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The Power in 'Choosing to Be Gay'

By Suzanna Danuta Walters

In politics, the notion of being gay by one's own volition is like Voldemort—dangerous even to be uttered. Biological determinism is the new normal, yoked to tolerance claims much as magic hews to Harry Potter. It was not always this way, but a determinist ethos began to insinuate itself into gay politics in the late 1980s or so. As sociologist Vera Whisman noted as early as 1996, "the claim of 'no choice' is to a pro-gay stance as the claim of 'choice' is to an anti-gay one: a foundational argument. Anti-gay rhetoric uses the term 'sexual preference' to imply choice, while pro-gay rhetoric uses 'sexual orientation' to deny it."

Television shows are full of characters invoking their biology when confronting their queerness, and Hollywood films depict immutability as unassailable truth in movies that present a "tolerance" thesis. In conversations with friends and family, we certainly hear a lot of "but I always knew something was different," or "I always felt gay," or something to that effect. These are, unquestionably, very real feelings for many (although assuredly not all) gay people, and I don't want to deny the experience of that "inevitability."

Believing that one is born gay can also become a handy weapon against the harsh treatment by family and society, and an explanatory tool to combat internal self-loathing and doubt. There is clearly some real comfort for gays—particularly those who have navigated the waters of hatred—to come to land on the supposedly solid shores of biology.

However, part of the problem in this whole gay-gene discussion is that "choice" is referenced in a narrow way. It is a big leap from thinking that homosexuality is a deep part of one's sense of self to asserting that particular sexual formations and desires are biologically predetermined.

Most of us do not think of our sexual desires or identities as akin to that almost consumerist notion of choice—a deliberate and straightforward act, like choosing to eat lobster or buy a pair of Nikes. Yet even radical gay activists find themselves forced to rely on "nature" when facing off against those who deem gays both unnatural and immoral.

Particularly in the sound-bite world of public discourse, it is almost impossible to articulate a notion of queer choice or even just queer "being." Choice is considered to be fickle (and obviously "lower"

somehow than its opposite—the inevitability of biological determination)—and the assumption is that if in fact it is a choice, then it can be "corrected." Gay inevitability is posited as the narrative of our lives; one does not "become" gay but either represses or accepts what is always already there.

Both laypeople and scientists fervently believe that "scientific research can help dispel some of the myths about homosexuality that in the past have clouded the image of lesbians and gay men," thus perhaps opening the door to more "tolerant" attitudes. But I do wonder what myths they think immutability arguments dispel.

Certainly, one myth they may dispel is the simplistic mother-blaming of psychology or the equally simplistic conservative fantasies of a decadent culture that "produces" gayness, along with associated evils such as feminism, rap music, and thongs. Logically, the only other myth that could be dispelled in this scenario is the "myth" of choice, as immutability is configured as its opposite. As critical biologist Garland Allen remarks sarcastically, "'It's not my fault,' is supposed to be a liberating conception."

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Determining the "cause" of homosexuality raises the question of how to determine if one *is* a homosexual. This gets to the heart of a real problem: In searching for a biological basis for homosexuality, most scientists cannot help but re-inscribe the most constrained definitions of sexual identity, definitions that have been vigorously challenged by theorists and historians for decades.

LGBTQ theorists have long disputed the easy assumptions that link behaviors with identities. The assumption of "gay" as a category clearly delineated and easily knowable is challenged theoretically, historically, and cross-culturally.

In many Latin and Central American contexts, for example, more emphasis is placed on an individual's relationship to particular sexual acts than to some totalizing identity, so who penetrates and who gets penetrated may—in some contexts—be more determinative of identity than "sodomy" itself.

Or in many South Asian cultures, such as Thailand, sexual identities are formed much more around specific kinds of gender comportment, which does not translate easily into the simple moniker "gay." And U.S. Native American concepts of "two-spirit" or "berdache" don't fit easily with the normative concept of homosexuality as a unique minority identity either, as it indicates an understanding of gender identity at odds with the mainstream American model of mapping gender onto sexed bodies.

So when this nuanced and complicated historical and cross-cultural work confronts the recent obsession with immutability and biological origins, we have a serious set of problems, if not real contradictions. How we experience our sexual identity is produced in and through a multitude of factors, including our political commitments, our geographical locations, and our racial/ethnic identifications.

And, to add to the complexity, desire itself shifts and changes over the course of a lifetime. Seemingly contradictory sexual practices coexist, even as we insist on their absolute separability. One is no longer someone who likes a little this or a little that, but one *is* a gay person, part of a class or even species of person.

Most scientists have "resolved" this very serious definitional problem with a combination of subjects' self-reporting, declared homosexual experiences, and measured physiological reaction to visual

stimuli. For many researchers, responses to stimuli are the real test—but this produces any number of questions: Does attraction connote identity? Always? Does it imply action?

Our responses to sexual images are cross-cut with any number of complicating factors. Finding something pleasurable to watch—and even getting aroused by it—does not automatically indicate action, much less identity. I can't tell you how many lesbians (longtime, unambiguously defined lesbians) love gay male porn. It doesn't mean they're secretly straight. A woman who defines herself as exclusively heterosexual might get turned on by a gorgeous gay man (or woman), but this says little about her own self-identification or her own actual sexual behaviors and practices (which, in turn, may say little about her identity).

So if one reports that one is gay for a scientific study, but in fact has never had same-sex sexual behavior, then how is that measured? Is that person "gay" for the sake of the study? How gay? Or if one has same-sex desire but never acts on it? Or engages in same-sex acts but never defines oneself as gay? Or engages in acts that scientists define as gay but that they themselves do not? Or sometimes has same-sex sex but also has (pleasurable, active) opposite-sex sex? What is the cutoff point?

And what of changes over the life course? Not only does our sexuality change as we age, but our perceptions of it alter and shift. In a culture so thoroughly heterosexualized, it is hard to think that our "preferences" aren't at least in part framed by this overweening reality.

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The idea that discovering biological causation leads simply and automatically to an erosion of discrimination is patently false and has been challenged repeatedly and insistently by any number of critics.

A narrowly determinist position can be challenged on many grounds: the veracity of the studies themselves (small sample sizes, not replicated, definitional issues from the start); the gendered assumptions that are built into the very studies and the idea of causality; the inability to account for competing narratives such as bisexuality, changes over life course, gender differences, and so on.

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The fact is that most of these studies, in searching for "gay" causality, leave heterosexuality and its compulsory nature unexamined. Addressing these complex challenges is more important in the fight for real inclusion than the short-term tactic of exploiting essentialist arguments for political gain.

But if the public debate (and much of the legal argumentation) is set up so that "tolerance" is dependent on immutability, it is hard to challenge either, because they become wedded to each other in a relation of means (immutability) to end (tolerance).

As Ed Stein noted in *The Washington Times*:

Linking human rights to some scientific theory as yet completely un-proven is risky. All that you'll get with the gene theory is the right with things you don't choose, but homosexuals want things they do choose: to be openly gay and hold a job and have same-sex marriages. [...]

My concern is that as soon as we start to encourage and embrace as part of a political agenda scientific research in this area, we lead to re-medicalization of sexual orientation. Jumping on the genetic bandwagon is hurting our cause. The point is, nothing's wrong with homosexuality, so why try to take it on with science?

If we do believe that sexual desires and choices are fluid and complicated, then surely we must assume that a world in which heterosexuality is not the default norm—not promoted—would perhaps open up the door to a wider variety of sexual expressions and choices. And isn't it the case that difference does, in point of fact, matter?

While gay teachers may not "turn" kids gay (just as my hetero parents failed to turn me hetero), can't we also offer up the possibility that openly gay teachers (or neighbors or mothers or firefighters) may create environments that encourage expansive thinking about sexuality and gender?

Challenging both the fear of homosexuality and the ideology of immutability that attempts to refute that fear depends on a very different set of assumptions: that being gay is just fine, thank you very much; that gayness is not a problem to be understood, or solved, or even tolerated; and, more to the point, that there is a positive benefit to an expansive and open approach to human sexuality and gender. In other words, the framing of "gayness" as an issue of nature versus nurture or destiny versus choice misses the point about sexuality and about civil rights. It's not our genes that matter here but rather our ethics.

This post is adapted from Suzanna Walters' 'The Tolerance Trap: How God, Genes, and Good Intentions are Sabotaging Gay Equality.'

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