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Sexual Prejudice

The erasure of bisexuals in academia and the media

By Loraine Hutchins

The Scapegoating of Bi Men

Men who call themselves bisexual are liars. At least that's what the *New York Times* science section said in "Straight, Gay or Lying: Bisexuality Revisited" (July 5, 2005).

We often hear this kind of prejudice and misinformation in popular media, even in the gay and lesbian press. But how did a distinguished daily come to such a conclusion? How did the "national newspaper of record" decide that men who are attracted to more than one gender are really inventing their interest in women and repressing a "true" homosexual identity?

The following is an account of what the research underlying this article is really about, and what kind of impact it has had on millions of bisexual people and those who love them. It's a story I know a lot about. I debated reparative therapist Joseph Nicolosi on CNN in 1993. For over 20 years I have worked to educate people about biphobia and how it's interwoven with homophobia, heterosexism, and gynophobia in our society. Still, I was taken by surprise by the *Times* story. My summer hasn't been the same since.

Times reporter Benedict Carey's article was based on his reading of "[Sexual Arousal Patterns of Bisexual Men](#)" by Gerulf Rieger, Meredith L. Chivers, and J. Michael Bailey, which currently appears in *Psychological Science* (Vol. 16, No. 8, August 2005), the journal of the American Psychological Society. Bailey, the senior author of the article, was until recently chair of the psychology department at Northwestern University. He lost that position last year but still serves as a professor there. The article questions the veracity of bi men's self-definition, and thus, the very legitimacy of bisexuality as an orientation, at least for men. (Women, the authors say, are not as easily quantified. They've done other research showing *all* women are essentially bisexual, but that's another story.)

What they stuck on the men—a group of about 100 who were pretty evenly divided into those who self-labeled as homo, hetero and bi—was a penis meter that measures genital blood flow or level of erection (technically called a plethysmograph). No subject was offered film footage representing penile-vaginal intercourse because, as the researchers later explained, they were afraid that kind of footage would be too confusing to evaluate, since they wouldn't be able to tell whether the men's penises were responding to the female or the male or both. Each subject was,

therefore, shown several two minute male/male porn films and also several two minute clips of female/female porn. The researchers threw out 35% of their sample as “non-responders” (guys of all orientations for whom the lab/wiring/porn thing didn’t work to get them aroused). Since out of that remaining group the men who self-identified as bi had penises that, for the most part, didn’t get hard during the female/female clip(s), the researchers concluded that the bi men were only masquerading as such and were homosexuals who hadn’t faced their gayness yet.

Casting Doubt

Further, they opined that since *arousal* in men equals *orientation*, bi men don’t exist. The study might have been just another academic paper that never makes it out of obscure sex research journals and sex research conference presentations, but the researchers provided the *Times* with an advance copy of it. Reporter Carey wrote, “... a new study casts doubt on whether true bisexuality exists, at least in men.” By saying that the study “casts doubt on” the existence of bisexuality, the *Times* moved away from objective reporting and toward taking a position on its validity. (This would not have been an issue had the article simply read, “A new study questions whether true bisexuality exists...”)

The *Times* effectively endorsed the researchers’ opinion, giving the research much more credibility than it would have otherwise had. The story made its way into other news media outlets and was reprinted and commented on around the world. The researchers also were strategic, or perhaps just lucky, to get the story into the *Times* the same week a major sex research conference was occurring in Ottawa, The International Academy of Sex Research (IASR), thus assuring even more publicity for their assertions.

When the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) challenged the *Times* about its inflammatory headline, their response was that “straight, gay or lying” is a well known idiomatic comment gays make about bisexuals, and therefore was appropriate. Thinking this line of reasoning could sanction a lot more inaccuracies and hate speech, GLAAD requested that the *Times* at least change this article’s headline on their website. They refused to do so. GLAAD issued a statement and mounted a [write-in campaign](#) to help mobilize people’s response.

The Organized Response

Within 24 hours of the article’s release an ad hoc coalition of LGBT activists and academics came together, under the leadership of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, to coordinate a national response. The Task Force prepared a [press release and a fact sheet](#) critiquing the study the article was based upon. More importantly, they enlisted [BiNet USA: The National Bisexual Network](#), the [Bisexual Resource Center of Boston](#), and [GLAAD](#) in a series of nationwide conference calls that helped strategize a way to hold the *Times* accountable for its hate speech and misinformation. At least one group beyond the LGBT community—the

progressive media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR)—also issued a statement protesting the *Times* handling of the research.

A week later, amidst a flurry of criticism, the *Times* published a small selection of the many letters they had received on the article. The only published letter defending the article was by conservative gay writer Chandler Burr, who contributes to the *Times*.

The story continued to grow legs well into the second and third weeks after its initial release. While it remained one of the *Times*' website most forwarded articles for more than two weeks, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Los Angeles Times* covered public response to the story and asked additional questions about the research's original content. Increasing media response came from blogs of all sorts, bisexual listservs, websites, LGBT magazines, and local newspapers around the English-speaking world—with reprints and discussions from Belfast to Baltimore, Toronto to Atlanta, Sydney to Seattle, and many points in between. Meanwhile, the ad hoc coalition moved ahead with plans to arrange a meeting with the editor of the *New York Times* science section to discuss the coverage of the research and their future coverage of bisexuality and other sexual orientation/identity issues. A meeting did finally take place on July 27. There, coalition representatives aired their concerns and suggestions, and the *Times* promised to take these into consideration in future reporting.

The Research Flaws

The Task Force, with input from LGBT academics who had read advance copies of the Bailey et. al. study, developed a preliminary fact sheet. It points out that the *Times* fails "... to note several serious and obvious questions about the study's methodology and underlying premises ..." and also "... misstates some of the study's conclusions." As the Task Force writers said, the assertion by Bailey, Rieger, and Chivers that arousal, at least in men, equals sexual orientation, is a ridiculous oversimplification of the complexity of sexual desire. Rather, arousal is "... a combination of cognitive and physical responses, not reducible to genital responses to pornography." They also questioned the validity of the plethysmograph. The controversial device was developed in Eastern Europe during the 1950s and brought to Canada and the United States soon thereafter. It has been used to measure sexual response in relation to screening out alleged homosexuals from those seeking government service or citizenship. The Task Force fact sheet further asked how seriously one could take any study that had to throw out 35% of its respondents as non-responders (those men who had no measurable erections while watching the films), and pointed out that the researchers said that this study was part of a larger group of other such studies but that it really was not.

In addition to the above methodological problems, the fact sheet noted "many serious controversies that have plagued one of the study's authors" (Bailey). The *New York Times* didn't mention that Bailey's research reputation has been seriously questioned. As the Task Force

efforts continued, it became increasingly clear that the controversy over his past writings and research methods was wide indeed.

Bailey made an unwelcome name for himself within the transgender community several years ago, culminating in the 2003 publication of his book about trans women, *The Man Who Would Be Queen*. When *The Man Who Would Be Queen* came out *Publishers Weekly* said that "... Bailey's scope is so broad that when he gets down to pivotal constructs, as in detailing the data of scientific studies such as Richard Green's about 'feminine boys' or Dean Hamer's work on the so-called 'gay gene,' the material is vague, and not cohesive. Bailey tends towards overreaching, unsupported generalizations, such as his claim that 'regardless of marital laws there will always be fewer gay men who are romantically attached' or that the African-American community is 'a relatively anti-gay ethnic minority.' Add to this the debatable supposition that innate 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits, in the most general sense of the words, decidedly exist, and his account as a whole loses force."

Since the book came out Northwestern University received many complaints from transsexual women Bailey interviewed, who complained that they didn't know he was using them as research subjects, and that distorted versions of their case histories would appear in his book. Northwestern opened a formal investigation into charges of research misconduct against Bailey, as reported in a series of articles in the *Daily Northwestern* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In October 2004 Bailey resigned from his chairmanship of the psychology department, following the completion of the investigation and implementation of undisclosed sanctions against him by the university (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 10, 2004).

Sexuality Research: The Larger Picture

The Bailey, Rieger, Chiver research is part of a long line of studies that look for a genetic link to sexual orientation, as developed most recently by Dean Hamer, Simon LeVay, et. al. In an interesting yet probably totally unintended coincidence, the national gay news magazine *The Advocate* came out with a related cover story on July 5, the same day the *New York Times* released "Straight, Gay or Lying." *The Advocate's* story, "Scents and Sexuality," by Lisa Neff, reports on new studies about sexual orientation and smell. She then segues into a summary of genetics and sexual orientation studies over the past hundred years. While the survey article is quite well done, it overlooks bisexual, transgender, and intersex people and the increasing body of research developed on them in the past 20 years. Why does this disconnect still exist? There's no simple answer. However examining the origins of sexual orientation research does provide some clues.

Psychologists look at sexual orientation in two essentially different ways: the dichotomous approach (that which is not heterosexual is homosexual) and the more multidimensional approach, which views orientation more as a spectrum than two separate and distinct poles. Of

course the best known example of this spectrum view is the Kinsey scale which encompasses a range from exclusively heterosexual (0) to exclusively homosexual (6), with most people falling somewhere in between.

According to bisexual psychologist and author Ron Fox, the field has been evolving through a three stage reinterpretation of sexual orientation since the early '70s when therapists stopped seeing homosexuality as an illness. At the first stage it's fine to be lesbian or gay since homosexuality is no longer an illness, but sexual orientation itself is still seen as dichotomous, either/or, same sex or different sex oriented, with nothing in between. Most of psychology has now moved beyond that stage and sees dichotomous sexual orientation as too simplistic. At this second stage bisexuality is recognized as a legitimate orientation. This stage also reflects the point at which gay organizations began adding bisexual to their names, as in LGB. When the multidimensionality of sexual orientation is sufficiently explored it becomes clear that gender identity and expression, as well, exist along a similar continuum rather than only at two poles. This is the third stage, where, as a result of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender psychologists working together with heterosexuals to develop a more complex understanding of sexual orientation, the same complex understanding of gender becomes integrated into how psychology and sexuality research is conducted and taught.

And this new, more nuanced understanding of both sexual orientation and gender as spectrums isn't only confined to the research field. Activists and educators must often position their media advocacy and public sexuality education work in the gap between the old dichotomous view of sexual orientation and the newer, more multidimensional one. As they do this they hone classic bisexual skills, particularly the roles of bridge builder and diplomat. It is their talent to move back and forth—translating between groups and different sets of ideas, interpreting each to the other, and helping everyone see we're not so far apart as it seems—that helps them survive with their identities and integrity intact. A positive outcome from the *New York Times* article is the coordinated effort to critique Bailey et. al's research. Four scholars have already submitted response letters to *Psychological Science*, and queries to other related sexuality research journals are also now in progress.

This particular story of how we responded to one article elapsed over a mere month in time. But the larger picture of how this experience relates to other queer stories with unexplored bi angles remains to be told. We look forward to discussions on related topics such as: the developing definition of bisexual orientation, the relationship between transgender and bisexual identities, and ex-gay reparative/conversion therapy and its connection to bisexuality. All of this and more came up in our brainstorming around how to respond to the *New York Times*. It's been a valuable learning experience, one that has provided some sense of comfort and accomplishment to counterbalance the underlying pain and human suffering for bisexuals and those who love us that the publication of the *Times*' "Straight, Gay or Lying" story initially exposed.



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