

Do Elder Brothers Make You Gay?

By Neil Whitehead, Lower Hutt, New Zealand

It has been a theme in gay science studies for many years that having elder brothers makes you gay, (the Fraternal Birth Order effect, or FBO), and there are about 20 relevant studies, including three in which a very weak effect, or no effect was found, and three in which different sexual orientations were involved.

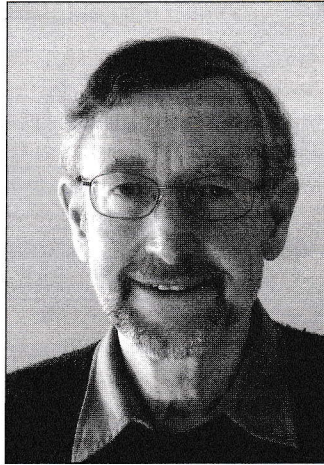
This being gay science, the preferred assertion has been that the explanation is biological rather than social, and a complex biological theory has grown up to explain it called the maternal immune hypothesis. That, in itself, is suspect and a paper rather sketchily surveying the defects of that theory will appear in the conference papers from the 2006 conference. Now a recent study, one of the three, casts more doubt on the fundamental premise that there is a Fraternal Birth Order at all [Frisch, M, Hviid, A (2006) Childhood family correlates of heterosexual and homosexual marriages: a national cohort study of two million Danes. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. Preprint, Oct 13. DOI 10.1007/s10508-006-9062-2.]

Even advocates of this theory calculate it only explains the SSA of about 17% of all cases. This is because many men with SSA do not have elder brothers or any siblings. Nor is the effect overwhelming. It is supposed to increase the probability of SSA by about 30% for each elder brother in the family.

The previous studies included re-analysis of Kinsey's data, re-analysis of the Kinsey Institute 1970 sample, which formed the basis of the well known Bell and Weinberg studies, re-analysis of the gold standard Laumann, et al. (1994) Chicago-based study, and various samples recruited from the gay and lesbian communities.

No Fraternal Birth Order Effect Found

Most of the studies showed the effect, but a few did not. The most recent, however, is unprecedented. Frisch and Hviid analyzed relationships from the two million Danes 18-49 years old, and found no Fraternal Birth Order effect and that those from stable traditional families favor traditional heterosexual marriage and the larger the family, the better (no surprise).



Neil Whitehead, Ph.D.

The Scandinavian countries have a thorough civic/health registration system, in which all the important events happening to a single person throughout their life can be correlated. To many readers this may seem a huge invasion of privacy, but there are stringent safeguards. In the accounts I have heard, researchers are not allowed direct access to the data. An experienced Ministry employee works for them at a significant hourly rate and gets exactly the numbers they require, while giving no identifying details of individuals. This is expensive research, and limits the studies that can be done, but the research value of the studies is very high and often definitive. In many cases, as the present one, the entire population of Denmark can be studied.

There does not seem to be an entry in each person's records giving their sexual orientation, so the present researchers used records of registered homosexual marriages (available since 1989 in Denmark according to the paper) which at least should be a reliable indicator of SSA status. However, only 1-10% of gays have entered such formal unions, so we must be aware that this group may not be typical of gays at large whose lifestyle is more typically quite short liaisons which are never formalized. Similarly those who registered heterosexual marriages were classed as OSA (opposite-sex attraction). That will be fairly reliable, though a few percent may be closet SSA. It does not consider, except by default, the large group of the population who are de facto or cohabiting. It presumably targets the more conservative or traditional OSA group.

There was no significant correlation of homosexual marriage with elder brothers, but again different from the emphasis in earlier findings, if a man had three or more elder sisters he was 60% more likely to enter a homosexual marriage. This was only marginally significant however, and it would be likely such a finding might not be repeated in a fresh survey.

Of the 1,890 men who entered homosexual marriage, 1,316 had no elder brothers. In addition, 463 had one and were 6% more likely to "marry"; 97 had 2 and were 8% more likely to marry; and 14 had 3 or more but were only 75% as likely to marry. Individually, none of these were significant, and considered all together there was an insignificant 2% positive trend per brother

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rather than the 30% in other studies.

Short Parental Marriage Increased Likelihood Of Gay Marriage Of Son

A quite significant finding was that a short duration of parental marriage increased the probability of homosexual marriage as much as 36%. Considering the size of the errors, this was a reasonably significant effect. There seemed few significant correlations for lesbian homosexual marriage. The number of SSA men (1,890) is large but we must remember that Blanchard (2004) combined the results from 10,143 men containing approximately the same number of men with SSA and confirmed the FBO effect. So why the conflict?

The main difference between studies is that samples drawn from gay/lesbian groups have tended to show the FBO effect, whereas truly random samples did not. At first sight this might be another case of very biased samples affecting the results, as they did for Kinsey's work, and some twin studies, but the excellent random sample of Laumann et al. (1994) also showed the effect, so it ought on balance to be real. What other reasons for the conflict could there be?

Could smaller families be a factor? Some researchers commented even in 2003 that the studies which have not shown the FBO effect have generally had smaller families. This should mean, however, that the families with large numbers should show the effect most strongly, and we don't see the FBO effect at all in the Danish families with three elder brothers who were actually less likely to marry homosexually (though the result might statistically have been as high as 27% more likely to marry, which might be a positive effect as high as 9% per elder brother). The Danish study would definitely have seen a 30% effect per elder brother and did not.

If this theory about small families negating the FBO effect proves correct, the FBO effect will apply less and less to modern families, which are smaller and smaller. Denmark could already have reached this point. This could make the theory irrelevant for many countries.

Is there something about those who homosexually marry which is atypical? Perhaps. They are thoroughly out of the closet. They will tend to be those who are most convinced their SSA is innate, and I suspect will have the largest number of factors producing SSA. I surmise their SSA may arise from several simultaneous social factors of which "elder brothers" is only one, and probably minor. I would judge that perceived father absence, sexual abuse and reinforcement of childhood gender non-conformity are stronger effects than an elder brother effect in which there is a rebellion against the masculine values of elder brothers (following Bem's "exotic makes erotic" theory, Bem, 1996). The latter is probably real in some cases but minor overall.

It is rather interesting that 30% of men with SSA see elder brothers as a factor in the development of their SSA but 50% see their peers as a factor (Otis and Skinner, 2004). This further indicates the brother effect is probably relatively minor in the mix. Bem

would further argue (and I agree) that the effect has never been found in lesbians because elder sisters tend to create a nurturing atmosphere rather than a competitive one, and do not provoke rebellion in girls to the same extent that elder brothers provoke rebellion in their younger brothers against masculine values. So I think there could be something atypical about those who homosexually marry, and they might not show an FBO effect. This might explain why the effect was not shown in the Frisch and Hviid sample.

FBO researchers increasingly insist on biological connections. They point to an FBO link to left-handedness and the fact that the FBO survives adoption (the number of elder brothers in the adoptive family does not seem to matter – however, the effect size is small). They say that excess boyhood femininity is not connected (social explanation), but their test sample showed a very weak FBO effect so does not support a plausible test. Early sexual experience, perhaps with brothers, does not seem connected.

It is also possible in some cases that elder brothers are more directly to blame. Although Bogaert could not show there was a correlation with early sexual experience, I have been told by NARTH members of cases where SSA has almost certainly resulted from sexual abuse by older brothers.

FBO For Rapists, Transsexuals And Pedophiles?

Alternatively, it may yet prove that the FBO effect is more illusory than would appear. The FBO effect is also shown by rapists, the transgendered and pedophiles, and as UK researcher James (2004) commented, it is more likely there is a social explanation than a biological one for correlation with such a diverse collection of sexual proclivities.

There may, indeed, finally be some biological connection, but alternative social explanations have definitely not been ruled out. We should certainly conclude FBO applies only to a small minority of those with SSA, and is not very significant in the overall scheme of things. ●

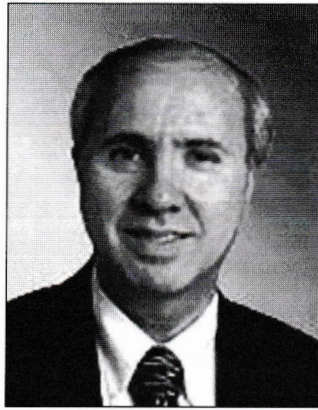
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(NARTH Conference news, continued from page 2.)

NARTH's message of hope and help to find its way in both the professional and lay communities. A number of volunteers offered to assist NARTH with both professional and community outreach efforts.

Closing comments were offered by President Elect, Dr. A. Dean Byrd who highlighted the year's successes and invited NARTH members to participate in a variety of NARTH's efforts including membership, ethics, public relations, and writing both scholarly and opinion pieces.



NARTH President-Elect A. Dean Byrd highlighted this year's successes and encouraged NARTH members to become more active in working on scholarly research and writing opinion pieces for NARTH.

He noted, "It's time for NARTH members to emerge from their places of safety in the academy and in the public sphere and proclaim the truth about homosexuality—homosexuality is neither innate nor is it immutable. People can and do make changes in their lives. The choice to seek help can indeed be a rational, self-directed goal, even a worthy goal, and individuals have the right to pursue that goal in the context of ethical, effective treatment." ●

Protesters Fail To Create Controversy

Less than a dozen protesters were present at the NARTH Conference in Orlando this year. Hotel officials required them to maintain a substantial distance from the conference building, so there was no disturbance to the attendees or to the conference proceedings. ●

