

# Homosexuality a matter of choice... or genetics?

The myth that homosexuality is a genetic condition, rather than an environmentally influenced choice, has been spawned by the media's sensationalism and several less than accurate scientific pronouncements.

Recent research has come largely from homosexual scientists who seem anxious to explain complex aspects of human sexuality to bolster the homosexual political movement.

These researchers have been guilty of faulty and unreliable methodology in performing their studies (which have failed to be replicated) while their personal motivations have led to biased interpretation of the results.

Neurobiologist Simon LeVay, who is gay, released a study in 1991 asserting that a region of the brain's hypothalamus is smaller in some male homosexuals and women than in some male heterosexuals. Consequently, the media reported homosexuality was a biological condition, the proof of which was in the brain.

What wasn't widely reported was that Dr. LeVay studied the brains of 19 deceased homosexual men. He presumed they were homosexual based on their medical records. The 19 "homosexual" brains were compared against the brains of 16 men and 6 women whom Dr. LeVay presumed to be heterosexual because their medical records did not say otherwise.

Although the results were reported in the press as though they were conclusive, the hypothalamus region for some of the heterosexuals were actually smaller, and in some homosexual subjects it was larger. Dr. LeVay blamed these "exceptions," which hurt his credibility, on "technical shortcomings"

and insufficient information about the sexuality of the subjects.

Not long after, Drs. J. Michael Bailey and Richard Pillard released a research study on twins. After recruiting male homosexual subjects with brothers, they concluded that in 52 percent of identical twins and 22 percent of fraternal twins, both brothers were gay.

But identical twins have the exact same genetic makeup. Thus if one twin is homosexual, and homosexuality is genetic, the other twin must be homosexual 100 percent of the time. Drs. Bailey and Pillard have now conceded that environ-

*These researchers have been guilty of faulty methodology.*

ment must play some role in forming one's sexual orientation, since their own research shows identical twins having different sexual orientation 50 percent of the time.

Similarly information from this study was leaked to the press and subsequently reported as strong scientific evidence that homosexuality is genetic. Yet the studies were not "scientific" because they had yet to be published in a scientific journal and had not undergone the standard scrutiny of the peer review process.

Every study's accuracy and methodology must be validated by other scientists and the results replicated. Failure to allow peer review before publicizing one's work is unscholarly and undermines the integrity of the study.

The most recent "gay gene" report resulted from research led by Dr. Dean Hamer at the federal-

ly funded National Cancer Institute. While assigned to research cancer, which kills 540,000 Americans each year, Dr. Hamer and his team spent two years and \$419,000 of taxpayers money trying to find a gay gene.

What Dr. Hamer actually found was a DNA marker on the X chromosome in 64 percent of the homosexual brothers studied. Such a DNA marker would not conclusively make one homosexual; in fact the other 36 percent of the subjects who were homosexual did not share the gene marker.

Because most individuals are not exclusively homosexual throughout their lives, it is impossible to prove that the behavior of homosexuality is a result of biological or genetic factors.

In fact, many homosexuals, believing that theirs is the second sexual revolution, proudly proclaim that they have chosen their sexuality.

So far, no bisexuals have even tried to claim they are genetically inclined to have sex with both men and women. And what about ex-gays? Although the media scoffs at the possibility, there are a significant number of individuals who cease to engage in homosexual activity and instead lead their lives as heterosexuals.

Former homosexuals are subjected to great scorn and ridicule by homosexual activists, presumably because they are the largest proof that all sexual behavior is a matter of choice.

What unsubstantiated studies will be next?

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Those who say homosexuality is not genetic do not know what they are talking about. This statement as far as we know today is absolutely true. It is also absolutely meaningless.

When conservatives say homosexuality is not genetic, what they actually mean to say is homosexuality is chosen, changeable and pathological.

But as every biologist and geneticist knows, whether a trait, like eye color, is chosen, changeable, or pathological is a completely separate question from what creates it — be it genes, hormones, or any other cause.

Take left-handedness. From decades of clinical observation, we know left-handers (A) don't choose to be left-handed, (B) cannot be made into natural right-handers, even when forced to use their right hands, and (C) suffer no mental pathology or physical illness from their left-handed orientation.

But we have no idea what causes left-handedness. Is it genetic? Some people think so; there is clearly a pattern of inheritance and evidence of what is called "genetic loading."

But identical twins, who have the same genes, are both left- or both right-handed only 50 percent of the time. It could be hormonal. Or maybe a combination. We don't know yet.

Is this interesting work scientifically? Very. Is it politically relevant? Not at all. We know from decades of observation what left-handedness is: a natural minority variant (around 8 percent of the population) of the human trait "handedness," a neurological motor orientation having not the slightest thing to do with one's fitness to do a job or vote in an election (although it is relevant to being a profession-

al baseball player).

The fact is that after 50 years of clinical research with homosexuals and heterosexuals, we know virtually the same thing about sexual orientation. No one chooses either orientation, and the mountain of clinical evidence dating from the 1950s demonstrating that there is no more pathology involved in being gay than there is being straight is universally accepted

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among serious scientists.

The claims of the reparative therapists are considered laughable, and virtually all reputable clinicians would say that as far as we know from the clinical record, one's sexual orientation is as immutable as one's handedness; different behavior can be coerced but from everything we've observed, the interior orientation remains.

We have no idea what causes sexual orientation, heterosexual or homosexual. Is it genetic? Some people think so; pedigree analyses of homosexuality show a classic "genetic-looking" pattern of inheritance and "genetic loading."

But again, identical twins, who have the same genes, are only both gay — or both straight — about 50 percent of the time. Is it hormonal? Could be. Researchers are looking into it.

Interesting science? Fascinating.

Politically relevant? Not in the least, because although we don't know if homosexuality is caused by genes, we know what it is: a natural minority (around 5 percent of the population) variant of the human trait "sexual orientation" having nothing to do with one's fitness to do a job or vote in an election.

The position, usually Christian, that homosexuality is a chosen lifestyle and a disease is today absent from serious scientific and clinical debate.

Christian conservatives start with homosexuality from religious belief, by definition antithetical to science. But because this country has historically resolved its debates on the side of objective, empirical evidence — witness the standing Supreme Court opinion on creationism — and against religion when the religious position is held to be merely a reflection of baseless prejudice, Christians know viscerally they must bolster their opposition to homosexuality with science. It is a futile exercise.

In the long run, Christians will have to stand by science or stand by religion. Religion is a better bet. Homosexuality, measured by science, is as clearly not a disease as left-handedness or brown eyes.

But the theological belief that homosexuality is immoral, no one can argue with. The problem with this, we all know, is that while we can legislate against diseases, in this democracy we cannot legislate theology.

*Chandler Burr is writing a book on the biological research of sexual orientation for Hyperion to be published in the fall of 1995. This article was written for Scripps Howard News Service.*