

The Meteoric Rise and Spectacular Fall of Sam Brinton: A Cautionary Tale....for Advocates of Change-Allowing Therapies

By Christopher Rosik, Ph.D.

Sam Brinton is well-known to Alliance supporters for his high-profile activism against “conversion therapy.” He has been the face of LGBT+ activism in this arena for over a decade, known for his gripping narrative of being the victim of torturous aversive conversion practices as a child. Now that narrative is coming apart in an excruciatingly humiliating manner. Although it is good and just for his lies to be exposed, before those of us who defend a client’s right to explore their potential for change in therapy engage in high fives, I think Briton’s comeuppance should give us cause for self-reflection as well.

How Brinton’s Narrative Unraveled

On September 16, 2022, police accused Brinton of stealing a suitcase from a baggage pick up carousel area of the Minneapolis St. Paul Airport. The contents of the suitcase were estimated to be worth \$2,325. According to the criminal complaint, Brinton did not have any checked luggage and surveillance cameras recorded him placing the suitcase’s baggage tag in his handbag before leaving. When contacted by police, he first claimed it was an accident due to being tired. This excuse soon collapsed. Under Minnesota law, Brinton’s crime could result in up to five years of prison and/or a \$10,000 fine.

As media reports highlighted Brinton’s theft in Minnesota, investigators in Nevada recognized him as a suspect in a July 6 theft of a woman’s suitcase at Harry Reid International Airport in Las Vegas.¹ Nevada detectives found an Instagram post in which Brinton was pictured wearing the same rainbow-colored atomic symbol T-shirt that had been observed in security camera footage from the Minneapolis St. Paul airport being worn by a White male suspect who removed baggage that matched the victim’s description of her missing bag. The suitcase contained \$1,700 worth of jewelry, \$850 worth of clothing, and makeup valued at \$500. This total value of stolen items constitutes grand larceny under Nevada law, considered a category B felony, and is punishable by up to 10 years in prison and a fine of up to \$10,000. A warrant for Brinton’s arrest was issued on December 8th.

These legal woes have finally created a critical mass for giving attention to long-simmer doubts about the veracity of Brinton’s account of his childhood experience of “barbaric” and “painful” exposure to “conversion therapy.” Brinton has claimed that a conversion therapist once bound him to a table while applying ice, heat, and electric shocks to his body while simultaneously forcing him to watch clips of gay sex. Despite claiming two years of this therapy and recalling very specific details of his therapy experience, he has claimed he cannot recall the identity of his therapist. The fluid nature of his accounts also includes different locations for the therapy and different types of providers (religious counselor or licensed therapist). These issues are given an excellent airing by Wayne Besen, one of the few LGBTQ+ activist who has for some time been publicly concerned with the truthfulness of Brinton’s story².

Wreaking Damage to the Credibility of LGBTQ+ Activism and Beyond

Since Brinton came to prominence in 2010, the list of organizations and causes with which he has been prominently associated reads like a who's who of LGBTQ+ and progressive activism³. These include the following:

1. Head of advocacy and government affairs for The Trevor Project from 2017-2019.
2. Founded The Trevor Project's *#50Bills50States* campaign, which focuses on ending the practice of "conversion therapy" within the United States and eventually, worldwide.
3. Advisory committee cochair of the National Center for Lesbian Rights *#BornPerfect* campaign through at least 2015.
4. Principal officer for the Washington DC chapter of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (a LGBTQ charity and human rights group).
5. Testifying about his "conversion therapy" experience before the United Nations Convention against Torture in 2014.
6. Testifying before state and city legislators in Massachusetts and Florida in favor of legislative bans on "conversion therapy."
7. Testifying by video to the Iowa Board of Medicine in 2016 in favor of administratively banning "conversion therapy."
8. Featured in such publications as the New York Times, The Washington Post, Playboy, and Time.
9. Co-author with Douglas Haldeman of a chapter in the 2022 book, *The case against conversion therapy*, edited by Haldeman and published by the American Psychological Association, where he shares his story once again on page 196.
10. Told his story to President Obama, whom he says was moved to tears and two weeks later made a formal statement standing against conversion therapy.
11. Appointed under the Biden administration to be the deputy assistant of spent fuel and waste disposition at the Office of Nuclear Energy in February of 2022 and has been relieved of those duties in November of 2022 subsequent to the legal charges against him.

No doubt these organizations, politicians, and professionals are in the midst of doing internal damage control and probably hope the story will just quietly go away. This may or may not happen. Yet the bigger issue is how is it possible such an unreliable and fantastical account of "conversion therapy" was not questioned long before now? And why did it take an apparent dramatic and public crime by Brinton before questions about his entire narrative began to be seriously examined. I think the answer to these questions provides an important lesson that supporters of the Alliance also need to consider.

The Dangers of Confirmation Bias on Display

Confirmation bias is the tendency for people to be more critical in their assessments of information that runs counter to their values and beliefs and much less critical toward information that supports their values and beliefs. All human beings are subject to this motivational tendency. In this light, Brinton's narrative of abuse from "conversion therapy" was just too juicy, too tantalizing, and too ready made for dramatic lobbying; hence, these LGBTQ+ activists and their supporters in government and in mental health associations were just not curious enough to consider actually verifying Brinton's story.

Also complicit in this problem was the legacy media, who similarly evidenced no curiosity about the truthfulness of Brinton's account. In one particularly stunning example, Brinton was interviewed by Yahoo!Life as late as October 27, 2022, which was published *after* he was questioned by police for the Minneapolis theft on October 9. During this interview, Brinton failed to mention his legal problems but did reassure the interviewer of his stellar character by stating, "I work on nuclear waste management where transparency, honesty, and trust building are so critical."⁴

While I have my theories about the nature of Brinton's psychological profile, I am more intrigued by the immense damage confirmation bias can create for an activist movement and the lessons that must be learned from this. There will be much partisan use of Brinton's deceit and implosion by those of us who defend the right to pursue change-exploring therapies, and this pay back is understandable. But my contention here is that *we* must also do some self-reflection in light of what Brinton has done, recognize our own vulnerability to confirmation bias, and not see ourselves as immune from such temptations to be less than forthcoming.

Guarding Against Brinton-esque Public Relations Disasters

My point is that there are plenty of reasons those of us who affirm the right to change-exploring therapy might be tempted to fudge the truth to enhance our advocacy. For example, we are facing a tsunami of opposition and, due to the urgency of our times, any person's claims of change, especially dramatic claims, might be prematurely latched onto by some as a valuable tool to challenge the conventional wisdom. A recent example of this might be Milo Yiannopoulos' 2021 statements that he had become an ex-gay and was going to advocate on behalf of improving the public image of "conversion therapy." His emotional history seems no more stable than that of Brinton, but his relative celebrity status and sudden support of change-allowing therapies could create a temptation to have him affiliate with the movement more broadly.

In addition, we tend to operate in more conservative and often traditionally religious contexts, which poses risks for oversimplifying the process of change. Not only are some religious circles uninformed about the research on change, but traditional Biblical interpretations of such passages as 1 Cor. 6:9-11 can place pressure on religiously devout individuals who struggle with unwanted same-sex attractions to report degrees of change that are more expectation than actuality. This can lead to spiritual disillusionment and even hostility toward religion down the line. Change, when it occurs (which it often does), appears to typically be experienced on a continuum of change and in the context of personal, ongoing dedication to confronting emotional, relational, and spiritual truth and acting upon it. Although dramatic change experiences may occur, they are rare, and should not be held up as the religious norm.

One recommendation I would make to limit the risk of our falling prey to confirmation bias is that of a substantial waiting period for those who want to go public with their change experience. The more the person is a public figure before his or her experience of change, the more critical this is, but it is good advice for anyone who experiences change as well as for those who support and love them. Quietly living out one's experience of change in community and while continuing to receive informed support, guidance, and discipleship seems to me to be a highly

desirable pathway to whatever public role the person may eventually come to assume. The model of the Apostle Paul can be instructive here, as following his conversion he spent three years in seclusion and relatively obscure ministry in Damascus and Arabia while sorting out the implications of his spiritual experience before taking a highly public ministry profile. In this light, I would find it reassuring if those of us who support change-allowing therapies recommended *at least* a three year wait period for any person who aspires to a more high-profile public advocacy role. This would go a long way toward giving assurance their emotional condition is stable and their experience of change is genuine and sustainable over time.

I do recognize that the temptations for celebrity status are less likely for those reporting change since they are not going to get the same adoring treatment from the media and progressive professional and social circles that Brinton received. Nor do I think that deceptive impressions made by those who claim to have experienced change and their supporters are motivated nearly as much by Machiavellian impulses as are the deceptions fostered by some activists who crusade against such change efforts. Nevertheless, as I noted earlier, confirmation bias and other pressures can influence anyone into self- and other-deception around a topic so intensely debated as that of the purposeful exploration and experience of change in same-sex attractions, behaviors, and identities. I hope we learn the crucial lessons of the Sam Brinton debacle even more than those who have been so burned by his duplicity and lies.

Footnotes

¹Catenacci, T. (2022, December 10). Sam Brinton, nonbinary Biden official, stole jewelry worth \$1700 in second luggage theft: police. *Fox News*. Retrieved from <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/sam-brinton-nonbinary-biden-official-stole-jewelry-worth-1700-second-luggage-theft-police>

²Besen, W. (2022, December 7). Has Sam Brinton’s story always been too good to be true? *LGBTQNation*. Retrieved from <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/12/sam-brintons-story-always-good-true/>

³Sam Brinton (2022, December 11). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Brinton

⁴Jones-Cooper, B., & Cosgrove, J. (2022, October 26). Sam Brinton on becoming the first openly genderfluid person in federal government: ‘I am given the opportunity to serve my country as I am’ *Yahoo!Life*. [The quote appears at 1’ 8” into the video at the top of the article.] Retrieved from <https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/sam-brinton-first-openly-genderfluid-person-federal-government-174428142.html>