

Who Are the Metrosexuals?

Variations in prenatal brain masculinization may predispose some men to feel less masculine, but not all such men consider themselves homosexual

by Louis A. Berman, Ph.D.

The buzzword "metrosexual" sprung from the satirical mind of Mark Simpson, who is contemporary England's Oscar Wilde. In a 1994 article, he pointed to "a new, narcissistic, self-conscious kind of masculinity produced by film, advertising and glossy magazines. . . I meant it both as cheeky satire and sober observation."

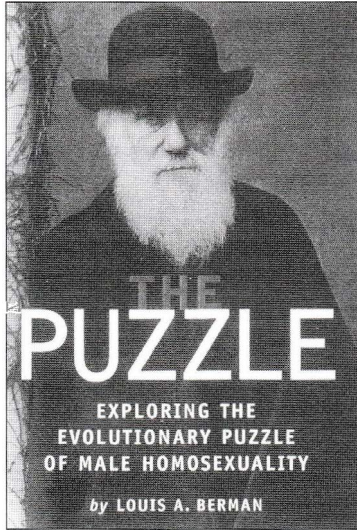
In other words, Simpson was beginning to notice urban gentlemen who were adopting many of the traits and interests of homosexual men—narcissistic, self-conscious ways, an interest in grooming, fashion, and style—but they were not homosexual.

Simpson waggishly coined the word "metrosexual," suggesting that these dandies were most likely to be seen in metropolitan, rather than provincial, areas.

Soon enough, a British marketing research firm zeroed in on this market for male fragrances, hair color, grooming aids, clothing and other accessories for good living. It was reported that 10 to 15 per cent of some skin care products intended for women, were already being bought by men for their own use.

British market research uncovered characteristics of this subculture that went far beyond Simpson's 1994 conception. In addition to their narcissism and fashion-consciousness, metrosexuals were found to be softer, more sensitive, more artistic, more domestic, more romantic, and less interested in business competition.

One market researcher described the metrosexual as "a straight man in touch with his feminine side. One who likes kids, likes helping out around the house, and who dreams more of growing old with the woman he loves than he does of being a hero or business tycoon." In 2002, Mark



Simpson wrote that when he coined the term eight years ago, he was "not being completely serious. No one has been more surprised than I by the rapidity with which metrosexuality has conquered the Western world."

Now for a psychological commentary on this phenomenon. What we are witnessing is, in part, a by-product of our society's increased respect for homosexual men.

Openly gay men now hold high-profile, high status positions in virtually all walks of life. In the old days, a man would be shunned, openly ridiculed, or even punished if he were suspected of being homosexual. Today, the risk is much lower. Today, men are less afraid to be mistaken for a homosexual. These straight guys are comfortable even though they may look gay. They more freely yield to their impulse to adorn themselves, to display their artistic or nurturant side.

What is the origin of a man's "feminine side," which he is more willing to act out today, than was true in earlier generations? Is this the imitation of adored (or dominating) female figures—Mother, big sisters, woman teachers? More and more evidence is piling up that variations in what have been called "gender-discordant traits" are based on variations in prenatal brain masculinization, a phenomenon that I take up in detail in my book, *THE PUZZLE, Exploring the Evolutionary Puzzle of Male Homosexuality*.

According to this viewpoint, what we see in the free unfolding of men's softer side is a relaxation of the Anglo-Saxon male's more traditional vigilance against revealing his less masculine tendencies.

One cannot understand the brain-embeddedness of a male's less masculine traits without recognizing the fact

that female development is the default path of the mammalian fetus. In other words, an embryo always develops into a female unless, at a certain stage of prenatal development, testosterone floods the embryo and masculinizes the brain and sex organs.

There is much evidence from the animal laboratory to support the belief that there is a curve of variation in brain masculinity (but not in genital masculinization). Some brain tissue is presumed to be genetically more resistant to masculinization than others. It seems likely that there is a difference in brain wiring that is expressed by differences in brain-discordance.

Some degree of brain-derived gender discordance is biologically functional. It may actually make a man more appealing to a woman if she sees in her potential mate more than an aggressive, competitive macho male. It is not unusual for a female to be attracted to males who seem to be capable of tenderness, compassion, and intuition, who are likely to share the tasks of child care and household management.

It would be more accurate to call these traits not a man's feminine side but part of his pre-masculinized nature. These behavioral characteristics are part of his original nature, just as the nipples on man's chest are not a mark of feminization, but part of a male's original nature.

In a *Chicago Tribune* article, Lisa, a public relations account executive, describes her metrosexual mate: "It's actually great to have a guy who loves to cook, can hold his own when discussing curtain choices and enjoys shopping for everything from clothes to power tools. . . . But when he gets into a room with men and they are talking about hunting, fishing, basketball, he has no clue what they're talking about."

The article adds that Lisa "loves her spouse's openness and says his nature enriches their relationship." Lisa is quoted to say, "I don't ever have to worry about him coming home at 2 a.m. because he's been out drinking beer, trying to pick up women at the bar. He's very family-oriented."

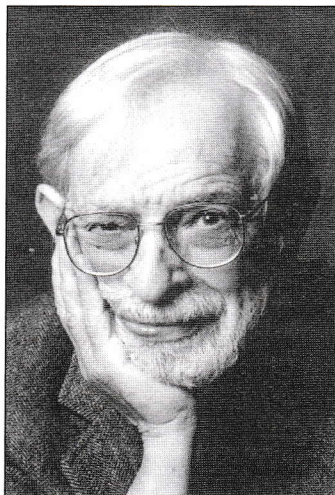
How is low brain-masculinization related to homosexuality? Some males (but not others) are troubled by their psychic kinship to females. "I am a male with a female brain," would express their shameful secret. They are burdened by a sense of inferiority, by a feeling of deficit. They adore and worship masculinity.

With sexual maturity, this adoration expresses itself in a wish to penetrate and be penetrated by another male, and to incorporate the body fluids of another male, as if this incorporation would correct their "masculine deficit." (This

impulse makes some homosexual men tragically resistant to safe sex.)

What about the "metro" in metrosexual, and the implication that gender-discordant tendencies are the product of an urban environment? In 1996, a gay researcher, Will Fellows, published a study that debunked the idea that homosexuality sprang from life in the wicked city.

Fellows had interviewed about a hundred gay men who were born and grew up on midwestern farms. Their recollections showed that from earliest childhood these farm boys were more interested in helping mother around the kitchen than in helping father in the field, liked growing flowers more than growing farm crops, enjoyed working with baby animals and chickens more than riding a tractor. In many ways, they became painfully aware of how different were their tendencies than their brothers', their father's, and their male neighbors'.



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In *THE PUZZLE*, I cite extensively from Fellows' study, for it demonstrates so dramatically how early gender-discordant traits can emerge in a very rural environment. (While still living on the farm, boys discover their homosexual tendencies. They move to the city to place themselves

in a friendlier environment. That seems to be the connection between homosexuality and the big city.)

Most importantly, perhaps, "discovery" of the metrosexual supports my conjecture, made in *THE PUZZLE*, that a sizeable number of men possess the congenital tendencies that may or may not lead to homosexuality.

This conjecture is supported by the finding that if one member of a set of male identical twins is homosexual, his twin brother may or may not be homosexual. Also supportive is the finding that in a longitudinal study of gender-discordant boys, only about half of them were homosexuals at adulthood.

Homosexuality appears to result from the interaction of genetic factors and experience. But exactly what kinds of experience trigger homosexual development? There is much clinical observation, but there are still many unanswered questions that good research could settle.

But so long as mainstream psychology holds that homosexuality is not a problem, it is unlikely that such research will be pursued. ■

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