

ORIENTATION OF THE SPECIES:

Boys, Girls, Nature, Nurture Sexual Orientation and Gender

BY LARRY RUDIGER

Among psychological researchers, a feisty debate currently rages over the nature of differences between women and men. There is passionate disagreement as to 'why.' However, there is practically no controversy about the 'what' – when viewed as a group, men and women are different.

These differences cannot be explained away. They have a magnitude comparable to the range of psychological variables deemed worthy of study. People's gut sense about these differences are comparable to, not an exaggeration of, their most reliably measured magnitude. And they are not, it seems, going to evaporate any time soon.

Groping for a theory to explain the gender gap, one camp blames reproduction – the often distasteful notion that 'biology is destiny.' From the process of procreation onward, women and men do not exactly 'share' this burden. While the boys go hunt and carouse, women tend to the hearth and keep an eye on the kids. Over the ages, 'good' men – that is, the ones most likely to survive and reproduce – do, while 'good' women do everything else.

This may describe the way things are now, and perhaps the way things were then. But as the other side points out, bolstered by persuasive evidence, it may be the other way around: powerful cultural habits mold us into what seem like two separate species.

Who's more right? We don't know. The causes of causes are elusive. However, better descriptions are instructive and useful. And the causes of sexu-

al orientation are not as murky as you might think.

Running in the family

In previous months, I discussed how behavior genetic research describes groups of people in an informative fashion. The dependable genetic qualities of twins – both identical and fraternal – give us enough known variables to set up a sort of algebra equation where we can solve for the rest. Variations are parsed into estimates of the relative influence of environmental and genetic influences. By examining careful samples of a population – say, the entire state of Missouri, where I get a lot of my data – then we can have some confidence in the results.

In the case of sexual orientation, these results are intriguing. For men, it seems that genetic influences account for about half the variance. This means that, unless you are going to entirely discount the laws of probability, the evidence does not support the 'choice' argument: to a large extent, gay men are born that way.

For women, however, the evidence is quite different. Many lesbians may share gay men's firm conviction that their sexual desires are deeply felt, and not a conscious choice, and that may indeed be so. But independent of such beliefs, lesbians are made more than born, while for gay men it's the other way around.

The proof, here, takes us back to twins. Identical male twins are more likely to both be gay than fraternal male twins. With females, it doesn't matter: twin girls of both types end up the same sexual orientation at basically equal rates.

Looking beyond twins to families, men and women share something here, but with

radically different implications. Being gay does seem to run in the blood, but on the mother's side only. The evidence suggests something on the 'X' chromosome, which, you'll recall from junior high biology, means it's part of mom's genetic contribution.

Thus for gay men, there's a much higher chance that, along with your brothers, twin or otherwise, your uncle – on mom's side – is also that way, and the same is true for granddad, too.

What's more, men tend to identify as straight or gay and stick to it most of their lives. Bisexuality is far less common for men than for women. And for men, the different aspects of sexuality tend to be more consistent: fantasies, attraction, sexual behavior, and self-identification most often line up either homo or heterosexually.

Different for girls

For women, though, the family picture's both different and the same. If you're a lesbian, then about six percent of the time, so is your sister (only one percent of straight women are this lucky). But nearly a third of the time, when it's true of the daughter, it's that way for mom as well. While moms and daughters may always share half their genes, as a group, so do sisters – and remember that in the case of identical twins, they're the same. Yet the coincidence of lesbianism between sisters versus mom/daughter is so very different.

As many know from their own experience, it's often the daughter who comes out first. Maybe lesbian moms somehow teach their daughters to follow their hearts, even when they don't take their own advice. This may include those internal dimensions of attraction and fantasy, which tend to vary

more for women – bisexual, straight, and lesbian – than for men. If culture didn't tend to discourage men's inner lives, then maybe we would be more attuned to those soft urgings drawing us to the more fluid sexual identity women enjoy.

Dean Hamer and Peter Copeland described a vivid example of such fluidity in

Living With Our Genes. During Hamer's research, an older woman they called Margaret reported that, in spite of two satisfying marriages and no sexual experiences with other women, she predicted her next lover would be female. "You know, I may be 68, but I'm still interested in sex. And you may

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