

Bound and Determined: Media and the Gay Gene

by Warren Throckmorton, Ph.D.

I admire tenacity. I really do. I love to see it in my children and my friends, and I like stories of people who keep on trying, plodding away day after day in pursuit of an objective or excellence in a chosen field.

So in a way I have to credit certain media sources for their determination to find the gay gene. Yes, that elusive gene that the media keep talking about, but no one has found. Well, recently the *USA Weekend* magazine's Jennifer Mendelsohn apparently thought she found it because she referred to it in her article, "What We Know About Sex."

To wit, she wrote that one of the things science has learned is that "orientation isn't a choice." She explained, "Research shows most people become aware of their sexual orientation around puberty and perhaps as early as age ten. Findings such as the discovery of the so-called gay gene have shown that genetics play a role in determining why a minority of people end up with a same-sex orientation..."

I was amazed that I had missed the research that showed all those things.

My own survey research into the matter has found an average age of initial same-sex attractions being around twelve. Experiencing vague same-sex attractions is a long way from people being "aware of their sexual orientation around puberty and perhaps as early as age ten." Indeed, most people who experience same-sex attraction during their teen years later identify as straight.

To educate myself, I called and left messages with *USA Weekend* several times over the course of two days with no response. So then I called Dr. John Bancroft, Director of the Kinsey Institute who had been quoted in the *USA Weekend* article.

I asked him if he really meant to imply sexual orientation was genetically determined. A well-respected scholar, Dr. Bancroft described some of the existing research of which I was aware, and then noted that he had tried to qualify

Ms. Mendelsohn's enthusiasm by his parting comment on the subject.

And indeed, Dr. Bancroft said in the article that genes are "just part of the picture. There are far more questions than answers." He noted to me that there is some evidence that should be taken seriously, but that even those studies have not been replicated, and there is more unknown than known at this point.

Well, that's a different slant on the matter. Given Dr. Bancroft's clear assessment of research, Ms. Mendelsohn's heading could have read, "*Cause of Orientation Unclear*" or "*Orientation Seems Flexible; A Product of Genes and Environment.*"

Scientist Says Media is "Hooked on the Gay Gene"

Dr. Bancroft went on to say, "the media has been hooked on the gay gene idea." I certainly agree, and it is this incessant misreading of the research on sexuality that seems most tenacious.

After so many false reports, I really have to wonder why the media is hooked on the idea. Why would journalists not want to get all sides or interpretations of existing research? Why are so many reporters bound and determined to find *one* answer for a complicated issue like human sexuality?

I don't know, but I guess I am just as determined to ask why. ■

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His research "Initial Empirical and Clinical Findings Concerning the Change Process for Ex-Gays," was published in the June 2002 issue of the American Psychological Association's publication *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*.