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Dangerous Politics and Sex Research: The Example of “Penis-gate 2011”

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Abstract

In summer 2011, a conservative lobby group released an inaccurate statement decrying the National Institutes for Health for allegedly funding four research studies the group deemed “bizarre.” Two of these studies explicitly involved sexuality research. This paper responds to the allegations around one of the studies and describes the subsequent media firestorm generated as a result of the lobby group’s report. This paper concludes by illustrating some of the dangers these types of allegations pose for science and researchers, and offers advice for how to navigate negative media attention.

“Get your facts first, and then you can distort them as much as you please.”

-Mark Twain-

The Seeds of a Media Firestorm

Our setting was summer 2011. The United States was in the middle of what one-day may be known as the “Double-Dip” recession. Unemployment has remained stubbornly high for more than two consecutive years. Republicans and Democrats were at a stalemate over raising the US debt ceiling, while the country was in danger of defaulting on its credit. In addition, international markets were feeling the pressure of a global recession. As a result, US taxpayers were paying acute attention to federal spending with an eye toward waste. Federal funding for research that seems superficial becomes an easy target.

On July 18th, 2011, the Traditional Values Coalition (TVC), a lobbying group for “Bible-based traditional values,” issued a press release decrying that the National Institutes for Health (NIH) “wastes millions on bizarre ‘research’” (Traditional Values Coalition, 2011). Their press release came after what they called a “six-month investigation of NIH grant applications based on publicly available information.” In essence, they scanned the titles and abstracts of currently funded research projects and academic publications resulting from funded projects, all of which are provided on the NIH’s website (projectreporter.nih.gov). In their press release, the TVC cited four studies, two of which explicitly involved sexuality research. The goal of this paper is to discuss the allegations and subsequent fall out involving one of those studies:

Grov C, Parsons JT, Bimbi DS. The association between penis size and sexual health among men who have sex with men. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*.

2010;39(3):788–797. Available here <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2874247/>

Fiction and Fact

In their statement, the TVC introduced three allegations about our publication:

1. The study was funded with 9.4 million taxpayer dollars
2. The study spanned 10 years
3. The researchers used federal funding to measure men's genitals.

How did the TVC come to these conclusions? In scanning research publications that resulted from NIH funding, our manuscript came up. The manuscript indicated that the first author (Christian Grov) was supported in part by a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (Grant # T32 DA07233). The TVC then searched the NIH database for the amount of funding that was awarded to grant number T32 DA07233. Indeed, that total is near 9.4 million dollars that have been awarded over the last 10 years. The TVC, however, failed to investigate the specifics of the T32 award mechanism. A T32 is a training award given to an institution to support numerous pre- and post-doctoral fellows in their scientific training. Any individual fellow's training could be as little as one year or as long as five. This particular T32 is housed at the National Development and Research Institutes, Inc. (NDRI), who selected fellows to participate in its training program. NDRI's program supports up to 16 fellows at a time with anywhere between one-third and one-half of fellows coming from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Each T32 has a unique focus, with NDRI's being a "training grant, which focuses on preparing behavioral scientists, especially racial/ethnic minorities, to conduct research in the areas of drug abuse, HIV/AIDS, and crime" (NIH Statement issued on July 19th, 2011 in response to the TVC report). My training at NDRI spanned 15 months. Fellows have gone on to prestigious positions in academia and health policy and have made tremendous contributions to public health through their research. During the 10 year period from 1997 to 2007 fellows authored or coauthored 384 academic publications based on the work they did while in the program. However, is the T32 a longitudinal study? No. And did our publication result from a 10 year study? No.

Were NIH funds used to conduct the study we described in our paper? In their statement following TVC's allegations, the NIH indicated that they, "Did not fund or approve the research described in the paper. . . Dr. Christian Grov was supported as a postdoctoral research fellow . . . [and] these funds can only be used to support expenses like stipends, tuition and fees. These funds cannot be used to support research projects" [emphasis added]. The actual data for our paper were collected in 2006, before I was a postdoctoral fellow, and without funding from the NIH. Instead, the data were collected by the Center for HIV/AIDS Educational Studies and Training (CHEST) as part of their annual community-based survey, *The Sex and Love Study*. I have worked with the CHEST research team for numerous years which is how I was able to gain access to this dataset. In 2008, and as part of my postdoctoral training in behavioral sciences, I analyzed the *Sex and Love Data* and wrote up

the findings for publication. This was one of nearly a dozen research papers I worked on while a fellow at NDRI. Did the NIH fund the data collection, much less \$9.4 Million? No, and no.

The Sex and Love Study is a pen-and-paper survey collected in public settings. These settings were not conducive for men to measure their genitalia on location; much less our research team taking a measuring tape to them. Instead we asked participants to indicate if they felt their penis size was below average, average, or above average. This is articulated clearly in the abstract and throughout manuscript. In all fairness, we recognize that if we had indicated “*perceived* penis size” in the title of our manuscript, perhaps there would have been less ambiguity regarding the nature of our data. But, did we measure men’s genitals? No.

All that being said, did the TVC’s inaccurate press release result in a media firestorm? Yes.

The Media Firestorm

Within minutes of the TVC publication, media outlets picked up on the story—the first being Fox News. Unlike many of the media outlets that published a story in response to the TVC allegations, Fox News contacted us for a statement. However, our response was reported in-part and appeared in the 8th paragraph of their report headlined “NIH-Backed Study Examined Effects of Penis Size in Gay Community”—the opening sentence of their report read, “The federal government helped fund a study that examined what effect a gay man’s penis size has on his sex life and general well-being” (Berger, 2011). Any reader scanning the headlines on Fox News, or even reading the first part of the article, would be left with a very different impression about the nature of our paper.

It is difficult to gauge exactly how much attention the Fox News and related new reports generated; however, we tracked Facebook reposts as an indicator of the impact in social media. A repost occurs when a Facebook user copy-pastes the URL of the online story into their own status update/news feed—essentially, they broadcast the message for those in their Facebook social network to see. A single Facebook user may have hundreds of individuals in their social network, thus a single repost could result in hundreds of “impressions” throughout a given social network. Within just 12 hours of the TVC report, Facebook users reposted web-links with inaccurate accounts of the research more than 13,000 times. In 24 hours, more than two dozen other web sites and blogs wrote/posted similar negative stories that can only be described as “copy-paste journalism”—none questioned the accuracy of TVC and Fox News reporting, and none contacted us to respond to the allegations. Within 48 hours, negative and inaccurate accounts of the research were reposted on Facebook more than 25,000 times. Although we were unable to track exactly how many times each one of these stories were read, it is reasonable to conclude that Facebook reposts resulted in geometric rates of “click through” to each website’s story. It is also worth mentioning that these figures do not include other means of social broadcasting such as Twitter, email forwarding, or word-of-mouth “gossip.”

On July 22nd, 2011—four days after the initial TVC and Fox News reports—ABCnews.com published a story clarifying the inaccuracies that were circulating (Moisse & Conley, 2011). Their headline read, “Study of Gay Men’s Sexual Health Called Waste of Taxpayer Money; Study Not Government-Funded.” Again, using Facebook reposts as a metric of impact in social media, this article generated significantly less attention—just over 300 people reposted the ABCnews article.

A month later, on August 23rd, 2011, National Public Radio (NPR) aired a story (and subsequently posted it to its website, NPR.org) about the politics of “silly science,” which described several studies being scrutinized as wastes of taxpayer money, ours included (see Greenfieldboyce, 2011). The report highlighted the political strategy whereby lawmakers and political groups “like to point to government spending that seems wasteful — especially in tough economic times. And one popular target has been scientific studies that either sound silly or involve foreign countries or have to do with sex.” Although it is difficult to estimate exactly how many people listened to the broadcast, the online story had been reposted to Facebook over 5,000 times. However, compare this with the Fox News article which, as of December 2011, had been reposted more than 16,000 times.

As of December 2011 (five months since the TVC issued its statement), we have identified 43 news stories and blogs about the controversy surrounding our publication. The negative and inaccurate accounts outnumber positive accounts 8 to 1.

The Danger to Science

The conversation many online media outlets had about our study neglected to review one key piece of evidence—the actual paper we wrote. Indeed, sexuality research in-and-of-itself is often devalued and dismissed. One of our findings included that gay and bisexual men’s perceived penis size was associated with sexual positioning (top, bottom, versatile). It was the sexuality aspects of our paper that garnered the most criticism. Meanwhile, some of the most important findings in our paper—its contributions to HIV and STI prevention—were completely ignored in 90% of the news stories that circulated about the study.

I recognize that there is a limited body of researchers studying the impact of penis size in gay and bisexual men’s lives—we are a niche, if you will. However; there is great danger in fabricating controversy around scientific research, regardless of the specific topic. In their own statement, the TVC called for “the Obama Administration and Congress to enforce a moratorium on NIH grant-making while a special prosecutor or another impartial investigator conducts a full review of the NIH budget.” Although President Obama has taken no such action, such a sweeping call undermines scientific progress—the NIH provides more financial support for scientific research than any other entity in the world. The TVC’s actions foster fear and skepticism of the research process and invites unnecessary politics into a field renowned for integrity and progress. One might think that our congressional representatives would be immutable to accusations about scientific integrity and funding allocations. However, twice in the last decade Congress has considered legislation to rescind funding from NIH investigators.

In 2003, a government document containing the names of 157 scientists who studied AIDS and human sexuality was circulated among members of the U.S. Congress (Russell, 2003). Among researchers this document became known as “The List.” The objective of this list was purportedly to identify research that the government should not be supporting (as examples of waste in government spending); even though all of the proposals were peer-reviewed by leading scholars and funding was awarded because of the proposal’s potential to improve public health. In likening “The List” to a witch hunt, one congressman called it a form of “scientific McCarthyism” (Russell, 2003).

Certainly, it would be easy to attribute “The List” to the political climate of the time (i.e., conservative control of the U.S. Congress in 2003), but these types of actions have persevered even under more liberal leadership. On July 23rd, 2009, the American Psychological Association circulated an email to its entire membership urging them to call Congress. The email read that the Democratic-controlled U.S. House of Representatives was preparing to debate whether to “rescind funding from three currently funded, peer-reviewed grants that focus on HIV/AIDS prevention, as an example of wasteful spending.” Two of the studies dealt with drug and alcohol abuse as it related to sexual health, and the third dealt with alcohol use among female sex workers. Thus, regardless of the prevailing political climate in the U.S., NIH-funded researchers conducting sexuality-related work must wonder when their projects will be on the proverbial chopping block.

Further, there may be even more profound implications for junior scientists (pre-doctoral, post-doctoral, untenured faculty) who are still forming the foundations for their careers. Junior scientists are more vulnerable to the shifting political winds and thus there is real potential for them to avoid certain areas of research out of fear of having it attacked, or defunded. Actions like those of the TVC have the potential to alter the course of scientific progress for the next generation of researchers.

Our work was not the first to be attacked, and it certainly will not be the last. Sexuality researchers in general are keen to the potential controversy their work involves and are often prepared to face criticism. Although certainly not an exhaustive list, our team navigated the media firestorm by following a few key guidelines:

1. Work with your media relations department at your home institution. Develop press releases about your work before it is published and ask them to keep a copy on file. Our article had been published for over a year before the TVC published their report.
2. When communicating with a media outlet, ask journalists for a list of questions and, if possible, submit your response in writing. This will help you to avoid being misquoted or surprised with an unexpected question. Whenever possible, be pithy. This will help to avoid your responses from being edited into something you did not intend. Although they won’t be required, ask journalists to confirm any quotes they intend to use before the story is published.
3. Be proactive. Do not wait for someone to contact you for your side of the story. It may never happen.

4. Know the value of your work. Chances are that you have made a contribution, even if small, to the greater good. Be prepared to articulate those facets of your work.
5. And for junior scientists, seek advice from colleagues and keep your superiors abreast of developments. It's better if your Provost or Department Chair hears it from you before they read about it in the tabloids.

Certainly, every situation will call for unique strategies. I hope that sharing some of our experiences will remind readers of the real dangers that exist to progress in the field of sexuality.

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