



**National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**  
**The Problems with “Straight, Gay or Lying?”**

An article titled “Straight, Gay or Lying?” and written by Benedict Carey appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* “Science Times” section on July 5.<sup>1</sup> The article was featured on the newspaper’s front page (A-1). There are numerous, serious problems with the article.

The article purports to cover a new study on bisexuality in males that is set to appear in the academic journal *Psychological Science*.<sup>2</sup> The article concludes that the study “casts doubt on whether true bisexuality exists, at least in men.” The article (1) fails to note several serious and obvious questions about the study’s methodology and underlying premises; (2) fails to report the many serious controversies that have plagued one of the study’s authors in the past; (3) misstates some of the study’s conclusions; and (4) fails to reflect the views of any leaders in the bisexual community.

1. The study has a number of methodological problems that the article fails to discuss, including:
  - The study, despite hollow caveats, focuses on sexual orientation being defined by one’s physical arousal of the genitals while viewing short films depicting people having sex. The data charts, for example, purport to show “sexual arousal as a function of sexual orientation” (p. 581). Modern school of thought is that sexual orientation is defined by a combination of cognitive and physical responses, not just by whether one’s genitals respond a certain way to pornography. The overarching theme of the article, however, is to accept the study’s hypothesis that “arousal is orientation.” In its 1,500 words, the article quotes only one individual who refutes this definitional approach.
  - To determine “arousal,” the study relies entirely upon measuring male genital arousal with penile plethysmograph.<sup>3</sup> There is considerable literature that questions its validity as a scientific instrument.<sup>4</sup> There is no standardization of how to use it as a test,<sup>5</sup> including a uniform set of visual stimuli or scoring procedures, let alone agreement on what degree

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<sup>1</sup> Carey, B. (2005, July 5). Gay, straight or lying? Bisexuality revisited. *The New York Times*. Retrieved July 8, 2005, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/05/health/05sex.html>

<sup>2</sup> Rieger, G., Chivers, M.L., and Bailey, J. M. (2005). Sexual arousal patterns of bisexual men. *Psychological Science*, 16(8), 579-584.

<sup>3</sup> Defined by the authors as the use of a “strain gauge that reflects changes in penile girth during erection.” “The penile plethysmograph (PPG) is a controversial type of plethysmograph that measures changes in blood flow in the penis in response to audio and/or visual stimuli. It is typically used to determine the (supposed) level of sexual arousal as the subject is exposed to sexually suggestive or explicit content, such as pornographic photos, movies or audio.”(Wikipedia encyclopedia – see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penile\\_plethysmograph](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penile_plethysmograph).)

<sup>4</sup> Bradford, J. et.al. (1997, June 18). Evaluation of the sexual behaviours clinic: Assessment of child molesters. Cited in Smith, Susan K. (1998). Evidence of penile plethysmography, psychological profiles, inventories and other “not a pedophile” character and opinion evidence offered on behalf of a defendant in a child sexual abuse case is inadmissible under *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceutical*. Available at [http://www.smith-lawfirm.com/Scientific\\_Evidence\\_Brief.html](http://www.smith-lawfirm.com/Scientific_Evidence_Brief.html)

<sup>5</sup> Simon WT, Schouten PG. The plethysmograph reconsidered: Comments on Barker and Howell. Bull Am Acad Psychiatry Law. 1993;21(4):505-12. PMID: 8054680.

of measured physical arousal is clinically significant.<sup>6</sup> The lack of uniform sets of visual stimuli or scoring procedures with this methodology is a glaring issue in this study never mentioned in the article.<sup>7</sup> There is evidence of false negatives and positives, leading some professionals to argue that it is a scientifically unreliable method. In fact, according to the APA (DSM-IV), “The reliability and validity of this procedure (penile plethysmograph) in clinical assessment have not been well established, and clinical experience suggests that subjects can simulate response by manipulating mental images” (Paraphilias, at 524).<sup>8</sup> At no point does the article question the use of this device.

- More than one-third (35%) of the study participants did not show “sufficient genital arousal for analyses” (p. 581). The article acknowledges this but accepts at face value a statement by one of the authors that this “lack of response did not change the overall findings.” Since the article also quotes one of the authors as saying, “that for men arousal is orientation,” does this mean that more than one-third of the participants had *no* sexual orientation? Any mechanical device that purports to accurately assess a condition and is unable to do so one out of three times is surely suspect.
- The study is based on a small study population — only 104 participants (30 heterosexual, 33 bisexual and 38 homosexual men) — of whom only 68 (65%) showed “sufficient genital arousal for analyses.” *In fact, only 22 of the men who identified as bisexual showed “sufficient genital arousal for analyses”* (p. 581). This is an extraordinarily small sample upon which to base such sweeping conclusions. The article does not make this clear, but calls the study “the largest of several small reports....” In fact, it is not.
- Participants for the study were recruited from advertisements in “gay-oriented” magazines and an alternative newspaper in Chicago for a paid study on sexual arousal (p. 580). The study population is not random or representative of all men who may identify as heterosexual, gay or bisexual. Moreover, as noted above, over one-third of the study population did not register “sufficient genital arousal” and nearly one-quarter of the study population registered no response whatsoever and were therefore not factored into the results (p. 580). The article does not note the problems with the sample and its selection.

2. The article fails to mention in any way, shape or form the controversies that have plagued one of the authors of the study, J. Michael Bailey. Bailey’s conclusions and methods have been relentlessly challenged by academics and activists. Stories on some of these

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<sup>6</sup> Simon WT, Schouten PG. Plethysmography in the assessment and treatment of sexual deviance: An overview. Arch Sex Behav. 1991 Feb;20(1):75-91. Review.PMID: 2003773

<sup>7</sup> The study describe the sexual stimuli as “several 2-min sexual films” including two depicting two men having sex with each other and two depicting two women having sex with each other. One of the authors described them as “movies of naked men or of naked women.” (See <http://www.tsroadmap.com/info/gerulf-rieger.html>.) Were these crude pornographic films or erotic/art films? Given the extraordinary range of pornography, it is clear there is no one subject matter that arouses all (or even most) people. What is the standard for choosing these films and their content? On what basis did the authors assume that films showing sex between two women would arouse the men who identified as homosexual or bisexual men?

<sup>8</sup> The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fourth Edition) of the American Psychiatric Association (“DSM-IV”).

controversies have appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,<sup>9</sup> *Windy City Times*,<sup>10</sup> *ScienceNOW*,<sup>11</sup> *The Daily Northwestern*,<sup>12</sup> *Associated Press*<sup>13</sup> and *Chicago Tribune*.<sup>14</sup> Readers should — at a minimum — have been put on notice that one of the authors and the one most extensively quoted in the article is not a dispassionate academic, but one with highly controversial — and much challenged — opinions and methods.

3. The article misstates and does not fully cover the study's findings.
  - The title of the article, “Gay, Straight or Lying,” and other text strongly suggest that bisexual men are lying about their sexual orientation. For all the underlying study's flaws, no where does it suggest that bisexual men are lying.
  - The study, again with all its underlying flaws, does not, in fact, “cast doubt on whether true bisexuality exists, at least in men,” as the article states. The study states, “In terms of behavior and identity, bisexual men clearly exist” (p. 580). Rather, the primary conclusion of the study is that “male bisexuality appears primarily to represent a style of interpreting or reporting sexual arousal rather than a distinct pattern of genital sexual arousal” (p. 579).
  - The study found that the study subjects' *subjective* arousal to the visual stimuli did, in fact, show that the men who identified as bisexual had “bisexual arousal patterns” (p. 581). The article does not mention this significant finding, again buying the notion that arousal, alone, is orientation.
  
4. The article fails to quote the opinions of the wide array of bisexual leaders, including activists and academics. Only one openly bisexual person is quoted, who offers a purely personal observation. Given the article's underlying theme — bisexuality in men does not actually exist — the article should have sought out the opinions of bisexual leaders and thinkers.

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<sup>9</sup> Wilson, R. (2004, Dec.1). Northwestern U. concludes investigation of sex researcher but keeps results secret. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Available at <http://chronicle.com/daily/2004/12/2004120103n.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Davis, A. (2004, Dec.8). Northwestern sex researcher investigated, results unknown. *Windy City Times*. Available at <http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/gay/lesbian/news/ARTICLE.php?AID=6810>

<sup>11</sup> Holden, C. (2003, July 18). Transsexuality treatise triggers furor. *ScienceNOW*. Available at [http://bric.postech.ac.kr/science/97now/03\\_7now/030718b.html](http://bric.postech.ac.kr/science/97now/03_7now/030718b.html)

<sup>12</sup> Leopoldt, J. (2003, July 24). Third complaint filed against sex research. *The Daily Northwestern*. Available at <http://www.dailynorthwestern.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2003/07/24/3f1f72c378697>

<sup>13</sup> Associated Press. (2003, July 18). Transsexuals accuse professor of research misconduct. *Northwest Indiana Times*. Available at [http://www.thetimesonline.com/articles/2003/07/26/news/region\\_and\\_state/c8b1f7592d2a627386256d6f0008fe7c.txt](http://www.thetimesonline.com/articles/2003/07/26/news/region_and_state/c8b1f7592d2a627386256d6f0008fe7c.txt)

<sup>14</sup> Tanner, L. (2003, July 30). Transsexuals file complaints over book. *The Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved July 8, 2005 from <http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TS/Bailey/ChicagoTribune-7-30-03.html>