

Lies and Bullying from the Human Rights Campaign

October 10, 2016 – On a page published last week on its website, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) [repeatedly distorts](#) our recent *New Atlantis* report “[Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences](#).” Furthermore, the HRC threatens Johns Hopkins University with repercussions unless the university publicly disavows and denounces its scholars’ work — thus attempting to chill academic research on controversial subjects in general.

Most of the HRC document is an exercise in distortion. To clarify the record, here are responses to a few specific misrepresentations:

HRC CLAIM: The *New Atlantis* report “falsely implies that children are ‘encouraged to become transgender.’”

The *New Atlantis* report, written by Dr. Lawrence S. Mayer and Dr. Paul R. McHugh, does not claim that children who identify as transgender do so simply because they are “encouraged” to become transgender. The report states that there is “no evidence that all children who express gender-atypical thoughts or behavior should be encouraged to become transgender.” Here the report echoes the latest edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, which states: “It is unclear if children ‘encouraged’ or supported to live socially in the desired gender will show higher rates of persistence, since such children have not yet been followed longitudinally in a systematic manner.” Not all children who exhibit gender-atypical behaviors are or will become transgender, and so physicians and family members should be cautious in assuming that gender-nonconforming children are in fact transgender. (For a further discussion of this subject, see pages 105–108 of the *New Atlantis* report, available online [here](#).)

HRC CLAIM: The *New Atlantis* report “falsely implies ... that young transgender children undergo medical interventions as part of affirming their gender identities.”

Rather than falsely asserting what our report “implies,” the HRC should focus on what the report actually says. On that point, here are the facts: Teenagers experiencing gender dysphoria sometimes undergo surgical procedures to alter their secondary sex characteristics. Pre-teen children experiencing gender dysphoria are sometimes given puberty-blocking hormones. And younger children are sometimes provided with psychotherapeutic “gender-affirmative” interventions meant to encourage and support them in their cross-gender identification; medical reports and accounts in the popular press describe the use of such interventions for children five

years old and younger.¹ (For a further discussion of therapeutic approaches for children who identify as a gender that does not correspond with their biological sex, see pages 105–106 of the *New Atlantis* report, available online [here](#).)

HRC CLAIM: The *New Atlantis* report “suggests that ... [b]eing lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer is caused by childhood sexual abuse.”

Again, the HRC makes false claims about what the report “suggests,” instead of quoting or accurately describing what the report actually says. The report describes scientific research that examines correlations between childhood sexual abuse and homosexuality. This research is important in part because it may help us better to understand the higher rates of poor mental health outcomes among non-heterosexual populations. However, the authors of the *New Atlantis* report note that, given the current state of research in this area, “the idea that sexual abuse may be a causal factor in sexual orientation remains speculative.” (For a further discussion of this subject, see pages 42–50 of the report, available online [here](#).)

HRC CLAIM: The *New Atlantis* report “suggests that ... LGBTQ people have inherent psychological difficulties.”

The *New Atlantis* report nowhere asserts that LGBT people have “inherent psychological difficulties.” The report extensively discusses the well-established scientific literature showing higher rates of mental health problems in LGBT subpopulations compared to the general population. As part of their analysis, Drs. Mayer and McHugh examine the “social stress model,” which holds that social stressors, such as stigmatization and discrimination, account for the disparity in mental health outcomes. In reviewing the existing scientific literature, they find that the social stress model can account for “some but not all of the elevated mental health risks.” They conclude that “More research is needed to explore the causes of, and solutions to, these important public health challenges.” (For a further discussion of this subject, see Part Two of the report, available online [here](#).)

HRC CLAIM: The *New Atlantis* report “suggests that ... [s]exual orientation is a choice.”

False. On the first page of Part One, the report explicitly states that “sexual orientation is not a choice.” The report goes on to show that, according to the scientific literature, “biological factors cannot provide a complete explanation” for sexual orientation and that “environmental and experiential factors may also play an

¹ Darryl B. Hill *et al.*, “An Affirmative Intervention for Families With Gender Variant Children: Parental Ratings of Child Mental Health and Gender,” *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 36 no. 1 (2010): 12, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00926230903375560>.

important role.” (For a further discussion of this subject, see pages 25–41 of the report, available online [here](#).)

HRC CLAIM: The *New Atlantis* report “suggests that ... [sexual orientation] can be changed.”

The report discusses scientific literature about the fluidity of sexual orientation. It is an incontrovertible fact that, for some people, patterns of sexual desire, attraction, and behavior do change. But the report nowhere discusses deliberate efforts to change sexual orientation. (For a further discussion of the science of whether sexual desires and attractions are fixed or change over time, see pages 50–57 of the report, available online [here](#).)

HRC CLAIM: The report is 116 pages long.

This is a small detail, but it is characteristic of the HRC document’s factual sloppiness. The *New Atlantis* report is 143 pages long; it consists of 3 pages of frontmatter, 113 pages of text, and 27 pages of endnotes. The complete report can be found freely available online [here](#).

HRC CLAIM: “Dean Hamer ... says McHugh and Mayer ‘twisted and misinterpreted’ legitimate research.”

In late August 2016, Dean Hamer, a research scientist, wrote [a short commentary](#) for the website of *The Advocate* criticizing the *New Atlantis* report. His article has numerous factual errors, and seems to be the source for some of the HRC’s misrepresentations. The editors of *The New Atlantis* responded to Hamer and explained some of his errors [here](#).

HRC CLAIM: “three Hopkins professors published a *Baltimore Sun* op-ed raising questions about the *New Atlantis* report’s credibility and concerns that it ‘could further stigmatize and harm the health of LGBTQ communities.’”

It is true that three Johns Hopkins faculty members, in a September 2016 [Baltimore Sun op-ed](#), made the claim that the *New Atlantis* report “could further stigmatize and harm the health of LGBTQ communities”; they even grotesquely insinuated that work like the report is somehow related to the recent heinous attack against a gay nightclub in Orlando. But these assertions and insulting implications are made without even the pretense of evidence or argument to support them. We can only invite members of the public to read [the report](#) for themselves, to see that there is nothing in it that endorses or incites violence or stigmatization against anyone.

HRC CLAIM: Dr. Lawrence Mayer, one of the coauthors of the *New Atlantis* report, received a “\$400-an-hour fee” for “defending North Carolina’s deeply discriminatory HB2 law in a federal civil rights lawsuit.”

The facts: Dr. Mayer was hired as an expert witness by lawyers for the State of North Carolina in its ongoing litigation with the federal government. The average rate of the federal government’s medical and psychiatric experts in this case is \$500 an hour. These fees are typical, and no more call Dr. Mayer’s integrity and impartiality into question than they do the integrity and impartiality of the federal government’s witnesses.

HRC CLAIM: Dr. Paul McHugh, a coauthor of the *New Atlantis* report, has “collaborat[ed] with an organization deemed a ‘hate group’ by the Southern Poverty Law Center.”

The organization that the HRC denounces as a “hate group” is the American College of Pediatricians (ACP), a professional organization; it recently published a statement on gender dysphoria in children, which Dr. McHugh signed. Dr. McHugh’s record as a scientist, clinician, and leader in the field of psychiatry is unimpeachable, as is demonstrated by his position at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and his membership in the National Academy of Medicine. The Southern Poverty Law Center’s blanket denouncement of the ACP, based on a policy disagreement, is a disappointing example of extreme rhetoric used to attack those with whom they disagree.

HRC CLAIM: The *New Atlantis* report offers “unscientific opinions.”

False. The report offers a review of the research literature, written so that all readers — both experts and non-experts alike — can understand what the science actually shows. The report cites nearly 200 peer-reviewed studies in over 300 endnotes. Throughout the report, Drs. Mayer and McHugh take care to describe and explain the evidence on all sides of the questions they discuss — which is far more than can be said of the HRC. Those who actually read [the report](#) for themselves will easily see just how badly the HRC misrepresents it.

HRC CLAIM: “McHugh and Mayer have drawn on the Johns Hopkins name to persuade readers to take them seriously.”

While it is true that the report’s authors are respected academics affiliated with Johns Hopkins University, neither they nor the editors of *The New Atlantis* have done anything to suggest that the report is a publication of Johns Hopkins.

HRC CLAIM: HRC’s efforts to coerce universities to publicly disavow work by their faculty “pose no threat to academic freedom.”

The Human Rights Campaign attempts to preemptively argue that its political assault on Johns Hopkins and its scholars poses no threat to academic freedom, precisely because the HRC recognizes that the public will see this assault for what it is: an obvious threat to academic freedom, and intentionally so. The HRC says that it “has been in communication with Johns Hopkins over the need for an official statement” about the *New Atlantis* report. The HRC is demanding that the university “clarify□ that McHugh and Mayer’s opinions do not represent it.” As leverage, the HRC has threatened to alter the way that it ranks the university’s hospital and its medical affiliates in HRC’s Healthcare Equality Index.

Set aside the fact that this threat calls into question the methodology and validity of HRC’s Healthcare Equality Index. This blatant effort to intimidate Johns Hopkins University by insisting that the entire university must answer collectively for everything written by its faculty is a disturbing strategy designed to make impossible respectful disagreement in the academy on controversial matters. The HRC’s claim that its efforts “pose no threat to academic freedom” is nonsense; intimidation tactics of this sort undermine the atmosphere of free and open inquiry that universities are meant to foster.

–By the editors of The New Atlantis
editor@thenewatlantis.com