

Limning the Psyche

The web site of Mark Yarhouse

On Spitzer's "Change"

April 13, 2012

Although I am currently traveling, several people have contacted me about the developments surrounding Dr. Robert Spitzer. People are asking me about Robert Spitzer's reported desire to retract his study of 200 people who claimed to have experience change of their sexual orientation. It is unclear what people want me to say. When I first read his reported exchange (<http://prospect.org/article/my-so-called-ex-gay-life>) with Gabriel Arana, I reflected on what I know about retracting studies. Research is typically retracted for gross errors or deception, as when data has been fabricated, for example. I had not seen anyone addressing this, however. All of the blogs and reports were on Spitzer's desire to make a retraction (or whether he was feeling pressure to do so or whether he was protecting his legacy, etc.) but not on what constitutes or warrants a retraction. I'll get back to this in a moment.

This line in his reported interview with Arana was puzzling to me: "The findings can be considered evidence for what those who have undergone ex-gay therapy say about it, but nothing more." This is shared as though it were new information. But that is actually how I tend to think of Spitzer's study, and it is how I think he wanted others to interpret his data. Nothing more, nothing less.

There is an interesting report from Alice Dreger's blog (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fetishes-i-dont-get/201204/how-ex-ex-gay-study>) of her exchange with Dr. Ken Zucker, editor of *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, the journal that published Spitzer's study back in 2003. Dreger actually knows Zucker and contacted him about a few points in the Arana article that did not make much sense to her. This exchange (as recalled by Zucker and told to Dreger) is interesting:

A few months ago, Zucker told me, Spitzer had called Zucker wanting to talk about the latest DSM revision. During that call, according to Zucker, Spitzer "made some reference to regretting having done or publishing the study, and he said he wanted to retract it. My recollection of the conversation was something like this: I said, 'I'm not sure what you want to retract, Bob. You didn't falsify the data. You didn't commit egregious statistical errors in analyzing the data. You didn't make up the data. There were various commentaries on your paper, some positive, some negative, some in between. So the only thing that you seem to want to retract is your interpretation of the data, and lots of people have already criticized

you for interpretation, methodological issues, etc.'"

The other part of this story brings us back full circle to the issue of a retraction. Does Spitzer's regret or change of heart or desire to no longer see his study as fueling the so-called ex-gay industry constitute grounds for a retraction? Back to Dreger:

Well, the problem with that is that Spitzer's change of heart about the interpretation of his data is not normally the kind of thing that causes an editor to expunge the scientific record. Said Zucker to me, "You can retract data incorrectly analyzed; to do that, you publish an erratum. You can retract an article if the data were falsified—or the journal retracts it if the editor knows of it. As I understand it, he's just saying ten years later that he wants to retract his interpretation of the data. Well, we'd probably have to retract hundreds of scientific papers with regard to re-interpretation, and we don't do that."

So we may or may not see a retraction in the formal sense of the word. I don't know how much it matters. In the blogosphere, where folks on both sides of this particular debate take shots at one another, what constitutes grounds for a retraction will likely be lost on those who want to use Spitzer's "change" to support their position. It was the case when Spitzer interpreted his data one way; it appears that way with Spitzer interpreting his data another way. (Although, as I suggested from the outset, Spitzer may be interpreting his data in much the same way he did originally—as when he first presented his findings at the American Psychiatric Association's annual meeting in 2001: as evidence that the people he interviewed believed they had experienced change of orientation.)

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1. David C. Pruden, MS [permalink](#)

April 17, 2012 3:44 pm

I met Robert Spitzer at the APA convention in Chicago in 1999 (maybe 1998?) when he was putting the study together. We had dinner together along with some other attendees and he expressed regret that his committee recommendation on the DSM diagnosis on homosexuality years earlier had been misused to the harm of some with unwanted homosexual attractions. His contemplated study seemed to be at the time motivated by that concern. Now more than ten years later he seems worried that his work has again been used to cause possible harm to the same population.

My impression is that Dr. Spitzer is a truly kind man who wanted his legacy to reflect his desire to keep various treatment options available and possibilities for affirmation open for everyone but that the politics surrounding this difficult issue repeatedly make him the issue. First as the enemy of those who labeled homosexual attractions pathology and wanted the change option affirmed and now for almost a decade an enemy to those on the other side who worry that the possibility of change for some reintroduces the implication of pathology for those who don't.

I find it impossible to call to mind another issue in the last thirty years so resistant to rational scientific discussion or unbiased examination. At almost eighty years of age Dr. Spitzer must find it all rather discouraging.

- David Pruden

Reply

- Mark [permalink](#)*

April 18, 2012 1:36 am

I met him much later, in 2001, but I had a similar impression of him, as a very kind man who is interested in scientific examination of challenging questions. He has often said he is drawn to controversies, too, so that is an interesting perspective as well.

Reply

2. Paul McMichael [permalink](#)

April 26, 2012 1:30 am

The issue is not the retraction or the statistical methods or the data or how journals deal with changes in any of those things. The issue is the bias in the original sample that could not be accounted for and which he now believes not to be credible or objective responses to his search for data.

Reply

- Mark [permalink](#)*

April 27, 2012 1:42 pm

I'd be interested in your thoughts on how to address the potential for sampling bias given the topic.

Reply

3. Guglielmo Marinaro [permalink](#)

April 26, 2012 6:50 am

Talk of expunging the scientific record or of retracting papers is simply obstructive and disingenuous claptrap. You don't have to do either of those things in order to let it be publically known that the author of a piece of research now believes it to be methodologically unsound and that he now therefore repudiates the conclusions that he formerly drew from it. That is all that Spitzer wants.

Reply

- Mark [permalink](#)*

April 27, 2012 1:40 pm

I think he has achieved that. Some people seem to treat it as follows: Because the author has asked for a retraction, we should treat the study as if it never happened. I don't think of it in that way. It is not retracted in that sense of the word. But since the primary researcher has such a different view of his own work, it is certainly noteworthy.

Reply

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