

Of Mice and Gay Men

By Warren Throckmorton, Ph.D.

Recently, Reuters and other news services reported a research study demonstrating that the brains of male mice are different than the brains of female mice. Amazingly, the news service turned this study into support for the theory that homosexuality is genetically determined.

For a long time, most scientists in the field have believed in the existence of such gender differences; however, the novelty of this study is that the differences appear to occur much earlier than previously thought. The source of the differences may indeed be due to the action of relatively few genes that precede the role of hormones in differentiating males and females. Thus, one influence on the differences in the ways men and women think may relate to this early genetically based mechanism.

Such research is interesting and does serve a purpose, but our story would be quite short if that was all there was to it. After all, we've known male and female brains were different, we are just learning a bit more about the factors leading to the differences. The real story I want to tell is about how the press reported this research.

Here is one frequent headline allegedly about this study: "Sexual identity hard-wired by genetics." Well, this isn't exactly right because the study was reporting about the brains of mice and dealt with differences based on gender, not identity. Identity is a subjective sense of oneself. Do you suppose male mice give much thought to their masculinity? I wonder if female mice look in the mirror and ask, "Does my fur make my haunches look fat?"

The mischief worsened with the first line of the Reuter's report: "Sexual identity is wired into the genes, which discounts the concept that homosexuality and transgender sexuality are a choice, California researchers reported yesterday." *What?* Is there a magician in the house? Someone slipped that homosexual issue into this story with a Houdini-like sleight of pen. So because the brains of male and female mice are different and these differences may be influenced by genes, homosexuality is genetic too? Someone help me unwind... following that logic has me tied into knots!

Let me be clear. The leap of logic is really a leap of faith. I read the study – several times, and I did not find the word

"homosexuality" anywhere. The authors did say this: "we speculate that the genes reported in this study may be fundamental factors that trigger differences between male and female brain development..."

Speculate? Basically, the researchers and subsequently the press are guessing several things: Guess *one*, if male and female mice brains are different associated with genetic differences then human brains may be likewise different. Guess *two*, if such gender differences exist in humans, then maybe the reasons men and women think differently is not

because of socialization and hormones, but because of the hard-wired gender of the brain. Guess *three*, if this is true of men and women, then maybe it could be true of homosexuals. Still with me?

If you are not, then you should pat yourself on the back; you didn't fall into the abyss between guesses two and three. The leap implied in guess one is not an uncommon inference made in studies of animals, but is by no means a certainty. Guess two has a substantial amount of research evidence against it, but an Olympic long jumper could make the leap. However, the leap involved in guess three is like the Grand Canyon. No, maybe bigger.

Never mind that the study did not study human or mouse homosexuals; never mind that the article reporting the study did not contain the word homosexual; the press and apparently even the scientists involved made this leap for the public *with no evidence*.

I would think many homosexuals would be somewhat offended by the inference here. Are not homosexuals men and women? The behavioral and attitudinal differences between gay males and lesbians are well documented. When it comes to sexual proclivities, gay males are more like straight men than they are like lesbians. On the other hand, lesbians, like their straight sisters, are less promiscuous and more relationship-focused than gay males.

While we are theorizing, permit me one: I think the differences between men and women are indeed more hard-wired, but subjective sexual identity and orientation are more influenced by socialization and culture. So gay and straight men are from Mars and gay and straight women are from Venus – just from different chatrooms.

So where is a reporter when I need one? ■

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