

'Born That Way' Theory

Latest Gay Brain Study Scrutinized

The mainstream media is reporting on the latest research that purports to show that gay males respond differently than heterosexual males to certain pheromones.

Dr. Jeffrey Satinover and Dr. Warren Throckmorton respond.

The *New York Times* reported in May, 2005, on findings from Swedish researchers who claim to have found that gay males are attracted to a different kind of scent than heterosexual males.

"For Gay Men, an Attraction to a Different Kind of Scent," by Nicolas Wade (5/10/05) quotes Swedish researchers with the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm who have studied pheromones and the different ways women, gay males, and heterosexual males react to them.

Lead researcher Dr. Ivanka Savic studied a testosterone derivative produced in men's sweat and an estrogen-like compound in women's urine. Both of these have been suspected of being pheromones.

Savic and her associates found that gay males responded to these pheromones in the same way women respond. Heterosexual males responded differently.

Distinguishing Cause From Effect

This study is being reported in the mainstream press as more evidence for a biological basis for homosexual behavior. However, psychiatrist Dr. Jeffrey Satinover, a lecturer in Civil Liberties and Constitutional Law at Princeton University, disagrees. According to Dr. Satinover:

The key statement in the *New York Times* interview with one of the authors of the article is this: "We cannot tell if the different pattern is cause or effect," Dr. Savic said. "The study does not give any answer to these crucial questions."

The same discussion arose after LeVay's study and LeVay finally conceded—years later—that repetition of homosexual activity can change the brain to produce the effects he discovered—likewise here, as the researchers state directly. This study claims nothing about homosexuality being innate (whether on a direct genetic, or indirect, epigenetic hormonal-developmental basis).

What if one changes the state of one's sexuality? The pheromone response would presumably change in consequence of behavioral-induced alterations in the underlying hypothalamic structures.

Because it is tacit and not explicit, the widely-held and erroneous presumption that brain structures are fixed and unresponsive to experience generates a second presumption, also tacit:



Jeffrey Satinover, M.D.

That if a brain structure or function can be correlated to a behavioral trait then the trait must be both unchangeable and innate. Unaddressed, and left non-explicit, this two-step sequence of tacit presumptions attached to explicit, high quality scientific data but of only a correlative kind, almost invariably generates in the mind of the scientifically unsophisticated something akin to a "belief."

Every single study that has emerged since the original LeVay study that falls into the above class—looking for or finding bimodal statistical physiological correlates (nervous system or otherwise) to homosexual versus heterosexual populations, in both males and females, however defined—comes with the same essential caveat: That cause and effect cannot be distinguished by the study.

Yet the press invariably editorializes, by implication or openly, that each new study somehow builds upon the last; that there exists a slowly but surely growing literature supporting the case that "homosexuality is biological," that "homosexuality is innate," "...genetic," "...unchangeable." Nothing could be further from the truth.

It would be identically and oppositely tendentious to say that "yet another study fails to find a biological, genetic, innate basis for homosexuality."

Another Clinician Comments

Dr. Warren Throckmorton has also examined this latest study and draws the following conclusions:

- The study does show involuntary hypothalamic response associated with self-assessed sexual orientation.
- The study shows that gay males do react to the estrogen condition but in a different manner than they react to the testosterone condition. However --
- The study cannot shed light on the complicated question of whether sexual orientation of the participants is hard wired.
- The brains of these participants may have acquired a sexual response to these chemicals as the result of past sexual experience. In other words, the response described in this study could well have been learned.