

Limning the Psyche

The web site of Mark Yarhouse

Two Developments, As It Were

April 27, 2012

The gay activist blog Truth Wins Out (TWO) has apparently been working closely with Robert Spitzer and claims to have a letter he wrote to Dr. Kenneth Zucker, editor of the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. It is being reported that Spitzer, in addition to regretting how he previously interpreted his findings on whether sexual orientation can change, is now offering an apology to the gay community:

I believe I owe the gay community an apology for my study making unproven claims of the efficacy of reparative therapy. I also apologize to any gay person who wasted time and energy undergoing some form of reparative therapy because they believed that I had proven that reparative therapy works with some “highly motivated” individuals.

This seems to be a natural extension of Spitzer’s recent expressed regret about how he interpreted his findings and particularly about how others have used his study.

The TWO web site is interesting though. There is a press release informing folks about the apology and then a notice that various groups should remove any reference to Spitzer’s study from their web sites.

Organizations that continue to cite Spitzer’s repudiated study, such as PFOX, Focus on the Family, and NARTH, are being dishonest and blatantly misleading their followers,” said Wayne Besen, Executive Director of Truth Wins Out. “By failing to expeditiously remove references to the Spitzer study, these groups are showing themselves to be completely devoid of character and integrity.

I am not going to defend how any one group is using Spitzer’s research, but this is such an odd declaration to make. Spitzer may regret how he has interpreted his findings or how others have used his findings, but he does not own the sole interpretation of his research. If that were the case, wouldn’t that be an interesting development? If the only legitimate interpretation of a scientific study was the interpretation held by the primary researcher? The reality is that others may also read his research and come to different conclusions, just as they did when many critics disagreed with Spitzer’s initial interpretation of his work. It may be informative to someone visiting an organization’s web site to know Spitzer’s current feelings of regret, but organizations

do not have to agree with him.

There are still many people trying to make sense of Spitzer's change of heart. The most frequently cited rationale people have brought to my attention is the pressure he must feel from various activist groups. That pressure is real. I remember him saying when his study was first presented that several people called for his job at Columbia, and his coauthor did not want to be listed on the presentation or publication of the study. But the "activist pressure" theory may or may not be a contributing factor.

The second most frequently cited rationale I've heard is that of legacy – not wanting to end a distinguished career on this study. That is another consideration. The study was certainly a departure for him. Again, it may or may not be a contributing factor.

When I spoke with him at the time of his initial presentation of the data and during the filming of the DVD I Do Exist, he often referenced the believability of the people he interviewed, as well as confirmation in some cases from spouses and the way in which people did not provide accounts of dramatic or categorical change, which is what he thought he would hear if people were trying to make a political point about change. That may be part of what he is saying today: they were believable accounts, but he did not have an objective way to assess those claims, and he only had a rating scale that (if I recall directly) he created (a scale from 1 to 100). Today he seems to be saying that that is not sufficient reason to believe others can expect to change sexual orientation if they enter reorientation therapy. Further, he feels regret if others thought it was sufficient reason and attempted change because of it.

At the end of the day, only Spitzer knows his reasons. Some will applaud him and obviously agree with him. Others will not; others will see these other explanations as plausible.

In any case, those who continue to offer reorientation therapy are going to need to collaborate with researchers to conduct well-designed studies to support the claim that it is effective and not harmful. That was the case when Spitzer held his initial interpretation of his study, and it is still the case today.

from → [Sexuality & Gender](#)

11 Comments [leave one](#) →

1. Guglielmo Marinaro [permalink](#)

April 27, 2012 10:50 am

"Spitzer...does not own the sole interpretation of his research."

Fair enough, but it would be entirely disingenuous of anyone who might cite the Spitzer study in the future as evidence for the effectiveness of conversion therapy to conceal the fact that the author of the study had renounced his original conclusion.

[Reply](#)

◦ Mark [permalink](#)*

April 27, 2012 1:21 pm

I agree with you, Guglielmo. No need to conceal what Dr. Spitzer's current opinion of his work is.

Reply

- Andrew [permalink](#)

May 19, 2012 7:40 am

Seems to me the question then is, will those organizations that engage in “ex-gay therapy” incorporate reference to Dr. Spitzer’s current opinion of his work into their literature, media, and talking points? Given that these organizations are less scientific/academic than religious/ideological (and inescapably political) bodies, I’d wager no. As it has been used for over a decade now, Spitzer’s 1991 study will still provide “scientific” legitimation for those groups that require it, instead of acting a prompt for further research with more rigorous standards of data collection and analysis, because these organizations don’t, in the end, care about the science. They feel a need to clothe their cultural bias in the rationality and authority that psychology and social science can legitimately claim for themselves, and this study and similar studies — even if recanted — will continue to supply them with scientific discourse they can appropriate to their less than scientific ends. That Spitzer’s study remains available and open to interpretation isn’t in dispute, I don’t think; what is at issue here is its willful misinterpretation by non- or pseudo-scientific social and political actors to perpetuate harmful “therapies” in the name of science, taken in vain.

2. StraightGrandmother [permalink](#)

April 27, 2012 11:53 am

Interesting that you reference the I Do Exist video, as didn’t at least one of those “believable” people also recant their change and continue on in life as a homosexual?

Isn’t that what Dr. Spitzer has come to believe? That we should not put much emphasis on a study of highly motivated religious people to “truthfully” report their sexual orientation after Sexual Orientation Change Efforts? IMHO Highly Religious people who enter SOCE do to their faith beliefs, will lie in order to not harm their church’s teachings.

If you listen to John Smid former Executive Director of Love Won Out and former Exodus Board Member this is what he describes. He knew all along he never changed his sexual orientation away from homosexual but he would never admit it as he never wanted his church to be hurt by his failure. The fealty to their religion makes them lie to researchers.

Reply

- Mark [permalink](#)*

April 27, 2012 1:31 pm

Straight Grandmother: I was referencing an exchange I had with Dr. Spitzer in the context of him being filmed for the DVD. I think you are right that at least one of those people interviewed has recanted.

I’m not sure I fully understand what Spitzer has come to understand, but I would not deny that highly religious people entering such therapy might feel pressure to report positive gains (depending on who is asking them, what is being asked, how it is being reported, and so on). I don’t think this invalidates all of their statements, however. But it is something important to keep in mind when conducting research.

John Smid is an interesting story for the reasons you've mentioned. I think it is prudent to listen to what he is saying and why.

Reply

3. StraightGrandmother [permalink](#)

April 28, 2012 7:11 am

Since I wrote my comment above, I read an even better description of what I was trying to say, written by Michael Bussee. He articulates this much better than I did, it's the same point but stated 1,000 times better

"Anyone studying "ex-gays" has to take into account the mindset of many of the participants. The impact of "name-it-and-claim-it" theology on self reports of "change" cannot be under-estimated.

It's not so much that "ex-gays" deliberately lie. It's more that they have a special way of looking at "belief". Those from more charismatic backgrounds are told that "what they profess in faith" will come to pass – if their faith is strong enough.

For example, such a believer may say, "I have been healed by Jesus" of this or that affliction – even though they still suffer from it. By proclaiming it on a spiritual level they help to bring it about on the physical level.

This idea of "claiming it on faith" is reinforced by such Biblical passages as "By His stripes we ARE healed" (past tense) and "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you HAVE received it, and it will be yours."

When these believers say, "My sexual orientation HAS changed", they may actually mean something closer to: "I strongly believe that my orientation has changed on the spiritual level and I am professing faith (confident hope) that it will also be true on the physical level."

That's what I meant when I said I was "ex-gay". It was what John Smid meant. It's what many of the men in our ministries meant. But these were self-reports of our hope – not a factual reality – believing (in faith) that what had changed on the spiritual level would manifest itself on the physical"

From another comment- "

As Michael Bussee said of a much smaller study of this kind in which he and a number of his clients took part years ago when he was still at the head of Exodus International: "When Pattison contacted us about putting together the study, Gary and I were very excited. We went through our files and carefully handpickcd and coached the research subjects. ... We told the research subjects how important it was to EXODUS's ministry and future that the subjects give the most positive response possible. We weren't lying – at least we didn't think we were. We believed it. ... Sadly, we were deluding ourselves and misleading others."

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These observations show how hard it is for *any* researcher answer the question "Can religion help you change your sexual orientation?" And for most people "change your sexual orientation" that means going from 100% homosexual to 100% heterosexual, not slight incremental changes in between.

As to how to really get at the truth I would suggest a researcher contact Michael Bussee and John Smid and others like them and ask them how to do it.

Reply

4. Mark [permalink](#)*

April 28, 2012 5:01 pm

That's a helpful clarification and expansion of what you were saying. Thank you.

With genuine regard for the experiences of these leaders, I cannot say how many people involved with Exodus or other ministries or professional therapy come from the specific background cited ("those from more charismatic backgrounds"). Nor can I say whether they (none / some / most / all) mean what Michael is saying about them. I believe Michael if he says that's what he meant at the time.

I think you and I would agree that studying sexual orientation is challenging (understatement); you are also bringing up the topic of psychology of religion, which is another complex area for researchers. When these two areas are combined for research purposes, it becomes that much more complicated. The complexity, in my view, is important for any researcher who wants to study this topic.

Reply

5. Wayne Besen [permalink](#)

April 30, 2012 2:42 am

In 1998, 15 anti-gay groups launched the \$600,000 Truth in Love ad campaign saying gay people could turn straight. One posterboy, John Paulk, was photographed by me in a gay saloon in Washington. The other posterboy, Michael Johnston, stepped down for gay orgies. Spitzer's study came a couple years later, it has now been renounced. The study is now gone from your arsenal, so you can stop being a sore loser and just accept it.

The bottom line, if you look back at this flashy campaign, any non-biased person would reasonably conclude that "ex-gay" programs are an experiment that has failed. Aside from these examples, we have found that Masters & Johnson's study showing gays could change was a fabrication. And George "Rent Boy" Rekers study on Kirk was a fraud.

Meanwhile, John Smid of Love in Action says that he has never met a man who has completely changed his sexual orientation. Alan Chambers says that 99.9% of his clients do

not change to the point where they are still not into dudes. What don't you get about this? Or is evidence that does not bolster your fundie point of view ignored?

Finally, a combination of a No Lie MRI and penile plethysmography would accurately test whether so-called "ex-gays" have really changed. But because you have an agenda, you would rather dishonestly let these political activists spin tales about their alleged "transformation" than take physical tests that prove they are frauds.

Given the evidence, only disingenuous dead enders still promote the "ex-gay" myth. Mark, your entire paradigm has collapsed in front of your eyes and you seem to be the last one to know.

Reply

- Mark [permalink](#)*

April 30, 2012 6:19 pm

Not sure were to start with your comment, Wayne, but here are a few thoughts.

I would say that I am familiar with the history you've cited. If you think I have a research "arsenal," I'm afraid you don't know me or my research very well. By far, most of my research is on sexual identity development rather than ministries that attempt change.

My "fundie" point of view? Well, I'm actually Reformed and an evangelical. Not a fundamentalist.

In many places my coauthor and I have explained why we did not do the so-called "no lie MRI" nor the plethysmography. Feel free to review those publications and web site: exgaystudy.org

I don't have a "change of orientation" paradigm. My research and clinical work is primarily on sexual identity, including a framework for resolving sexual and religious identity conflicts (co-developed with Warren Throckmorton) that was cited favorably in the background document to the 2009 task force report on appropriate therapeutic responses to sexual orientation.

If you decide to reply, please stay on the topic of the post. This is not a venue for making personal insults.

Reply

6. Malcolm Smith [permalink](#)

May 10, 2012 11:25 pm

Reading these comments, I gather that many people have a restricted idea of what counts as a "cure". If you mean that same sex attraction is completely replaced by opposite sex attraction, and never recurs, then it would be right to say that a cure is next to impossible. However, this means holding homosexuality to a higher standard than any other disorder. There are plenty of disorders, both physical and mental, which can never be completely eradicated, but for which the symptoms can be reduced to the level whereby the sufferer can live a more or less normal life.

Dr Spitzer's initial research referred to people's sexual orientation moving to an appreciable extent in the heterosexual direction, not to 100%, irrevocable change. And I remember one ex-gay saying it was like dieting: once you get to your appropriate weight, it is still necessary to ensure you do not fall back into the old ways of eating. Another said he was not completely straight, but "straight enough".

It is probably important for both therapists and patients to understand this, because it seems that many of those who backslid had fallen for the canard that there is something special about homosexuality, and that any lingering twinge of same sex attraction must be indulged.

Reply

- Andrew [permalink](#)

May 19, 2012 8:16 am

There are a couple difficulties I have with this view of "cure," most fundamentally that it semantically marks homosexuality as an "illness." If we were to invent an inverted scenario — a straight man who wants desperately to be gay, and is willing to invest significant resources, financial and personal, to achieve that change — how would he be viewed? Heterosexuality would then need be counted as an "illness," too, no?

There seems to be some subtle, and potentially pernicious, redefinition of terms here. I don't deny that it is very possible for a homosexual — or a heterosexual — person to resist acting upon their sexual urges. We are not slaves to our libido; this is a matter of will: we choose, in each individual circumstance, how to act upon the attraction we feel for others. The comparison of being "cured" of homosexuality to adhering to a diet, though, helps me understand ex-gays as more closely similar to men and women who are willingly celibate — choosing to refrain from acting upon an urge that, at its root, remains unchanged. Would we call a successful dieter someone "cured" of hunger? Again, the language of illness and cure here carries stigmatizing and shame-laden overtones that, to my mind, are quite dangerous to a person's overall sense of well-being, regardless of how she realizes her desires and urges as an ethical actor.

The last objection I hold is that there seems to be something much more complicated going on when we use the terms "gay," "straight," "homosexual," in this conversation. If "curing" someone of homosexuality is teaching them strategies to resist the urge to engage in sexual behavior, we need to 1) represent those "therapies" openly and honestly as what they are, and 2) ask whether that pattern of behavior is healthy or not. And I don't see how we can divorce from considerations of (2) the question of social identity. That is, even if we represent "ex-gay therapy" as a practice about reconfiguring sexual acts, that doesn't change the fact that those acts — and the urges behind them — are socially constitutive of identity in a deep and fundamental way in the 21st century Western world. How much more damage is done when homosexual men and women are promised access to "straightness," with all of the cultural and political privileges and protections attaching to that category, not to mention the personal impacts with respect to community and family, but who then, even after "therapy," recognize that at their core their desires still mark them as "gay" (that is, "uncured")? What is the psychological toll, and can this mode of being be in any way termed healthy? I don't see how it can.

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