

Is There a "Gay Gene"?

The following article is an adaptation of a paper written by Jeffrey Satinover, M.D.

The full text of "Is There a 'Gay Gene'?" is available for quantity distributions to NARTH members who wish to distribute this paper, wherever accurate information on homosexuality is needed. (Only a very nominal fee will be charged.) Contact the NARTH office for further information.

Many laymen now believe that homosexuality is part of who a person really is – from the moment of conception.

The "genetic and unchangeable" theory has been actively promoted by gay activists and the popular media. Is homosexuality really an inborn and normal variant of human nature?

No; there is no evidence that shows that homosexuality is genetic. And none of the research claims there is. Only the press and certain researchers do, when speaking in sound bites to the public.

How The Public Was Misled

In July of 1993, the prestigious research journal *Science* published a study by Dean Hamer which claims that there might be a gene for homosexuality. Research seemed to be on the verge of proving that homosexuality is innate, genetic and therefore unchangeable--a normal variant of human nature.

Soon afterward, National Public Radio trumpeted those findings. *Newsweek* ran the cover story, "Gay Gene?"

The *Wall Street Journal* announced, "Research Points Toward a Gay Gene...Normal Variation."

Of course, certain necessary qualifiers were added within those news stories. But only an expert knew what those qualifiers meant. The vast majority of readers were urged to believe that homosexuals had been proven to be "born that way."

In order to grasp what is really going on, one needs to understand some little-known facts about behavioral genetics.

Gene Linkage Studies

Dean Hamer and his colleagues had performed a common type of behavioral genetics investigation called the "linkage study." Researchers identify a behavioral trait that runs in a family, and then:

a) look for a chromosomal variant in the genetic material of that family, and

b) determine whether that variant is more frequent in family members who share the particular trait.

To the layman, the "correlation" of a genetic structure with a behavioral trait means that trait "is genetic"—in other words, inherited.

In fact, it means absolutely nothing of the sort, and it should be emphasized that there is virtually no human trait without innumerable such correlations.

Scientists Know the Truth about "Gay Gene" Research

But before we consider the specifics, here is what serious scientists think about recent genetics-of-behavior research. From *Science*, 1994:

Time and time again, scientists have claimed that particular genes or chromosomal regions are associated with behavioral traits, only to withdraw their findings when they were not replicated. "Unfortunately," says Yale's [Dr. Joel] Gelernter, "it's hard to come up with many" findings linking specific genes to complex human behaviors that have been replicated. "...All were announced with great fanfare; all were greeted unspectacularly in the popular press; all are now in disrepute."

Homosexual Twin Studies

Two American activists recently published studies showing that if one of a pair of identical twins is homosexual, the other member of the pair will be, too, in just under 50% of the cases. On this basis, they claim that "homosexuality is genetic."

But two other genetic researchers--one heads one of the largest genetics departments in the country, the other is at Harvard--comment:

While the authors interpreted their findings as evidence for a genetic basis for homosexuality, we think that the data in fact provide strong evidence for the influence of the environment.

The author of the lead article on genes and behavior in a special issue of *Science* speaks of the renewed scientific recognition of the importance of environment. He notes

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the growing understanding that:

... the interaction of genes and environment is much more complicated than the simple "violence genes" and intelligence genes" touted in the popular press....The same data that show the effects of genes, also point to the enormous influence of non-genetic factors.

More Modest Claims to the Scientific Community

Researchers' public statements to the press are often grand and far-reaching. But when answering the scientific community, they speak much more cautiously.

"Gay gene" researcher Dean Hamer was asked by *Scientific American* if homosexuality was rooted solely in biology. He replied:

"Absolutely not. From twin studies, we already know that half or more of the variability in sexual orientation is not inherited. Our studies try to pinpoint the genetic factors...not negate the psychosocial factors."

But in qualifying their findings, researchers often use language that will surely evade general understanding --making statements that will continue to be avoided by the popular press, such as:

...the question of the appropriate significance level to apply to a non-Mendelian trait such as sexual orientation is problematic.

Sounds too complex to bother translating? This is actually a very important statement. In layman's terms, this means:

It is not possible to know what the findings mean--if anything--since sexual orientation cannot possibly be inherited in the direct way eye-color is.

Thus, to their fellow scientists, the researchers have been honestly acknowledging the limitations of their research. However, the media doesn't understand that message. Columnist Ann Landers, for example, tells her readers that "homosexuals are born, not made." The media offers partial truths because the scientific reality is simply too unexciting to make the evening news; too complex for mass consumption; and furthermore, not fully and accurately understood by reporters.

Accurate Reporting Will Never Come in "Sound Bites"

There are no "lite," soundbite versions of behavioral genetics that are not fundamentally in error in one way or another.

(For the continuation of this four-page article contact the NARTH office.)