

Nature v.s. Nurture - an Old Argument Revived

Deborah Lashman

On August 30th, in a study released to *Science* magazine, a neurobiologist claimed he had found a difference between the brains of straight and gay men. The report generated widespread attention in the media, including front page headlines in the *New York Times* and here in Vermont in the *Burlington Free Press*. In response to the study and the media attention, Lambda Legal Defense Fund issued a press release which we have reprinted in its entirety because we think it so well discusses the issues raised by both the study and the attention it gained.

While some in the gay community welcomed the study, feeling that it proves that gayness is not something that comes from their upbringing or that can be cured, we agree with David Barr of the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York when he says, "It doesn't really matter why people are gay or not gay. That's not the important question. What's really important is how they're treated." Frances Kunreuther, director of the Hetrick-Martin Institute agreed. "The issue is not what causes sexual orientation, but the reaction to it. ...that reaction causes gay people to be beaten up, to be thrown out of their homes, to be in incredible isolation. If this work could be a magic bullet to make people accept lesbians and gays I'd say terrific. But I don't believe that's going to happen."

Lambda Legal Defense Fund Statement On Study Linking Brain Structures to Sexual Orientation

In response to a study released today by *Science* magazine suggesting male sexual orientation could be related to brain structure, Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund welcomed honest scientific inquiry on issues regarding sexual orientation but cautioned against drawing conclusions about the preliminary findings.

First, as a matter of historical perspective, minority groups have often been the object of studies seeking to locate a biological explanation of the difference. Most of these studies have been fully discredited. For example, the first "biology as sociology" research was conducted in the 19th Century on prisoners in Paris. Their head size and facial structures were studied to develop the "prototype" of the biological head of a criminal. Whether this preliminary study of the purported

"biology" of homosexuality will eventually be confirmed is completely unclear. It is therefore probably prudent not to draw too many sweeping conclusions from the San Diego study.

Second, there are some methodological questions raised by the study. How is homosexuality defined by the study? If Kinsey was right in finding that human sexuality is not fixed at the poles but rather distributed across a broad continuum, does this affect the validity of Dr. LeVay's findings?

Third, all of the homosexual men studied in Dr. LeVay's studies died of AIDS. It is now understood by medical specialists that HIV disease has a profound impact on the brain, although the degree to which we fully understand this impact is limited. Recent evidence suggests that HIV's effect on the brain may even be far greater than originally thought. Until we know more about HIV's effect on the brain, it would seem prudent to hesitate before broadly extrapolating to the general population data regarding the neurological characteristics of men with AIDS.

Furthermore, lesbians were not studied in the survey. Not only does the study's failure to study sexual orientation in women merely reflect the medical and scientific community's historic failure to include women's issues in their work, but it means that Dr. LeVay's study only addressed one component of the concept of sexual orientation. The research thus exhibits the perpetuation of invisibility of women's and lesbian's sexuality by the scientific community.

Notwithstanding these methodological questions, Dr. LeVay's findings are intriguing, from a purely scientific perspective. But it is important to remember that, regardless of whether homosexuality is biologically based or accelerated, a person's sexual orientation is an intrinsically private matter. Even if homosexuality were **completely** the product of free choice, there would still be no basis for criminal, coercive, or discriminatory penalties against same-sex orientation. And **regardless** of any biological basis for homosexuality, it is difficult to fathom on what moral, ethical, or religious basis one can reasonably discriminate against people who are sexually and emotionally oriented toward their

own gender. Homosexuality, since it clearly occurs with a significant frequency and regularity in all cultures, is an orientation that is as "natural" as heterosexuality. This fact remains true whatever the "origins" of homosexuality or heterosexuality.

Dr. LeVay's research, and other studies of its kind that may follow, do raise profound ethical issues that ought to be addressed. The history of this century, which has included the racial eugenics movement and Hitler's Germany, should make us wary of the uses to which such preliminary findings might be put by the unenlightened. A key historical and ethical lesson which our culture seems astonishingly hesitant to understand is that diversity is not a problem to be dealt with but instead is one of the most beautiful characteristics of human existence. If research like Dr. LeVay's assists in helping society understand the beauty of human difference, then it is to be welcomed. The lesbian and gay community, however, has no intention of watching such preliminary research become the putty for biological engineers who want to make homosexuality extinct.

Finally, we have to question why the media is so interested in this study and the origins of sexual orientation. During the past two decades, many more significant data have been available (e.g., statistics of violence against us, our lack of access to health care, the denial of benefits to same-sex partners, the denial of the rights to care for and raise children, discrimination in the workplace); almost never has one of these issues reached the front page of the *New York Times*. We would propose one answer to the question: stories like this one of Dr. LeVay's preliminary findings do not require the media to treat us like subjects, like equal members of a greater community struggling for full participation and inclusion, but rather, they can continue to see us as objects whose deviance is fascination like that of psychotic murderers or a newly discovered animal. A story of this nature merits space in the science section. The front page placement, the wire service response, the television coverage all suggest a sensational tid-bit meant to grab a market share and not a serious interest in the lives and concerns of some members of our community. ▼