



Nurtured by nature

By Sean McLennan

"Is being gay a choice?" This has to be the world's favourite question about sexual orientation, and despite the question being posed over and over and over again, it's still being asked. Worse, you'd think that by now, they would have at least gotten the question right, but the question of "choice" is still being phrased completely inappropriately. ABC's recently aired five-part special *A Matter of Choice?* is a typical example of how the issue is misrepresented in the media.

Usually, "Is being gay a choice" is posed as the opposite of "Is being gay genetic?" This conflates two completely different issues. A behaviour can be entirely learned—with no genetic components—and still not be a "choice". One's native language, walking, toilet training, and phobias are all behaviours that humans learn after being born, but are not considered "optional" nor subject to conscious decision-making.

Moreover, the deeper scientists look into the question of "nature vs. nurture" the more the division simply becomes arbitrary and irrelevant. Genetics and learning are two ends of exactly the same spectrum. The same behaviours in one species can be genetically specified, and in another be completely learned. Humans take a couple of years to learn to walk but horses and other large ungulates practically fall out of the womb and start running. There are some birds that have to learn the songs that they sing from their families as they are raised, but other kinds of birds can be completely isolated from birth and will still grow up to sing the same songs as the rest of their species. Genes are efficient; learning is more flexible. The balance any species comes to is a combination of chance and the cost/benefit analysis that evolution has worked out for them.

To complicate the matter further, there's also variation within a species; we always seem to implicitly assume that the reason someone exhibits a characteristic or behaviour will be the same from person to person. Beyond some well-understood characteristics like blood type or eye-colour, this is highly unlikely. Take autism for example. Children can be born with autism, but there are also cases of children acquiring the disorder up to age five or so. Everything from genetics to inoculations to milk allergies have been implicated as causes.

Ultimately, it has been impossible to tie autism down to a single cause. Studies of identical twins—siblings that have exactly the same DNA—show that if one twin is autistic the other has about a sixty percent chance of also being autistic. That's a pretty strong correlation—much stronger than chance—but obviously genetics cannot be the whole story. If genetics were the sole cause there would be a hundred percent chance. It's probably the case that there are genetic factors to autism and there are environmental factors. Both play a larger or lesser role from individual to individual.

Homosexuality is more like autism than eye-colour. Twin studies show the same pattern as autism—there is a strong correlation between genetics and sexual orientation but not enough of one to conclude that homosexuality is caused by genetics. Again, it's much more likely the case that there are genetic factors and environmental factors that vary from individual to individual, and, like weights being placed on a balance, eventually enough factors come together to tip the scale. This matches individual reports too: like many gay people, I realized that I was "different" at a very young age (around four), but I know people who swear specific events in their adolescence or teens "made them gay". There's no reason to doubt either experience. It's well within the realm of possibility that some people have a stronger genetic predisposition to homosexuality than others; some people might be born gay, others might need environmental catalysts. Either way, would we call it a choice? I've heard people say that they "became gay" but I've never heard anyway say that they "decided to be gay".

Whether the question of "choice" is appropriately separated from the question of "nature vs. nurture", or whether it is naively phrased, I usually respond with a much more pertinent question: "Why do you ask?" The only people who care are the ones with an agenda in mind, whether it is to vilify or vindicate homosexuality. As a society, we are facing some fundamental issues in human rights and getting bogged down in trying to determine the causes of sexual attraction can only obscure the root problem with irrelevant details. That is: are there any individual, cultural, or societal characteristics—whether caused by genetics, environment, or personal choice—that justify discrimination and the denial of civil rights to a segment of the population? This is the base issue with which civilization just can't seem to come to grips, even though the answer looks so obvious. All the other questions of cause and effect are inconsequential compared to humanity's continuing struggle for equality. ▼

Sean McLennan has a degree in Linguistics from the University of Calgary and he's currently working towards a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science at Indiana University. In between research, classes and teaching, he does Web design, writes for a Japanese English-learning magazine and is active in a local GLBT education group.

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QUEERWORD clues & words by Outlooks staff answers on Page 49

Across

- 1) Catholic hot-shot who just hit Toronto
- 3) This stone statue "learned a move" from Sharon Stone
- 6) Colour of subject in Nathalie Gilbert's *Pourquoi Pas?*
- 8) Reviewed porn flick: *Strokes to* _____
- 12) Sexual "role" or A *Midsummer Night's Dream* character
- 14) Foreign AIDS creator Pieter-Dirk _____
- 16) Host city for the 2002 GALA Choruses Festival
- 18) Toronto patio/eatery with a "hangover" name
- 21) Winnipeg's newest Empress: Sohorny _____
- 24) This eating disorder can also affect men
- 25) Recent fab happening in Montreal: Festival _____
- 28) From Freddy's lurid list: trouser _____
- 29) One of the Gay Games most popular "posing" events
- 31) This Alberta "big boy" says gay marriage won't happen
- 33) This Willi conducts the Vancouver Men's Chorus

Down

- 2) Don't You Wish? DJ. is an aspiring one of these
- 4) Colour of Outlooks logo on front cover
- 5) Jim Egan's partner Jack
- 7) August is primarily this zodiac sign's month
- 9) Comedian Cho recently played this grand New York hall
- 10) An ongoing debate: Nature vs. _____
- 11) This fashion house recently revived the fedora
- 12) Topic of discussion at G.L.C.C.E.'s drop-in night
- 13) Aptly named Winnipeg lawyer
- 15) This community organization just donated to the OMCF
- 17) The 8th edition of this Toronto party is around the corner
- 19) Number of *Frisky Summer* movies made to date
- 20) This *Golden Girl's* going to play Sydney during the Games
- 22) Jeans manufacturer or harsh type of dyke
- 23) Songstress Swift or glowing coal
- 26) Philadelphia museum dedicated to "The Thinker"'s creator
- 27) Izora Jackson-Jones rode one of these in the ARGRA Rodeo
- 29) A winter coat associated with the far north, now in vogue
- 30) Nancy Jo Cullen poetry collection: *Science Fiction* _____
- 32) Canada's own supermodel (not Yasmeen Ghauri)