

Are Heterosexuals Born that Way?

If anyone asked you how you became heterosexual, what would you say? You might shrug and say something like, "I don't know, it just happened. Maybe I was born that way?" But it's no mystery how we become heterosexual; the stages of human development toward heterosexuality are well known and documented, and in this chapter we'll look at the most important ones. Altogether they make a strong case for an environmental rather than a biological basis to sexuality. The research literature also gives good evidence that many people who have a homosexual orientation (whose sexual attraction is toward the same sex) often had a struggle with a couple of stages critical to heterosexual development. We will also show that a strong individual chance element is involved in sexual development.

Stages of Heterosexual Development

Affection, Nurture and Bonding

A female fly lays eggs near food, but she is not around when the young grubs hatch. They have no family life, no mothering, no fathering. The presence of the female fly is not needed; the grubs do not need her affection, but still breed like, well ... flies. On the other hand some of the higher animals particularly need early mothering. Affectionate early nurture seems to produce the capacity for affection in offspring - with effects on sexuality.

Researchers who have brought up monkeys completely isolated from other monkeys, giving them only a cloth mother figure, have found subsequent breakdown in their mating behavior.¹ When they were frightened, young male monkeys would run to the cloth figure and cling to it as a kind of substitute mother. But when they were mature and were introduced to sexually receptive females, they were confused, clumsy and fumbling in their attempts to mate, and frequently failed to do so when they tried. The researchers concluded that mating is not completely instinctive but partly learned, and depends on the quality of early nurturing. Female monkeys brought up without maternal nurture don't have such obvious trouble mating, but their behavior as mothers is alarming. They are brutal and even lethal mothers; "helpless, hopeless and heartless" the researchers observed,¹ a finding they extrapolated to abusive human parents. Early isolation and lack of nurturing fail to create affection in offspring. This affects the mating abilities of male monkeys and makes poor mothers of female monkeys.

What about us? Do we learn to be affectionate from our earliest relationships? It seems we probably do. Environments severely deprived of nurture don't just create people who are unable to be affectionate with either sex, they actually kill us.

The thirteenth century chronicler Salimbeni of Parma, Italy, told the story of Frederick II of Germany.² Frederick had extensive domains in Sicily and Italy, was "Holy Roman Emperor", and was considered perhaps the most enlightened man of his age. He was tolerant toward Jews and Muslims and a patron of the arts and sciences. (He was also reportedly "bald, red and short-sighted.") Frederick II had a theory that there was an original Adamic language, innate to all mankind, but that we did not grow up speaking it because we were exposed to the languages of our countries through our parents. He thought that if children were brought up in isolation they would automatically start speaking this original language. So he took some children and committed them to the care of nurses, but only for feeding and bathing. There was to be no cuddling, caressing, or speaking.

The outcome? The children did not survive long enough to develop any language at all. They all died. (Frederick's reaction is not recorded but, he was so short-sighted he should have been red-faced, to put it baldly.)

In 1760, a Spanish bishop recorded: "in an orphanage children become sad, and many of them die because of this sadness". In those days an orphan child in an orphanage received minimal care and little affection.²

In their attempt to breed a master Aryan race, the Nazis took children born from genetically "ideal" parents and attempted to raise them under controlled conditions to realize their maximum potential. The directors of the program did not give the children normal mothering; they were left to their own devices in an institution for long periods. The experiment was a disaster. Again, some of the children died, and most of the rest developed severe psychological problems, which often left them unable to form normal relationships.

Various childhood researchers concur. Langmeier, well-known for research into the effects of extreme isolation in early childhood, has found children deprived in this way are slow to develop generally, and find it difficult to form normal human relationships of all kinds.² Nielson, *et al.*, looking at offending delinquent adolescents, found numbers of offences correlated with extent of early maternal separation. These children "lack basic human trust and capacity for empathy, and their interpersonal relationships are shallow."³ In a classic paper, Helen Deutsch linked early loss of maternal nurture with lack of affection and inability to form relationships in adulthood.⁴

Beres and Obers (cited in Schwartz, *et al.*¹) remark on the effects of severe deficiency in early maternal nurture. They followed thirty-eight subjects aged sixteen to twenty-eight who had been institutionalized early in life, and remarked that none of them "demonstrated the capacity to make a successful marriage or to parent." Beres and Obers thought this was primarily an intimacy problem. Another feature of some individuals with attachment problems is a total lack of fantasy. Some find any kind of imagination difficult.

In the 1950s, the World Health Organization asked British psychoanalyst John Bowlby to research the mental health of homeless children. His response was a monumental book, *Attachment and Loss*, which led to more affectionate childcare in institutions. Bowlby found that extreme emotional deprivation in early childhood produced children with very cold personalities who were unable to form lasting relationships. They also craved affection.⁵

In contrast, affection shown to baby boys (by anyone, but especially the mother) sometimes produces an erection. This undifferentiated response becomes more and more specific with age, eventually being restricted to those of the opposite sex who are potentially sexually responsive. This process of differentiation is connected with the development of gender identity.

Parental Gender Expectations and Training

Mothers often deny treating boys and girls differently, but studies show they do. The parents know the gender of the child and from then on treat him or her as a member of that sex - often unconsciously. Boys' limbs are exercised and stretched far more, and the vocal babblings of girls are imitated far more. Later in infancy, boys are allowed less physical contact and less verbal and eye contact than girls. Boys are more likely to be held facing away from the mother (and father) than toward. The parents are more likely to point something out to a boy than a girl. The mother tends to yield more often to the boy's demand to feed, whereas the girl is more readily denied and given direction. She has to yield to her mother's ideas of how much to take and when. When this sort of different behavior is repeated hundreds of times, it is bound to have an effect. "By the age of thirteen months, there are clear differences between male and female children," says LaTorre.⁶ "There is apparently an attempt to "develop independence, adventure and mastery in the boy.... The males show much more exploratory and autonomous behavior."

Most other people also reflect their gender expectations toward the child. In some experiments, researchers took young babies and pinned opposite-sex names on them: girls names on boys and vice versa. Without knowledge of the experiment, people who were strangers to the babies were brought in to see them. Predictably, they cooed over the "girl" babies saying "Isn't she pretty?", and over the "boys" said things like, "Looks like he'll be a good cricket player when he grows up." A father, watching his young son tear into a steak with unsteady knife and fork, remarked approvingly, "That'll give you big muscles!" Presumably he would never have said it to his young daughter. If a little boy drops his trousers and piddles in

the back garden, mother laughs tolerantly, but if her daughter takes off her underwear and throws it over the neighbor's fence, she is probably scolded. Studies again show that the boy is given much more freedom and allowed to do many things the girl is not. His dirtiness and untidiness is tolerated far more than a girl's.

The Growth of Gender-Awareness

Imitation is one of the child's main methods of learning. One of a baby's first milestones is the first smile, at about the age of seven weeks. When it is not indigestion, it may be an imitation of its mother's smile. At about five to seven months, a child knows the difference between Daddy and Mummy, and begins to turn to them for comfort and protection rather than strangers. At about the same time, a sense of "self" begins - children begin to realize that mirrors portray themselves as separate entities .⁶

But the child only begins to develop a sense of gender at about eighteen months, and then only superficially. Shortly before eighteen months, children can tell men and women, boys and girls apart, even in photos, but mainly on the basis of external appearance, such as length of hair or clothing. At about eighteen months the miracle of speech occurs, and the child starts to learn names of things, and then names of classes of things. It starts to learn the names of body parts, including its own genitalia. It becomes aware that it belongs to a certain class of people - boys or girls.

By the age of three, 65-75 percent of children correctly identify themselves as a boy or girl, but most do not at age two and a half. Kohlberg⁷ observed a boy of two and a half years who went round the family circle saying "I'm boy," "Daddy boy," "Mommy boy," "Joey [a brother] boy." After correction he dropped his mother from the list, but still became confused about the gender of those outside the family. Kindergarten age children already know from pictures of toys what a boy would like to play with and what a girl would. They can also identify the sex of dolls correctly. They will not be persuaded to change these opinions, even with the offer of a reward! But they are still not clear what male or female really is, and categories and their properties are still very fluid and fuzzy at ages three to six. Before the age of six, children tend to believe in a form of magic; they believe a car could change into a truck under the right circumstances, or a boy into a girl. The famous psychologist Piaget and his followers demonstrated this. He found most four year olds thought a girl could be a boy if she changed into boy clothes, cut her hair like a boy, and played boy games. Another example is given by Kohlberg:

"The following comments were made by Jimmy, just turning four, to his four and a half year old friend Johnny:

Johnny: I'm going to be an airplane builder when I grow up.

Jimmy: When I grow up, I'll be a Mommy. Johnny: No, you can't be a Mommy. You have to be a Daddy.

Jimmy: No, I'm going to be a Mommy.

Johnny: No, you're not a girl, you can't be a Mommy.

Jimmy: Yes I can."⁷

By the age of four or five, children tend to make distinctions between adult males and females on the basis of strength or size, and boys in particular attach great significance to these qualities. They think that social power derives from physical power, which in turn comes from physical size. "Children agree earliest and most completely that fathers are bigger and stronger than mothers, next, that they are smarter than mothers, and (by six and beyond) that they have social power and are the boss of the family." Sex roles are stereotyped on the basis of size, strength, and power at that stage; almost all of a group of sixteen four to five year old American children believed only males were policemen, soldiers, firemen, or robbers - categories involving danger and aggression. By the age of five, 97 percent of children know their gender is fixed and they cannot choose to be either a mommy or a daddy. By the age of six or seven, most are certain a girl cannot become a boy regardless of what she wears. By that age they all believe boys fight more than girls. Why? "Because girls get hurt more easily than boys." The categories and the belief about the categories have become fixed. But they are not aware of gender difference as genital difference until about five to seven, even when extensively enlightened by parents. They also have considerable difficulty accepting that the differences are natural and normal. They think that the genitalia of the opposite sex are "funny" or "wrong," or have been cut off, or that perhaps one will grow more like the other.

Even though adult females are seen as less powerful and competent than males, female stereotypes are still powerful enough to make femininity attractive to young girls. The mother or female teacher is more competent and feminine than the young girl. Femininity is associated with “niceness,” nurture and helpfulness, and superior attractiveness for children aged six to seven. Girls continue to prefer feminine objects and activities at all ages.

Parent-Child Relationships

Psychologists differ over details of the process, but all concede the importance of attachment to the parent of the same sex (or a surrogate), the start of a dependent relationship, and imitation and modeling off that parent for the formation of a sense of gender identity. The child identifies with what is masculine or feminine in the parent of the same sex and absorbs it in a kind of daily osmosis. In identifying with his father (“I am like Daddy”), the boy makes the shift away from his mother that is essential for development of a masculine personality. For this shift to occur, the father needs to be an attractive and “salient” figure to the child: present, involved, warm, interested. Nicolosi⁸ says a father needs to be dominant and nurturing to be “salient”. Paternal warmth - as perceived by the child or by the mother - has consistently been linked to a boy’s willingness to identify with his father and masculinity of preferences.⁷ A “bad” father who creates conflict is worse for the boy’s masculinity than no father at all. An emotionally warm and involved father also has an affirming effect on a girl’s developing gender identity as she models her mother and peers.

Psychologists agree that the girl identifies primarily with her mother throughout childhood. By age four, she is clearly identifying with her mother more than her father. Although her identification with her father increases over the years four to nine, it has the effect of reinforcing her feminine values and feminine identification rather than weakening them. The same effect of mother identification does not occur nearly as strongly for boys. The little girl tends to stay near her mother and is encouraged to imitate her and do “mother” things. She learns and copies dress, appearance, and behavior. The boy has a more difficult task than the girl, who retains her primary attachment to her mother. He has to separate himself from his mother and learn to imitate his father. This is quite a conceptual leap, and it is no surprise that boys are significantly slower to mature socially than girls. The girl also separates from her mother, but later and in a much more subtle way. Imitations of mother and father are well advanced by age three.

Peer Group Relationships

By ages three and four, boys are showing clear preferences for boy-type activities, toys, and boy friends rather than girl friends, preferences that remain stable or increase with age. For girls, the choice of girl-type activities and toys, and girls as preferred friends, is well established by the same ages, but does not increase. When Koch observed pre-school children, he found 80-90 percent of friends were of the same sex. It seems quite reasonable, comments Kohlberg, to attribute the same-sex preference of both boys and girls aged three to five to the child’s need to maintain its gender identity. Similarity leads to affiliation - boys and girls play with their own sex because they are like them.

So, by age three, boys and girls are already playing in different ways, and each group is quite distinct. Boys can become quite contemptuous of girls. When three-and-a-half-year old Joey was asked if he wanted any girls at his birthday party, he said, “No, I hate girls, girls are icky!” - a judgment partly informed by his natural growth, partly by his slightly older brother.⁷

Numerous studies show that boys play in a way which already echoes adult male society: games emphasizing competition and rules and winners and losers. Disputes about rules, or indeed about anything, are common, and a hierarchy is established in which each boy knows his (temporary) place. Boys tend to try to order each other about, reflecting their place in the hierarchy. Boys increasingly define their masculinity in terms of competitive achievement and acceptance in male groups. Girls, on the other hand, value relationships, and, if a game starts to cause disputes, it is usually abandoned. Girls want relationships, whereas boys want to be independent. Girls want to work together in an egalitarian sort of way and try to reach consensus by suggestion rather than orders.

In one paper comparing boys’ and girls’ styles of handling a given task, boys used competition 50x as much as the girls, and girls used “taking one’s turn” 20x as much as the boys³¹

By the age of eight, roughly 85 percent of both sexes believe their own sex is best. Boys who cross the line are mercilessly teased. “No-girls-allowed” activities are common to boys, in the attempt, some psychologists believe, by the boy to consolidate his gender identity following the shift in identification to his father. Boys listen increasingly to what their associates want and believe, rather than to their parents, imbibing the sense of what is acceptably masculine from each other. As LaTorre says, the sexual orientation “soaks in from the outside.”⁶ A similar process happens for girls. The peer group has a similar role to that of the same-sex parent. Mixing mainly with their own sex strengthens a child’s sense of being male or female, and the differences between the two groups deepen.

Older brothers or sisters are significant. A few studies show that elder brothers or sisters act as gender role models, and that they have somewhat more influence on average than parents.³²

As the differences increase, a natural curiosity develops about the other group, and this leads in a significant minority of cases to sexual investigation and experimentation; by the age of seven and eight more than one half of boys have been sexually exploratory with other boys and more than half with girls, usually without the knowledge of their parents. Only about half the girls were involved in pre-pubertal “sex play” of any kind. In more than two thirds of cases, the experimentation took place only once or twice, suggesting curiosity rather than attraction.”^{9,10} There are stirrings of sexual fantasy in a faint pre-echo of puberty. Boys, in particular, become more interested in the sexual nature of female adults. Most of this appears to be attraction of opposites rather than hormonally driven because the mean age of first attraction is close to 10 for both boys and girls, about two years earlier than puberty, but possibly corresponding to the peak age of formation of boys and girls groups at school.

The age of first attraction has significantly changed . Fifty years ago Kinsey found the mean age of first attraction for boys was similarly about 10 years, but the mean age for first attraction in girls was 16. This argues attraction is not hormonally driven, but arises from societal factors which change with time.

The several-year spread of ages for first attraction is unusually wide, but very few experience their first attraction as their earliest memories. In this sense no-one is “born heterosexual”. The range of ages also means that any genetic component must be small, because if it were biologically programmed, it would occur, like puberty, within a spread of about 2 years. We will see later that homosexuality is similar.

One piece of scientific research adds an interesting perspective to parental and peer influences on later sexual behavior. Kendrick and colleagues at the Babraham Institute in Cambridge allowed ten ewes to raise goats from birth and ten nanny goats to raise lambs from birth. The fostered kids and lambs grew up in mixed flocks of sheep and goats but the kids fraternized mainly with lambs and adopted their play and grooming habits, and the lambs fraternized mainly with kids. Once mature they ignored their own species and tried to mate 90% of the time with the foster mother species. They kept this up every day during an observation period of three years, and even after years of mixing with their own species, the males did not revert (though the females did). If the sexuality of these lower animals was so influenced by learning, human sexuality will be more so.

Breeders and biologists often experience difficulty inducing captive pandas to mate, which may stem from the captive bears’ lack of experience. Some keepers in China and Thailand have shown their pandas videos of ‘panda porn’ — footage with mating pandas in an attempt to teach them to mate. A number have been successful, even resulting in reproduction. But this is merely one example of the difficulties of captive breeding programs; far from sexual reproduction being instinctual, innate and automatic, it is heavily dependent on social circumstances. We can expect a large learning component in human behaviour as well.

Puberty

The next milestone in heterosexual development is puberty. In boys, the body is flooded with the male hormone, testosterone; in girls, the female hormones, estrogen and progesterone. In boys, the voice deepens, the genitals enlarge, and body hair thickens; in girls, breasts develop and menstruation begins. Both become aware of themselves as sexual creatures. Boys experience their first erotic arousal at about age thirteen, and romantic fantasy begins in girls. In heterosexuality, this new sensation is expressed toward the opposite sex. But puberty does not create a sex drive that overrides existing sexual orientations, preferences, attractions, and emotional attachments. The hormonal surge only eroticizes the psychological orientation that already exists. In people with a developing heterosexual orientation, sexual desire is expressed toward the opposite

sex.

Even in intersexes, the pubertal surge usually expresses itself according to the gender of upbringing. Hermaphrodites who have male gonads are often raised as girls because of their ambiguous external genitalia as infants, but at puberty they are flooded with male hormones and have erotic dreams (in a way which a young woman is much less likely to), the equivalent of the male “wet dreams,” but the imagery in their dreams is typical of young women’s dreams, not young men’s.¹²

Sexual orientation is unsteady at the start. In early adolescence, deep emotional involvements with the opposite sex are quite rare, and there is usually a “superficial game-like quality to heterosexual interaction.... It is almost like the play behavior of the child.”⁶ Although they are also associating strongly with their same-sex peers, and confirming their own gender, adolescents often doubt their own masculinity or femininity at this stage. Same sex sexual experimentation is quite high in adolescent boys; 12 percent reach orgasm with another person of the same sex, but usually only once or twice.¹⁰

Falling In Love

“Falling in love” rather than childish ‘crushes’ is another stage in the process of becoming fully heterosexual, one that doesn’t appear to be related to puberty, puberty being hormonal, and falling in love social. Researchers know of some cases of girls falling in love before age twelve, but no cases of boys doing so. Even those children who are precociously sexually mature at very early ages -such as eight - do not fall in love, although many of them have definite heterosexual fantasy, or dreams leading to orgasm, and may masturbate. In one case reported in 1932, a boy who became sexually mature before the age of four was reported to have made “obvious and distressing sexual advances to adult women with whom he was left alone.” But he did not fall in love.¹² Falling in love can happen in some cases without puberty, and indeed even without any gonads, but only past a minimum age.¹² Falling in love doesn’t seem to be biologically driven; rather, it seems to require a certain age and stage of social development.

In the romantic West, an ocean of ink has been used up in the description of this most mysterious of sensations, but “falling in love” is not really very mysterious. A lot is now known about why people in the West are attracted to each other. In his book *Families and How to Survive Them*,¹³ Robin Skynner, a family therapist, boils attraction down to three things: social pressures (class, religion, and money), conscious personal reasons like good looks and shared interests, and unconscious attractions - commonly called ‘chemistry’. To demonstrate how chemistry works, Skynner breaks his new classes up into groups while they are still strangers to each other and asks each person to choose “another person from the group who either makes them think of someone in their family or gives them the feeling that they would have filled a ‘gap’ in their family.” No one is allowed to speak during the exercise. When they have found each other they are encouraged to see if they can find out why they chose each other, and to talk about their family backgrounds. Then each couple chooses another couple, making foursomes, and then each foursome forms itself into a family of some kind, agreeing with each other about roles. In each case, Skynner reports, people choose others whose families have functioned in very similar ways to their own - for example, difficulty in showing affection, incestuous relationships, absentee fathers, or obligatory cheerfulness. In this group exercise, there are always people who are not chosen. The first time Skynner tried the exercise, this group of leftovers found they had all been fostered, adopted, or brought up in children’s homes. Although Skynner concedes his trainees are deliberately looking for someone making them think of their families, he says we are unconsciously attracted to certain kinds of people in a way that somehow mirrors the way we learned to relate in our families. In other words, to a significant extent our responses when we “fall in love” have been unconsciously learned and are not always positive.

But in many non-western cultures, marriages are arranged, and people fall in love after they are married. That’s the way the culture does it, and if the arrangement is a good one, socially and economically, and there is mutual consideration, love usually follows.

A study¹⁴ of 445 pairs of twins, most of them identical, found no genetic contribution to the way “people make emotional attachments to each other.” Rather, the study found that spouses were more like their partners in “love attitudes” than twins were to each other.

If heterosexuality were genetic, one would expect an indiscriminate attraction to the opposite sex across

the board. But (excluding incest, which falls in a different category) this is not the case. There is an enormous amount of individuality and chance. Young men do not want to marry their sisters, unless they have been separated from them during their upbringing.⁹ Studies in Israeli kibbutzim, in which unrelated children are raised together from a very early age while parents work, show they do not find each other erotically interesting in adolescence, though there are no restrictions on romantic involvement between kibbutzniks. In one study, all the young people without exception married outside the group they had grown up with.¹²

A study by Bem¹⁵ argues that what is “exotic becomes erotic”. In other words, a large part of what drives sexual attraction is the mystery of the other sex which has developed separately for years in childhood. Although this idea has been attacked by various researchers there is a general agreement that the exotic is one factor feeding into the erotic.

Cultural Conditioning

Sexual attraction and behavior also depend on the conventions of a particular culture. In *Wild Swans*,¹⁶ an account of three generations of women in a Chinese family, Jung Chang writes of the custom of foot-binding. “My grandmother was a beauty ... but her greatest assets were her bound feet, called in Chinese . . . `three inch golden lilies.’” Not only was the sight of women hobbling on tiny feet considered erotic, men would also get excited playing with bound feet, which were always hidden in embroidered silk shoes.

When Jung Chang’s great grandfather was seeking a suitor for his daughter, he planned the first meeting so that this daughter’s “tiny feet” would be seen to advantage in their “embroidered satin shoes.”

The custom has clear cultural origins. It began about 1000 years earlier when a Chinese emperor bound the feet of his concubines to stop them from running away. But they became erotic symbols - in spite of the fact that bones were broken and deformed in the binding process and that the dead skin stank when the bandages were removed.

The attraction of Victorian men to women’s ankles was another “cultural” erotic response. So is the reaction of males in some Moslem cultures to a naked female arm.

It is common for members of one culture to not be particularly erotically attracted to members of another, at least initially. It takes time to appreciate the social conventions of what is erotic in a particular culture and how well a person fulfils them.

Highly Individual Factors

People also develop their sexual orientation and preferences through chance incidents, random circumstances unique to the individual that go deep, structuring themselves into the individual’s personal responses to people, situations and events. These can be associated with sexual arousal. Once the behavior starts it tends to be repeated, and gradually become habitual. According to Gebhard of the Kinsey Institute, unusual behaviors and preferences can often be traced back to one-off incidents of this nature. He gives two examples. A young teenage boy experienced strong sexual arousal when he was wrestling with an older girl who was stronger than he was and on top of him. He later developed an attraction to large, muscular, dominant females, tried to include wrestling in love play, and became a bit masochistic. In another case, a boy broke his arm, which, because of the circumstances, had to be set without anesthetic. It was extremely painful. While this was being done the doctor’s nurse clasped him close to comfort him. He became sexually aroused and later developed a fetish for brunette hair styles the same as the nurse’s. His sexual behavior also became somewhat sadomasochistic. Gebhard places considerable emphasis on the role of chance circumstances in the development of sexuality. He comments about data “which show to an almost frightening degree the power of chance operating through variables in the immediate situation”¹⁷

We will see in chapter 10 that twin studies also show that highly individualistic responses are predominant in the factors leading to sexual orientation. These reactions are mostly to unusual and personally significant people and circumstances, rather than features of the bodies we have, or the common everyday routines and experiences in a family.

Habit Formation and Addiction

According to Gebhard, any kind of heterosexual activity started soon after puberty almost invariably continues from then on. In other words, what we start doing we tend to keep on doing unless the negative

consequences outweigh the perceived benefits. We form a habit. If the habit becomes a way of relieving emotional pain, it can become addictive.

Summary

No-one appears to be born heterosexual. Rather, heterosexual attraction appears to be learned, developing over a period of time in response to certain environmental factors, in particular:

- Good maternal nurture from the earliest stages and through the first few years: nursing, feeding, touching, talking, presence, eye contact, and care of physical needs. Where this is present the first stage of heterosexual development takes place: the child responds and attaches to the caregiver. Without it, the child's incentive to identify and imitate is weak and social development suffers. If the early deprivation has been severe and longterm, we seem to end up with people who lack an essential element of sexual orientation - the ability to experience or show affection either to the opposite sex or to the same sex.

- Identification with and imitation of the parent of the same sex (or other close same-sex models).

- Acceptance by and identification with same-sex peer groups including elder brothers or sisters.

- Identification in a boy with what is culturally "masculine" and in a girl with what is culturally "feminine" (gender conformity).

- The day-in-day-out treatment of boys and girls, as boys or girls respectively. (The slowly developing awareness of gender in a boy or girl suggests that gender identity is not programmed in from day one, but is learned; slowly acquired in complex ways from the social environment.)

- The biologically-programmed hormonal rush of puberty. This might be expected to be the strongest determining factor in sexual orientation, but puberty only adds sexual drive to whatever prevailing sense of gender is already present. That is, it reinforces existing gender orientation but doesn't change it.

- Falling in love. This appears to be unrelated to genes or puberty; it is something environmentally conditioned that requires a minimum chronological and social age.

- Culturally prescribed sexual behaviors, like arousal over women's bound feet.

- Personal sexual preferences and behaviors that can be traced back to a never-forgotten, highly significant personal encounter or experience and often associated with early sexual arousal in unique circumstances.

If anything was going to be programmed into the genetic code, you would think heterosexuality would be. The urge to survive and reproduce ought to be one of the most basic in the species. But heterosexuality seems to be a psycho-social learning process spread over many years.

Homosexuality

If heterosexuality is learned, what about homosexuality? Is it obvious it is a different category? We suggest it is not different.

Relationships with Parents and Peer Groups

The psychological literature on homosexuality clearly reveals breakdowns in learning processes native to the development of heterosexuality. Rather than bonding and identifying with same-sex parents, imitating and role modeling, numerous studies of homosexuals show early breaches, negative relationships, and resistance to identification and modeling. One comprehensive study of homosexuality¹⁸ found 84 percent of homosexual men said their fathers were indifferent and uninvolved compared with 10 percent of heterosexual men, and that only 10 percent of homosexual men identified with their fathers in childhood, compared with two thirds of heterosexual men.

Rather than boys playing with boys and girls with girls, studies show pre-homosexual children have few friends of the same sex and are rejected by same-sex peer groups. They show boys who played with girls, didn't like male sports, and wanted to be around women more than men. In a review of the literature⁸, van den Aardweg says poor relationships with peer groups are even more common in the backgrounds of male homosexuals than poor relationships with fathers.

Numerous empirical studies have shown that homosexual women have poorer relationships with their mothers than heterosexual women.¹⁹ Saghir and Robins¹⁸ found only 23 percent of homosexual women

reported positive relationships with their mothers and identification with them, compared with 85 percent of heterosexual women.

Bell *et al.*¹⁹ comment that, in both boys and girls, a negative relationship with the same-sex parent reduces the desire to identify with that parent. Children with reduced identification are more likely to develop “gender non-conformity” (“sissiness” in boys and “tomboyism” in girls; the sense of feeling “different” from their peers). This is what we find in male and female homosexuality. A boy who has not bonded well with his father and has only a weak identification with him is not developing a sense of masculine identity. Nicolosi remarks that “the masculine qualities conveyed in the healthy father-son relationship are confidence and independence, assertiveness and a sense of personal power.”⁸ Without these attributes, he will not fit well into childhood male peer groups. Male homosexual clients characteristically say they were rejected by childhood male peer groups because they were “weak, unmasculine, unacceptable.” That’s when the name-calling starts - “sissy,” “girl.” Saghir and Robins found 67 percent of homosexuals were called sissy or effeminate by others, (compared with three percent of heterosexual men), and that 79 percent of these men in childhood and early adolescence had no male friends, played mostly with girls, and rarely or never played sports.¹⁸

A similar pattern is seen in lesbianism. Young girls resistant to mother identification and modeling do not fit well into female peer groups. In Saghir and Robins’ group, 70 percent of homosexual women were “tomboys” as children, compared with 16 percent of heterosexual women. They had no girl playmates (unlike preheterosexual girls), played mostly with boys, and were active in team sports. Most rejected playing with dolls and showed no interest in domestic role-modeling. Sixty three percent wished they were boys or men, compared with only seven percent of heterosexual women. The attitude persists into adulthood. One of the two findings that differentiated lesbian women from heterosexual women was the feeling in lesbian women that they were less feminine and more masculine. “They express disinterest in feminine accessories and fashion, prefer ‘sporty’ and tailored clothes, and shun make-up and hairdos. They see their social and domestic roles as being incompatible with those of other women. They behave more competitively and are oriented toward career and accomplishments with little interest in raising children or in domestic pursuits.”¹⁸

It is important to note that this effect, “childhood gender non-conformity,” is one of the strongest effects known in the psychological literature on any gender behavior and is an excellent predictor of later homosexuality.¹⁵ A summary of surveys of boys with gender non-conformity so severe that they were referred to clinics showed 50% of them subsequently became homosexual.

This is also true for girls. Of those seen in clinics with a fairly clear diagnosis (usually called Gender Identity Disorder) 32% became bisexual or lesbian in fantasy and three quarters of them (24% of the whole sample) behaviorally also.³³

This, however, means that most of the factors we outline in this chapter are weak influences on average, but for selected individuals they may be critical. This means there is no single, unique path to SSA. Nor is any individual factor overwhelming by itself. In fact a fair summary is “for any given factor the majority will not develop SSA.”

This arises from a principle called “resilience”. Most children exposed to any trauma do not suffer deeply long term – only a minority do.³⁴ But for that minority it can go very deep.

This gives rise to an aphorism:

There’s many a way to SSA.

Sexual Activity and Sexual Abuse

Several major studies have highlighted more childhood and adolescent homosexual activity in pre-homosexual children and adolescents. Van Wyk and Geist,⁹ looking at a sample of 7669 white male and female Americans, say both lesbians and homosexuals were more likely to have had intense pre-pubertal sexual contact with boys or men. They draw a link between sexual abuse and later lesbianism, but also say that most lesbians learned to masturbate by being masturbated by a female. It appears that these women as growing girls were retreating from male sexual contact at the same time as they had also experienced female sexual contact. By contrast, young pre-homosexual males appear not so much to be in flight from female sexual contact, as to find satisfaction in male sexual contact. Male homosexuals were more likely

than heterosexual men to have been masturbated by other men or boys, they comment, and “once arousal to the particular type of stimulus occurs, it tends quite rapidly to form a pattern.”

“Ex-gay” support groups (see chapter twelve) report that between 50 percent and 60 percent of homosexual men coming for help have been abused sexually.²⁰ This is confirmed by various researchers. Finkelhor found young men sexually abused by older males were about four times more likely to engage in homosexual activity as adults.²⁰ Nichols reports male sexual abuse of lesbians is twice as high as in heterosexual women.²¹ Gundlach and Riess²² report a similar figure. Ex-gay groups report high levels of male sexual abuse (up to 85 percent) in female homosexuals who come for help.²⁰ Peters and Cantrell (cited elsewhere²²) found more than two thirds of lesbians reported being forced into sexual experiences with males after the age of twelve, compared with only 28 percent of heterosexuals.

So sexual abuse appears to be a factor in the development of homosexuality. Ex-gay groups suggest that when a boy’s relationships with father and peer group are unhappy, childhood and adolescent sexual intimacy with another man leads to a later association of sex with what they are really seeking: male interest, affection, and acceptance. One former homosexual, Michael Saia,²³ says homosexual men are not looking for sex when they have their first sexual encounter. He says they are looking for acceptance, understanding, companionship, strength, security, and a sense of completeness. Sex becomes the way to get it. “I was starved of affection,” said Bob. “I didn’t like the sex at first, I just wanted someone to really love me. I told myself, OK, if this is what I have to do to get the touch, I’ll do it. Then it got to where I liked it. So. . .” Lesbianism, on the other hand, is primarily emotional rather than sexual. Lesbianism is a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions, affections and sexual feelings are directed toward each other.

Later studies of non-clinical groups have shown no difference in sexual abuse between heterosexual and lesbian groups. Chapman and Brannock,²⁴ for example, show women questioning their sexual orientation because they feel strong emotional and/or sexual bonds with women rather than because they have been sexually abused by the opposite sex. This accords with the findings of one researcher in developmental psychology, Dr. Elizabeth Moberly, whose conclusions have been widely accepted by the international ex-gay movement. Moberly²⁵ sees sexual abuse as a secondary contributor to homosexuality. She posits the main cause as early “defensive detachment” from the parent of the same sex that interferes critically with the identification process that produces a sense of gender in children. This breach between a child and the same sex parent (which, she says, could happen for any number of reasons, and is as often a result of childhood misperception of parents’ actions as parental neglect or abuse), structures itself into the relationship and leaves the child with a deep need for the same-sex love, affection, and gender identity that it has rejected or which has not been provided. Difficulties in attachment and identification lead to feelings of alienation in same sex peer groups and from then on homosexual development follows a fairly predictable course: a deep need for same sex affection, affirmation, acceptance, and sense of gender identity; masturbation and/or fantasy around a certain admired same sex figure; a sexual encounter; the beginning of habitual responses; self-identification as homosexual; “coming out;” finding partners; the homosexual lifestyle; civil rights. Many people with homo-emotional feelings and homosexual responses, however, do not “come out” to friends and family or live a visibly homosexual or activist life-style.

In one of the largest studies of a homosexual population, Bell, *et al.*, said homosexuality could not be traced back to “a single psychological or social root.”¹⁹ However, they gave the highest values to a constellation of factors: negative relationship with the parent of the same sex, “childhood gender non conformity,” and adolescent homosexual arousal and activity.

So, if heterosexuality results from a learning process that involves relationships with parents and peer groups, puberty, sexual encounters, highly individual experiences, and repeated behaviors, so does homosexuality.

If homosexuality were genetically predestined, one would not expect a slow development of same-sex attraction but a universal awareness of it from earliest years. However, Dr. Dean Hamer, looking at eighty men living openly as homosexuals, found, as in heterosexuality, the average first attraction was at 10 years of age which is not “as long as I can remember” - as many gay men say.²⁶ Self-identification as homosexual typically came about five years later. For actively homosexual men who are married, somewhere between a third and two thirds of them concluded they were homosexual only after they married.^{27,28}

No Sexual Orientation

A total lack of sexual orientation is common but mostly temporary, caused by illness, depression, marital conflict or negative sexual experiences. In this state, called anhedonia, the light has gone from all pleasures, not just sexual ones. The Kinsey Institute in 1970 found about 10 percent of the adult population (8.9 percent of men, 11.8 percent of women) saw no prospect of sexual enjoyment with either sex.¹⁰ A 1980 survey of forty year old women found one third never had spontaneous libido.²⁹ A 1987 survey of British women aged 35 to 39 found 17 percent had seriously diminished libido.²⁹ In contrast some bisexuals seek heterosexual partners except when tired or depressed when they seek homosexual ones. These examples show the malleability of sexual orientation.

A few people appear never to have learnt a sexual orientation. Leiblum says some patients often show "a chronic lifelong lack of sexual interest.... Often we are unable to identify evidence of psychic inhibition of libido in such individuals but rather seem to be dealing with a permanent state of 'asexuality.' Sexual stirrings or urges seem not to occur instead of being blocked or repressed."²⁹ One researcher³⁰ described the unusual situation of a married couple with complete lack of sexual interest, who had known each other since childhood and discovered their common indifference. They appear to have married for companionship. When interviewed, they had lived together twenty years and slept in each other's arms, but there was no genital contact at all. There was no physical abnormality. They were quite content. This may not be a complete lack of sexual orientation, but it had no erotic expression.

Conclusion

We all tend to take our heterosexuality for granted as if it just happens. But it seems to develop slowly and steadily and to consolidate over about two decades - through clearly defined and documented stages. Psychologists are in broad agreement about the general stages of heterosexual development and unanimous about one thing: heterosexual orientation is not genetically determined. They will say it is overwhelmingly learned; the result of response to the environment. Most will also say genetics has a part to play, but only a very minor one. Homosexuals in contrast frequently show a breakdown in several of the developmental stages leading to heterosexuality, particularly attachment to and gender identification with the same sex parent and positive connection with same sex peers, leading to needs for same sex affection and affirmation that become eroticized. Once the pattern of sexual gratification of these needs starts, a habit begins, becomes ingrained, and often addictive. Rates of male sexual abuse are higher in homosexuals and lesbians than in heterosexuals. If heterosexuality is learned, then homosexuality is too.

So, what role might genetics play in homosexuality? Probably about the same role it plays in the pregnancy of a fifteen year old girl. You could argue that if she is born with the combination of genes that make her attractive in her culture (and therefore subject to more male sexual pressure than she would be if she were ugly), that she is genetically predisposed to become pregnant at age fifteen. In homosexuality, it would seem that any biological trait that adds to a person's sense of "gender non-conformity" (one of the strongest predictors of later homosexuality) could be said to genetically pre-dispose him or her to a homosexual orientation.

But did your genes make you heterosexual or homosexual? No, it seems you learned it over many years.

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