

Homosexuality: Cured or Understood?

Stories in the news--such as Ted Haggart's, his fall from grace and subsequent redemption through Christian therapy that made him "100% heterosexual," make us ask, "What causes homosexuality anyway, and can it be changed?" For helpful insight into this question, I thank Carol Lynn Pearson, author of the new book, "No More Goodbyes: Circling the Wagons Around Our Gay Loved Ones."

There are still mysteries in how our sexual orientation is formed, but today some significant facts are in. In 2006, 60 Minutes aired a fine segment called "The Science of Sexual Orientation." Lesley Stahl reported that, while the final answer of what makes a person gay or straight may be a long way off, "scientists...are already yielding tantalizing clues."

Michael Bailey, a psychology professor at Northwestern University and a leading researcher in the field of sexual orientation said, responding to the extremely different gender behaviors of a set of boy twins, "To me, cases like that really scream out, 'Hey it's not out there, it's in here.'" He said he doesn't think nurture is a plausible explanation, as in the disproved theory that homosexuality is caused by overbearing mothers and distant fathers.

"Today," reported Ms. Stahl, "scientists are looking at genes, environment, brain structure and hormones." The report went on to demonstrate that gay and straight people move differently and talk differently, suggesting characteristics of the opposite sex are embedded in the brain structure.

Further, it has been demonstrated that homosexuality runs in families. In studying identical twins, one gay and one straight, Dr. Bailey suggested that the environment he's most interested in is "the environment that happens to us while we're in the womb," which is an environment that is "much more important than we ever thought it was."

Adding to the mystery is that "the more older brothers a man has, the greater that man's chance of being gay," a finding that has been "demonstrated in study after study." 60 Minutes concluded that the scientists they spoke to are "increasingly convinced that genes, hormones, or both...determine sexual orientation before birth."

Similar evidence was presented in a talk in 2004 by Dr. William Bradshaw of Brigham Young University's biology department. He discussed scientific data that he claimed "proved homosexuality is a result of biological orientation." In addition to some of the findings also cited by 60 Minutes, Dr. Bradshaw presented the results of studies that show homosexuals have a 39 percent greater probability of being left-handed than right-handed, and that homosexual men go through puberty significantly earlier than heterosexual men.

Another BYU professor, Dr. Duane E. Jeffery of the Zoology department, observes:

"The best synthesis of available data suggests that specific combinations of genes....make the fetus susceptible to influence by the interacting fetal/maternal hormones....Homosexuality is far more profitably understood as a phenomenon of biology than of the schoolyard.... 'hard-wired,' i.e., inherent and 'natural'; it is not the result of learning or training."

Dr. R. Jan Stout, a psychiatrist who began his study of homosexuality with the firm conviction that it was "a learned behavior, an illness to be treated and corrected," learned over the years that his earlier position had been "wrong and simplistic." He came to believe that "the crucial factor is the timing and amount of testosterone released in utero by the developing embryo," that apparently "environment fine tunes the instrument of sexuality but neither creates nor organizes its direction."

Each of us discovers, rather than decides our sexual orientation. Within that reality, various choices are made. But that fact should help us all to treat each other with more understanding and compassion.

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About the Author

Don L. Wright is publisher of "No More Goodbyes: Circling the Wagons around Our Gay Loved Ones," available at <http://www.nomoregoodbyes.com>.