Jensen Moore

The Evolution of Homosexuality

The precise cause of homosexuality has been a heavily debated topic for many years. In “The Last Mile”, a chapter of Siddhartha Mukherjee’s book “The Gene”, Mukherjee extensively explains his belief of the role of genetics in determining sexuality. The article “Homosexuality: Born or Bred?” by Newsweek Staff discusses the genetics while also addressing that it could be a combination of genetics and environment. “Born Gay?” by Paul Billings and Jonathan Beckwith examines the faultiness of the studies used in these articles. The TED Talk “How Homosexuality Benefits Evolution” by James O’Keefe introduces the idea of homosexuality being an evolutionary advantage. “Pas de Deux of Sexuality Is Written in the Genes” by Nicholas Wade delves into the neurological and evolutionary side of sexuality. So, who’s correct? Is homosexuality determined genetically? Is it just a choice relating to the circumstances you are raised in? Could it be some form of evolution? We’ll start by looking at the oldest and once most widely accepted theory; choice.

Since the days of Sigmund Freud leading psychologists, psychiatrists, and the general public believed homosexuality to be a choice. More recently in the 1950’s and 1960’s, it seemed most experts had largely come to a consensus. Homosexuality was characterized as a frustrated form of neurotic anxiety and “homosexuals, like all perverts, are neurotics.” (Mukherjee 370) In 1962, Irving Bieber released a paper discussing the environment that lead to this choice, stating that “male homosexuality was caused by the distorted dynamics of a family–by the fatal combination of a smothering mother who was often ‘close-binding and [sexually] intimate’, if not overtly seductive to her son, and by a detached, distant, or ‘emotionally hostile’ father.” (Mukherjee 370) However, some believe that Bieber had this cause and effect relationship backwards, “hostile fathers didn’t make sons gay, fathers turned hostile because the sons were ‘unmasculine’ to begin with.” (Newsweek Staff 1) Officially, the idea of homosexuality being a curable disorder occurring from a complicated childhood was dropped in 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association expunged it from the list of emotional disorders. (Newsweek Staff 4) To fully explain what shifted the view away from homosexuality being a choice, we need to examine the genes.

In 1993 the discovery of a so-called gay gene radically shifted public opinion on the topic. The discussion inverted from vilifying the adult’s sexual preferences to sympathizing with a child’s inborn propensities. The research leading to this discovery was spurred on from a study by Michael J. Bailey done on homosexual identical twins in the 1980s. Bailey found that, “Among the fifty-six pairs of identical twins, both twins were gay in 52 percent. Of the fifty-four pairs of nonidentical twins, 22 percent were both gay-lower than the fraction for identical twins, but still significantly higher than the estimate of 10 percent gay in the overall population.” (Mukherjee 373) This proved to Dean Hamer, a researcher at the National Cancer Institute, that gayness had to be related to genetics somehow. By analyzing the genes in gay men, Hamer isolated a connection between them to a region called Xq28, the ‘gay gene’. There were problems validating this, however. Studies from 1995 to 2015 were either unable to or only weakly find a connection between Xq28 and male sexuality. None of the studies found any individual gay gene. Furthermore, Paul Billings and Jonathan Beckwith pointed out other errors with Bailey’s study and genetic studies in general, such as biased samples, difficulty defining homosexual men, and the similarity in which identical twins would’ve been raised. (Billings, Beckwith 2) Ultimately, all the research to date has proved that genetics have some influence on human sexuality. The extent of the influence, however, is up for debate. The real question to me is, why? What is important enough about homosexuality for us to pass it down genetically? What advantage does it bring? These questions have much to do with evolution.

In the animal kingdom, homosexual behaviors are observed relatively frequently. Species of monkeys have been seen not only engaging in gay sex but behaviors like two males caressing each other. Are these species of animals intelligent enough to decide that they want to be gay? Perhaps it was the way they were raised? When you factor this into the discussion, other theories become quite silly. Clearly there is some biological reason for homosexuality, or we would only see it in humans, like many other unique human behaviors. So why do we see this? What would the advantage be to have this trait passed down? Interestingly enough, homosexuality conflicts with the primary purpose of life itself, to reproduce or pass on genes. Two males cannot naturally reproduce; therefore, this gene should be quickly stamped out. This tells me there must be quite a compelling reason for it to still exist despite this huge disadvantage. Wade’s article discusses one possible theory, “Such genes could be retained if gay men were unusually effective protectors of their nephews and nieces, helping genes just like theirs get into future generations.” (Wade 4) It has also been proven by two Canadian researches, Ray Blanchard and Anthony F. Bogaert, that each older brother a man has substantially increases the chance of him being gay. Perhaps the reason that this is a successful system in evolution has less to do with individual survival and more to do with group survival. Despite not passing on your own genes, you are ensuring that your genes are passed down by proxy. If you share 50 percent of your DNA with your siblings, and 25 percent of your DNA with your nieces and nephews, you are just as biologically successful if you ensure your sibling has two surviving children as you would be if you had one child. (O’Keefe) This system also increases the chances of your sibling securing a mate to pass down their genes by reducing competition. A gay male won’t be competing with a straight male for the female. It is difficult to thoroughly prove this theory, but from what we know now about biology and evolution, this seems to be the most logical conclusion with an abundance of supporting evidence.

As the debate of the cause of homosexuality continues, as does our knowledge of science and biology. Most intellectual authorities at this point agree that homosexuality is not a choice, and there is strong evidence supporting it having a heritable nature. If homosexuality is not a choice, and has some genetic component, then surely the answer lies with evolution. The theory of natural selection states that beneficial genes are passed down while unhelpful genes are quickly removed from the gene pool. The fact that gay behaviors are frequently observed throughout the animal kingdom means this is not a behavior unique to humans. If that is the case, there must be some advantage for it to exist and be passed down. Whether it is group survival or some other advantage we do not fully understand yet, it is time to accept the abundance of evidence and move forward.

Works Cited:

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