

Homosexuality: The Innate-Immutability Argument Finds No Basis in Science(*Salt Lake Tribune*, May 27, 2001)

BY A. DEAN BYRD, SHIRLEY E. COX and JEFFREY W. ROBINSON

The *Tribune* has published several articles in recent months regarding homosexuality. While well-written, the articles do not reflect the scientific literature. In fact, their social advocacy suggest a greater reliance on politics than on science. Perhaps it is time to examine the innate-immutability argument about homosexual attraction. The issue is enormously complex and cannot be reduced to a simple "nature vs. nurture" debate. Homosexual attraction, like many other strong attractions, includes both biological and environmental influences. Scientific attempts to demonstrate that homosexual attraction is biologically determined have failed. The major researchers have arrived at such conclusions.

Dean Hamer, a gay researcher, attempted to link male homosexuality to a stretch of DNA located at the tip of the X chromosome, the chromosome that some men inherit from their mothers. Regarding genetics and homosexuality, Hamer concluded: "We knew that genes were only part of the answer. We assumed the environment also played a role in sexual orientation, as it does in most, if not all behaviors. . . . Homosexuality is not purely genetic. . . . environmental factors play a role. There is not a single master gene that makes people gay. . . . I don't think we will ever be able to predict who will be gay." Hamer further writes: "The pedigree failed to produce what we originally hoped to find: simple Mendelian inheritance. In fact, we never found a single family in which homosexuality was distributed in the obvious pattern that Mendel observed in his pea plants."

When the study was duplicated by Rice with robust research, the genetic markers were found to be nonsignificant. Rice concluded. "It is unclear why our results are so discrepant from Hamer's original study. Because our study was larger than that of Hamer's et al, we certainly had adequate power to detect a genetic effect as large as reported in that study. Nonetheless, our data do not support the presence of a gene of large effect influencing sexual orientation at position XQ 28."

Simon LeVay, in his study of the hypothalamic differences between the brains of homosexual and heterosexual men, offered the following criticisms of his own research, "It's important to stress what I didn't find. I did not prove that homosexuality is genetic, or find a genetic cause for being gay. I didn't show that gay men are born that way, the most common mistake people make in interpreting my work. Nor did I locate a gay center in the brain."

In commenting on the brain and sexual behavior, Mark Breedlove, a researcher at the University of California at Berkeley, demonstrated that sexual behavior has an effect on the brain. In referring to his research, Breedlove states: "These findings give us proof for what we theoretically know to be the case -- that sexual experience can alter the structure of the brain, just as genes can alter it. [I]t is possible that differences in sexual behavior cause (rather than are caused) by differences in the brain." LeVay observed, ". . . people who think that gays and lesbians are born that way are also more likely to support gay rights." A third study, which was conducted by Bailey and

Pillard, focused on twins. They found a concordance rate of 52 percent among identical twins, 22 percent among non-identical twins and a 9.2 percent among non-twins. This study provides support for environmental factors. If homosexuality were in the genetic code, all of the identical twins would have been homosexual.

Established researchers Byne and Parsons and Friedman and Downey reviewed the studies linking biology and homosexual attraction. They concluded that there was no evidence to support a biologic theory but rather that homosexuality could be best explained by an alternative model where "temperamental and personality traits interact with the familial and social milieu as the individual's sexuality emerges."

Are homosexual attractions innate? There is no support in the scientific research for the conclusion that homosexuality is biologically determined. Is homosexuality fixed or is it amenable to change? There is ample evidence that homosexual attraction can be diminished and that changes can be made. Particularly disturbing is the lack of media attention to the research reported in the Archives of General Psychiatry, which concluded that gay, lesbian and bisexual people were at risk for mental illness, specifically suicidality, major depression and anxiety disorder. While one might suggest that society's oppression of homosexual people may be the cause of such mental illness, this may not be the case.

Gay activist Doug Haldeman, at a recent meeting of the American Psychological Association, focused on the right of individuals who were unhappy with their homosexual attraction to pursue treatment aimed at change. He stated: "A corollary issue for many is a sense of religious or spiritual identity that is sometimes as deeply felt as is sexual orientation. For some it is easier, and less emotionally disruptive, to contemplate changing sexual orientation, than to disengage from a religious way of life that is seen as completely central to the individual's sense of self and purpose. . . . However we may view this choice or the psychological underpinnings thereof, do we have the right to deny such an individual treatment that may help him to adapt in the way he has decided is right for him? I would say that we do not."

Finally, lesbian activist biologist Dr. Anne Fausto-Sterling of Brown University, referring to the biological argument for the development of homosexuality, states: "It provides a legal argument that is, at the moment, actually having some sway in court. For me, it's a very shaky place. It's bad science and bad politics. It seems to me that the way we consider homosexuality in our culture is an ethical and a moral question." Much of the criticism aimed at those whose value systems view homosexual relations as unacceptable is based on the innate-immutability argument. The argument finds no basis in science. Regarding science and morality Hamer stated, ". . . biology is amoral; it offers no help in distinguishing between right and wrong. Only people, guided by their values and beliefs, can decide what is moral and what is not." Homosexual relations are moral, ethical issues.

Those individuals who experience unwanted homosexual attractions have a right to treatment. Whether others agree is not as important as respecting that choice. Tolerance and diversity demand that they do so.

A. Dean Byrd is a trained scientist and board licensed psychologist. Shirley E. Cox is a licensed clinical social worker. Jeffrey W. Robinson is a licensed marriage and family therapist. All make their homes in Utah County.