

Homosexuality and Genes: *Déjà vu All Over Again?*

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"I can hear the doors of gyms and fitness centers slamming shut right now. Why bother to change something like body weight, if it's so clearly due to genetics?"

It's like *déjà vu* all over again. Another study claiming to support the idea that homosexuality is directly caused by genes comes to public attention. And then there are the journalists eager to trumpet the headline. Alas, as in the past, the reports and public statements of the authors misrepresent and hype the study beyond recognition.

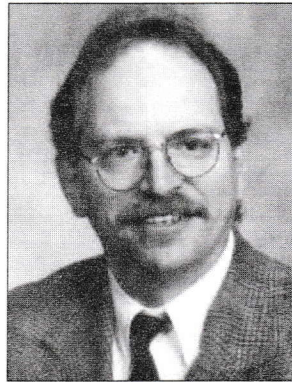
For instance, there is the "blinking" study reported recently in the *Behavioral Neuroscience* journal. Lead author Qazi Rahman has become a leading opponent of the idea that environment may play a crucial role in the formation of same-sex attraction. Columnist Nicholas Kristof thought so much of this study that he quoted it in a recent *New York Times* article as being important evidence of a gay gene.

Although Rahman's theories are more hormonal than genetic, the researcher does negate the role of environment in sexuality. Why? One reason is that when startled, 15 lesbians on average blinked in a similar manner to 15 straight men. There were no differences between straight and gay men.

Wait... no difference between gay and straight men? From reading Kristof's recent piece and the press accounts of the study, you would not know that. Because a small group of lesbians blinked like a small group of straight men, the leap is made to assume being a lesbian is obligatory? The inference is confounded by the fact that it is well known that smoking can impact startle response, and Rahman's study did not take smoking status into account in choosing study participants.

Hence, the headlines for the Rahman study could easily have read: "Sexual orientation not genetic for gay men; might be for lesbians." I must have blinked; I didn't read that anywhere.

In his *Times* article, Kristof then quotes another Rahman article from the journal, *Personality and Individual Differences*, that speculates that 50-60% of the differences in sexual orientation are due to genetic influences. Kristof and others in the media uncritically accept these numbers even though there is a considerable debate in scientific circles about the validity of the 50-60% figure, and the twin research on which it is based. Despite a couple of fairly sophisticated attempts, efforts by independent researchers to confirm these numbers have failed.



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So what you *wouldn't* know if you only read the news services is that the data are highly questionable, and there are findings in these studies that better support environmental hypotheses concerning sexual orientation.

Even if we did assume that differences in sexual orientation were 50-60% genetic, what would that mean? Well, first of all that leaves a pretty substantial portion of sexual preference open to environmental influence.

So the analogies to left-handedness and eye color fall absolutely flat.

The Influence of Genes on Other Human Traits

Second, to gain perspective, let's look at other personality traits and the estimated percent of individual differences attributable to genetic factors, according to existing research found on the American Psychological Association's website. Genetic factors appear to influence—

- * Attitudes toward reading books - 55%
- * Feelings about abortion on demand - 54%
- * Feelings about roller coaster rides - 50%
- * Attitudes towards the death penalty for murder - 50%
- * Humility - 58%
- * Likelihood to engage in casual sex - 49%
- * Attitudes toward equality - 55%

With these genetic influences, think of the new advocacy groups that might spring up. Roller-coaster enthusiasts might lobby for free or reduced admission to theme parks, since many riders would be hindered from being "who they are" by restrictive pricing policies. If we thought about these traits the way the media and some researchers want us to think about homosexuality, the campaign for safe sex is futile—since nearly half the reason why certain people drop their pants on a whim is supposedly due to genetics. And as we are getting accustomed to hearing... "can't change that," right?

At risk of belaboring the point, the faulty interpretation of all of these studies is that genetic influence is the same as destiny. Arising from studies of identical twins raised together, these studies frequently fail to take into account the confounding factor of shared environment. Despite the flaws in interpretation and design, the inference desired by

many in the gay-activist camp is that the only scientifically acceptable approach to homoerotic feelings is to accept and identify with them.

Unless one is prepared to say that about attitudes toward equality, the death penalty, abortion and literacy...then why say it about sexual feelings?

Here's one more human trait that is highly heritable: weight and body type. This trait is estimated to be 60-80% related to genetic influence. If homosexuality is out of control at 50-60%, then what of one's physique?

I can hear the doors of gyms, fitness centers and infomercial studios slamming shut now. Why bother to try to change something so clearly due to genetics? Oh, to have inherited the six-pack "ab" gene!

There may be one trait that is determined. I guess we could call it journalistic determinism, because it appears that many journalists are determined to find that gay gene. I really shouldn't be so hard on them; they probably can't help it.

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