



REPARATIVE THERAPY ANGUISH & GUILT

Withholding our truth is almost always damaging. Coming out with the truth is almost always relieving. As queer people, we know the oppression of withholding the truth about who we are or we have faced the consequences of refusing to withhold. We know that some make it their life's work to deny our truths while others work to make room for us all to come out.

Dr. Robert Spitzer is a highly regarded psychologist who led the movement to remove homosexuality from the The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in the 1970s. At the time he was considered an ally, a champion for the depathologizing of homosexuality. In a move that surprised gay rights advocates and his colleagues alike, Dr. Spitzer published a paper in 2003 that supported the idea that it is possible for gay men and lesbian women to fundamentally change their sexual orientation.

Proponents of reparative therapy hold that being gay is a relational problem, which occurs when a man has a poor relationship with his father or is abused as a child. Gay men are afraid of men and that's why we pursue them romantically. What's wrong with this theory is that there are just as many straight men who have had poor relationships with their fathers as there are gay men who have wonderful relationships with their fathers. However, Dr. Spitzer wanted to understand the experience of those who claimed to have changed their sexual orientation.

Dr. Spitzer recruited 200 participants (143 males, 57 females), who had claimed to have been able to change their sexual orientation through therapy. The participants completed extensive phone interviews and self-report measures. Dr. Spitzer's conclusion was that many of the participants had, in effect, transitioned from gay to straight. His paper gave hope to those who felt they needed to be straight to find acceptance and emboldened those who wished to provide reparative therapy.

In my first year in graduate school I picked up the mantra: show me the data. (Yes, I'm a research geek). So often when research makes headlines the reader only takes in the bold conclusions, but the scientist in me is always skeptical. Show me the data. In other words, what are these headlines really based on? In the case of Dr. Spitzer's 2003 study, proponents of reparative therapy heard what they wanted to, but they couldn't have care-

fully reviewed the data. The research was flawed in many ways. Typically, academic papers go through a process of peer review, essentially to affirm the legitimacy of the research and its conclusions. Not so for Dr. Spitzer's paper. Self-report measures were used to record what participants could recall about their past experiences. Self-report and recall measures are notoriously unreliable because individuals will report what is expected or desired rather than what is true. Many participants had been in programs such as Love In Action (think of *But I'm a Cheerleader*). Wrote Dr. Spitzer in 2003, "Are the participants' self-reports of change credible or are they biased because of self-deception, exaggeration, or even lying? Again, it is impossible to be sure." Many conservative and religious providers of mental health services didn't need to be sure. They heard what they wanted and carried on with convincing gay men and women that their sexual orientation was the root cause of their overall suffering and rejection from family and God.

Even though Dr. Spitzer has come out against reparative therapy, mental health providers continue to offer the practice. In 2011 a young gay man from Portland sought out therapy for depression from a local psychiatrist who attempted to convince him that the root of his depression is his pathological homosexuality. Thankfully, this psychiatrist is being sued by Southern Poverty Law Center and the Portland based Beth Allen law firm. But there is no doubt that there are other providers of mental health services out there who hold similar beliefs, regardless of their training.

In May of this year Dr. Spitzer finally acknowledged that his research was poorly designed and should not be considered valid. At age 80, suffering from Parkinson's disease, Dr. Spitzer has come out of the closet to share the anguish and guilt he has borne because of how others have held up his research as proof of the possibility for change of sexual orientation for gay men and women.

Dr. Spitzer has expressed relief for finally acknowledging his truth. His experience is not new to us. We know the joy of living our truth. ■

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