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Action Alert

New York Times Suggests Bisexuals Are "Lying" Paper fails to disclose study author's controversial history

7/8/05

In a lead article in the **New York Times'** July 5 Science section, headlined, "Straight, Gay or Lying? Bisexuality Revisited," **Times** writer Benedict Carey reported that an upcoming study "casts doubt on whether true bisexuality exists, at least in men." In suggesting that men who claim a bisexual sexual orientation are liars, the **Times** relies heavily on a single study whose senior researcher has a career marked by ethics controversies and eugenics proposals--facts that were not presented to readers.

According to the **Times**, the study "lends support to those who have long been skeptical that bisexuality is a distinct and stable sexual orientation. People who claim bisexuality, according to these critics, are usually homosexual, but are ambivalent about their homosexuality or simply closeted. 'You're either gay, straight or lying,' as some gay men have put it."

In leaping to dramatic conclusions from a single study with a small population, Carey echoes the study's authors, who seem equally eager to generalize from scant evidence--and to confuse the study's assumptions with its conclusions. Carey quotes the study's senior author, J. Michael Bailey of Northwestern University, who acknowledges that bisexual behavior exists, but argues that "in men there's no hint that true bisexual arousal exists, and that for men arousal is orientation."

But that arousal equals orientation seems to be assumed, not proven. The study measured men's self-identified orientation against their physical arousal while watching various kinds of pornography; bisexual men's self-identified orientation did not correspond with their physical arousal, according to the study, with some being aroused much more by on-screen men and a smaller group responding much more to on-screen women.

This finding could just as easily be read as evidence that arousal in bisexual men does **not** equal orientation--that simple measurement of arousal does not predict people's behavior or identity. But the **Times** reporter himself uses the phrase "true bisexuality," which suggests that people with bisexual behavior and identity might still not qualify as "true" bisexuals.

Well into Carey's piece, some cautionary or critical viewpoints were aired. None of those viewpoints, however, gave

readers any hint of Bailey's controversial history. In 2001 Bailey co-authored an article that argued that, if it became possible for parents to determine the sexual orientation of their fetus, "selecting for heterosexuality seems to be morally acceptable.... Selection for heterosexuality may tangibly benefit parents, children and their families and seems to have only a slight potential for any significant harm" (**Archives of Sexual Behavior**, Vol. 30, No. 4, 2001). The fact that a researcher has promoted the eugenic elimination of homosexuality would seem to be relevant background for gauging the credibility of his studies of bisexuality.

Bailey more recently came under fire for his 2003 book, "The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism," which defended the discredited theory that transsexual women are not female-gendered people born with male bodies, but "are extremely feminine gay men or are sexual fetishists who are 'erotically obsessed with the image of themselves as women'" (**Chronicle of Higher Education**, 12/10/04). Bailey profiled a handful of transsexual women for his book, many of whom filed complaints against him for not getting their consent to be studied (**Times Higher Education Supplement**, 5/28/04).

The book shares remarkable similarities to Bailey's new study on bisexuality: In both, the researcher denies people's own evaluation of their identities, suggesting that bisexuals and transgender people are lying about who they are.

In fact, the **Times'** headline could have been taken from the press release for Bailey's book, which was headlined, "Gay, Straight, or Lying? Science Has the Answer." A new study by the same author, peddling a very similar theory, should have been a red flag to journalists, and readers should have been informed of the author's controversial history in order for them to better evaluate the study.

When the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation asked the **Times** to retract its inflammatory headline, the paper argued that "gay, straight or lying" is "a commonly used phrase among many gay people" (GLAAD.org, 7/7/05). It's unclear why a derogatory stereotype about one group--bisexuals--should be more acceptable in a headline because it is attributed to another group--gay people.

ACTION: Please ask the **Times'** new public editor, Byron Calame, to examine the **Times'** report on bisexuality, particularly the lack of relevant information about the senior researcher's controversial background and the headline's suggestion that an entire sexual minority is "lying."

CONTACT:

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As always, please remember that your comments have more impact if you maintain a polite tone.

Read the **Times** article here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/05/health/05sex.html>

See also GLAAD's action alert: http://glaad.org/action/write_now_detail.php?id=3827

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