Evidence of Opinion: A Critical Analysis of the Use of Empirical Literature in Controversial Topics

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Evidence of Opinion: A Critical Analysis of the Use of Empirical Literature in Controversial Topics

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Abstract
The American Psychological Association (APA) and the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) use the same empirical sources as supporting evidence for differing views on the psychological treatment of sexual minorities. Given this discrepancy, we undertook a critical analysis of all sources commonly cited by APA and NARTH. We conclude that the sources have not been used consistently, and that this may be a product of differing beliefs surrounding a controversial issue.

Introduction & Background

• Empirical studies play a significant role in the science of psychology. This research may be used as supporting evidence for controversial topics, which may result in conflicting interpretations of the literature. This is the case in research surrounding sexual minority issues.

• Recent publications by the APA and NARTH concerning sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) illustrate this phenomenon.

• The APA and NARTH cited the same sources to support different conclusions. In light of this, our group reviewed this common literature in order to directly compare these conclusions and provide an impartial review of the research cited. Our analysis was focused on three topics: (1) Existence of evidence that sexual orientation can be changed through reorientation therapy, (2) harmfulness of SOCE, and (3) pathology of sexual minorities compared to the general population.

Topic 1: Fluidity of Sexual Orientation

• APA Claim: Studies supporting reparative therapy (i.e., therapy focusing on a change in sexual orientation) lack scientific rigor, and since effectiveness can not be proven the method should not be practiced.

• NARTH Claim: Studies support reparative therapy, and though some are unscientific, many are legitimate.

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The articles themselves are often less extreme, acknowledging the need for further research, the author’s own initial skepticism, and the acknowledgment of different definitions of success, as well as the reality that even when reparative therapy seems to work it only affects about 1/3 of clients.

Topic 2: Effects of SOCE

• APA Claim: SOCE are harmful to the patients that experience them.

• Assert that there is a lack of sufficient evidence that SOCE is not harmful.

• SOCE may harm patients by treating same sex attraction as a disorder.

• NARTH Claim: SOCE is not always harmful and can be helpful as well.

• Assert that patients have a right to receive treatment if they ask for it.

• Argue that all therapies have the potential to harm.

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Within Article Bias: Interpretation and Methodology

• Narrow groups studied, such as highly religious individuals or those mandated to participate by court order

• Reliance on convenience samples often made up of those already seeking reorientation

• Several studies associated with religious publications and organizations such as the Journal of Psychology and Christianity and Exodus International

• Some studies conducted or hosted by members of the Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists, the National Gay and Lesbian Health Association, and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

• In one study, the researcher was a participant

• 6 of the more recent articles cited as supporting reparative therapy are authored by former NARTH president Joseph Nicolosi

Conclusion
Through careful analysis of the articles cited by both APA and NARTH, we have found that the same articles have been used as support for opposing viewpoints. We therefore conclude that when research regarding controversial issues is either conducted or cited, it is important to consider possible societal and personal biases.