

Thanks, Borso. This journal isn't one of those that, like Jay Leno, I'd refer to as "my Bible." So if there was substantial--and I presume mixed, at the least--reponse at the time, the question would be why the article came to be influential, at least to a particular audience. The answer to that is pretty obvious, of course.

What's disturbing about the larger story is the way in which it reflects many Americans' fundamental misunderstanding of how science works. While scientists recognize that much (virtually all social) science is statistical, non-scientists run around claiming that anything which is not 100% "proved" is essentially unproved. Which is then interpreted to mean, ironically, that any one research result, no matter how wacky, can be seen as "just as good as" any other: nothing is certain, ipso facto, everything is equally (un)certain.

2 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



rt_firefly 14 hours ago in reply to 11182967

What emerges as really disturbing to me is that the collection of peer commentaries does a fairly decent job of dismissing the study (to that extent the journal did some due diligence), but this was obviously ignored by the usual suspects, including (I assume) the pop press.

For example, it didn't take long to find a methodological critique by Helena Carlson that pointed out that: "... this is a population of highly religious, White, Protestant, middle aged, and middle class men and women. There is little evidence that they are representative of a diverse gay community." This is a pretty basic demonstration of what happens when people don't do their homework - either willfully or negligently, or just flat out distort the facts. And it happens all the time.

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



mawickline 14 hours ago

Time marches on. I, for one, am grateful that Dr. Spitzer had the grace to do this.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



Robert Oscar Lopez 14 hours ago

I'm bisexual and don't feel like I need to apologize to anyone. Straights need to accept that I'll always find men attractive. Homosexuals need to accept that I have a choice and they can't cure me of women by saying I'm in denial. It's shocking how crude the level of discussion is especially from my gay supposed allies.

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)

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