Quick Hits: Sex in the News

APA discredits ‘reparative therapy’

The American Psychological Association (APA) passed a resolution detailing how therapists should treat gay and lesbian clients who want to deny their sexuality because of religious beliefs.

By a vote of 125-4, the APA’s governing Council of Representatives rejected “reparative therapy,” saying it hadn’t proven effective, but also endorsed celibacy as a possible alternative for patients whose religious beliefs opposed homosexuality. Some conservatives have advocated “reparative therapy” as a way to change sexual orientation; many psychologists believe such efforts are harmful.

“Both sides have to educate themselves better,” says Judith Glassgold, a psychologist in Highland Park, N.J. “The religious psychotherapists have to open up their eyes to the potential positive aspects of being gay or lesbian. Secular therapists have to recognize that some people will choose their faith over their sexuality.”

APA appointed a Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation in 2007 to review and update APA’s 1997 resolution, “Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation,” and to generate a report.

The task force examined peer-reviewed journal articles in English from 1960 to 2007, which included 83 studies. Most of the studies were conducted before 1978, and only a few had been conducted in the last 10 years. The group also reviewed the recent literature on the psychology of sexual orientation.

“Unfortunately, much of the research in the area of sexual orientation change contains serious design flaws,” Glassgold says. “Few studies could be considered methodologically sound and none systematically evaluated potential harms.”

Joe Solmonese, president of Human Rights Campaign, praised APA’s decision. “Homophobia, bias and discrimination are what make it difficult for people to accept and be open about their sexual orientation,” he says. “We have to change hearts and minds, not our sexual orientation, and we are hopeful that the position of the APA helps to heal those who have been hurt by rejection and betrayal, and to foster greater awareness, skills and knowledge among mental health professionals.” (Wall Street Journal and Associated Press, Aug. 6 and APA and Human Rights Campaign press releases, Aug. 5)

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“If you want to get hold of someone, you text them.”

On the day she was interviewed, Sam had 114 text messages in her cell phone in-box.

A research team led by Mizuko Ito, PhD, a professor at University of California-Irvine conducted 800 interviews with youth and young adults and spent more than 5,000 hours observing how they used the Internet and other technology. This Digital Youth Project found that “most youth use online networks to extend the friendships” they’ve established at school, church, synagogue, mosque and in sporting activities. Examples of these networks include MySpace and Facebook.

“We’re dealing with an entirely new generation of native users of the web who have a different relationship with it than those of us who are adopters,” says Don Dyson, PhD, an assistant professor at Widener University and an AASECT-certified sexuality educator.

Adds Dyson, “It’s the new cultural divide.”

To stay relevant to 20-somethings, Dyson invites the web into his classroom. Five years ago, sexuality education students created person-al journals that included reflections on how commercials, billboards or films took advantage of a teaching moment or squandered it. Today, students must post those thoughts to a blog or online message board. Other students are encouraged to add comments to their colleagues’ blog postings.

Dyson has also discovered males are more likely to discuss feelings and emotions online than in face-to-face settings. This, he says, is because of cultural taboos against boys and men to express feelings publicly.

“Rather than thinking about the Internet as something that is intruding, we should think about it as an excellent tool for emotional literacy work with boys and men,” Dyson says. “We shouldn’t be stuck in a paradigm about the way we think people should relate.”

— Todd Melby