

Who says?:

**A brief essay investigating the accuracy of referenced information
in the “*Are Gay Relationships Different?*” article presented
in TIME Magazine**

Many scientists place blame on the media for poorly or inaccurately reporting new research findings to the general public (Bruno & Vercellesi, 2002; McComas & Simone, 2003). Considering many people rely heavily on media coverage—newspapers, magazines, and radio shows—as their source of scientific information, disparities between the media coverage and the actual research can easily result in misinformation. In order to anecdotally investigate this schism, one can compare and contrast an article from a periodical with the scientific journal articles which it references.

In a recent article for TIME Magazine, John Cloud discusses the contemporary issue of whether homosexual relationships are the same or different than heterosexual ones (Cloud, 2008). He starts his report with a story about his breakup with his male partner, and then goes on to discuss current research in the fields of human sexuality, and more specifically, homosexuality. In that discussion, he references material from four scientific journal articles, and one book on the topic of familial structures. Unfortunately, not only is the referenced research difficult to find due to lack of appropriate citations, but much of the information Cloud reports is inaccurate or incomplete.

In the first referenced article (Gottman & Levenson, 2003), Cloud makes several claims regarding the research findings. Firstly, he says that it was the “first study to observe [homosexual]...partners during conversation” (Cloud, 2008, p. 79). While this statement is correct, the subsequent qualification that Gottman and Levenson coded data related to various facets, including “changes in heart rate” is false (Cloud, 2008, p. 79). The researchers did record information regarding “facial expression,” and “vocal tone,” but did nothing to record or measure heart rate variability (Gottman & Levenson, 2003, p. 76).

Secondly, Cloud reports on the findings of the authors' study by saying that “gays and

lesbians are nicer than [heterosexuals] during arguments,” and breaks down the relatively subjective term “nicer” into the three categories of belligerence, domineering behaviour, and fear, which are the terms used by the researchers (Cloud, 2008, p. 79). Though he doesn't quote the authors while using their exact words, he accurately represented the findings in this regard.

Thirdly, Cloud discusses the findings from only one subsection of the study. The researchers investigated these facets not only when heterosexual and homosexual couples engaged in argumentative conversations, but also when they talked about what they had done that day, as well as when they discussed something that was considered enjoyable for both of them (Gottman & Levenson, 2003). Cloud simply disregards the findings from these other two types of communicative exchanges.

Fourthly, Cloud refers again to variability in heart rate, which was not investigated in the cited study by Gottman and Levenson. Further, Cloud uses these “findings” to draw conclusions and develop his own theories on differences between heterosexual and homosexual couples. For instance, he states that faster heart rates in heterosexual couples are correlated with “lower relationship satisfaction,” and that the reciprocal correlation is true for homosexuals (Cloud, 2008, p. 79). Further yet, he draws on this misinformation to develop a generalisation about the preferences of heterosexuals and homosexuals in their relationships, as if the Gottman and Levenson study alone had “proven” his assumption.

In the second referenced article, Cloud makes a generalisation based off a Norwegian study that found homosexual males have more exposure to pornographic materials than do heterosexual males, and more than women of either sexual orientation (Træen & Stigum, 2006). There are many errors in Cloud's use of these results, and with his conclusions. Firstly, he generalises to Americans the results of a study that had a non-representative sample containing

only Norwegians. The authors of the study even say that “the low response rate” makes “it difficult to generalize...the results to the adult Norwegian population” (Træen & Stigum, 2006). Not only does Cloud disregard the authors' recognition of their own methodological limitations, he applies their non-parametric results to the American population as well. It is possible that this study was the only one to yield results supporting Cloud's hypothesis, and that is the reason he references it.

Secondly, the idea of “partner-independence,” which Cloud attributes to gay men's higher use of pornographic materials, was attributed by the researchers *more so* to lesbians than to gay men (Træen & Stigum, 2006). While this idea *was* mentioned regarding gay males, the authors placed much higher emphasis on its relation to homosexual women. Cloud shifts this emphasis in his article.

Thirdly, and regarding the same idea of partner-independence, Cloud violates the general posit of the social sciences that “correlation does not imply causation” (Pagano, 2007, p. 125). He states that “gay men consume more porn than everyone else, *making* [italics added] them more 'partner-independent,’” and thus implies that the increase in partner-independence is *caused* by increased exposure to and usage of pornographic materials (Cloud, 2008, p. 79). Træen and Stigum suggest a correlation between usage of pornography and partner-independence, but do not imply that one causes the other (2006).

In the next section of his article, Cloud introduces the third referenced article: a 2004 study by Kurdek. Firstly, he initiates this portion of his discussion by presenting his own theory that homosexual relationships end more quickly than do heterosexual ones because homosexuals need “sufficient drama” to fill up “emotional spaces” (Cloud, 2008, p. 79). While it is acceptable for Cloud to interject his own beliefs, he places this statement immediately before discussing

Kurdek's research. The juxtaposition of his personal beliefs and the scientific research leads the reader to believe that Cloud's beliefs are the conclusions of the aforementioned research.

Secondly, Cloud mentions possible reasons for the shorter duration of homosexual relationships, including but not limited to “childhood pain,...and gay-community pathologies like meth addiction” (Cloud, 2008, p. 79). Though Kurdek's findings support the notion that homosexual relationships end more promptly than do heterosexual ones, Kurdek does not attribute their shorter duration to any specific childhood causes or substance abuse (Kurdek, 2004a). Rather, he does conclude that homosexuals may be “less likely” to stay “trapped in empty relationships” (Kurdek, 2004a, p. 896). He also mentions that social stigma may contribute to their dissolution, but does so in a later-released book, not related to his previous study (Kurdek, 2004b).

Thirdly, Kurdek expresses his concerns regarding some of the collected data, yet Cloud neglects to mention these concerns. For instance, Kurdek points out that the samples he used might not be representative, and that there are “biases associated with self-report” (2004a). As with his reference to the Norwegian study of exposure to pornography, Cloud simply overlooks these relevant concerns.

In the last section which references scientific journal articles, Cloud cites findings in an earlier study by Kurdek. In this article, Kurdek, using a set of samples similar to the one in his 2004 study, concludes that homosexual couples' relationships end more often than do heterosexual marriages (1998). He further states that, despite this disparity in relationship dissolution, the rate at which the quality of the relationship decreases is very similar between heterosexual and homosexual couples, and that heterosexual couples more often have reasons to maintain the marriage, such as children and financial benefits (Kurdek, 1998). Cloud reports

these findings almost verbatim to how they are presented in Kurdek's article, and does not seem to draw any of his own unsubstantiated conclusions from them.

Cloud ends his article with another small anecdotal section, in which he comments about the results of his recent breakup with his significant other. The mixture of his anecdotes and his interpretation of scientific findings obfuscates the line between legitimate results and personal belief, thus making it difficult for the reader to determine what is research based and what is the writer's opinion. Given the multiple disparities between Cloud's report on scientific research, and the actual findings *of* that research, there may be merit in the notion that the media inaccurately presents or, in some cases, completely misrepresents the findings of science.

References:

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