

What God Has Joined Together?

A Christian Case for Gay Marriage

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Five

Understanding Sexual Orientation

Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding.

—Proverbs 3:13

SO FAR WE HAVE suggested dialoguing across the “great divide” in a spirit of humility. We have explained the human need to belong. We have indicated why marriage, and the decline of marriage, matters. And we have suggested routes to a marriage- and child-supporting culture.

Does the case for marriage extend to same-sex marriage? Before considering arguments for and against welcoming gay and lesbian people into marriage, let’s consider what research has revealed about sexual orientation. What do most informed people of faith, whether “traditionalists” or “progressives,” now agree upon? What’s still at issue?

Note that we focus not on “homosexuality” but on *sexual orientation*. An analogy may help: People sometimes ask, “What causes left-handedness?” But that’s not the scientific question. Rather, researchers compare right- and left-handed people in order to discern what influences *handedness* (everyone’s). Thus, the scientifically more appropriate question is, why are most people right-handed and some people left-handed? What predicts this variation?

Likewise, researchers don’t ask, “What causes homosexuality?” Instead they compare the anatomy, physiology, and experiences of

straight and gay people in hopes of discerning what influences *sexual orientation*. Their studies shed as much light on heterosexuality as on homosexuality. Thus this chapter is about *everyone's* sexual orientation, ours and yours included.

Sexual orientation means an attraction toward members of either the other sex (heterosexual orientation) or one's own sex (homosexual orientation). Such attraction is revealed in our longings and fantasies. Those two categories, heterosexual and homosexual, will be our focus.

But isn't there a continuum of orientations, from exclusively heterosexual through bisexual to exclusively homosexual? Actually, although there is some variability, sexual orientation is one of the few human traits that are “bimodal” rather than distributed along a bell-shaped curve. Only about one in two hundred sexually active respondents in anonymous national surveys—12 out of 7076 Dutch adults in one recent survey;¹ 88 out of 14,460 American adults in National Opinion Research Center surveys²—report having both male and female partners in the last year. The percentage is only slightly higher if a longer reference period is taken into consideration.³ These few people surely included some homosexual persons in heterosexual marriages. Thus the number of actively bisexual people—those who feel and enact sexual attraction to both sexes—appears minimal. With sexuality as with handedness, nearly everyone is disposed in one direction or the other, with few being genuinely ambidextrous. This is most clearly so with men. Women's sexuality, as we will see, varies more over time. Few people claim to be asexual (having “never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all”)—only 1 percent, according to one recent large survey.⁴ (A discussion of transgendered and intersexed persons is beyond our scope in this book.)

The Common Ground

Despite well-publicized and sometimes passionate disagreements about sexual orientation within the family of faith, there is also much agreement. Although differences always command attention,

our conversation will be more civil if we remember that what unites us is deeper than what divides us. And we need to start with our faith.

The common ground in the basics of our faith. Today's followers of Jesus share a faith that God exists, loves us, and made this love manifest with a supreme redeeming act, which also serves as the supreme model for our own love for others. "Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Whatever our differences, we agree that everyone is an image bearer of God, with immeasurable worth, and deserves respect. (Christians have therefore traveled the world in establishing hospitals and schools, knowing that compassion extended to even the least of those Jesus called his brothers and sisters is the same as compassion extended to him.) And whatever our disputes, we share a common hope—that death will not have the last word. In the end, the very end, offered the fourteenth-century mystic Dame Julian of Norwich, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

We also, as we noted in chapter 1, generally agree that truth is revealed through God's word (Scripture) and God's works (nature). Furthermore, we agree that pride is a deadly temptation, that we all are fallible and at times broken, and that we are called to worship God with an "ever reforming" spirit of humility. Finally, most of today's followers of Jesus agree that sexual fidelity and covenantal relationships are biblically supported and conducive to well-being. Thus we welcome marriage-supporting media and economic policies, and we celebrate the co-nurturing of children by adults who are committed to each other and to their children's welfare.

We Christians come in many varieties—mainline and evangelical, Pentecostal and Catholic, liberal and conservative. But on the big-ticket items we are discussing here, followers of Jesus pretty much agree. Whatever our differences, we stand on common ground.

The common ground in what we know about sexual orientation. Most of us not only agree on the basics of our faith but also have found some common ground in our emerging understanding of sexual orientation. We are likely to agree

- *on the numbers.* Homosexual orientation is not so common as the old “10 percent of people are gay” myth suggested. (As a general rule, distrust big round numbers offered without supporting data.) In surveys, with their privacy protected, something closer to 3 or 4 percent of men and 1 to 2 percent of women report being exclusively homosexual. In the National Opinion Research Center surveys, 975 percent of sexually active Americans report having only other-sex partners during the prior year. (Statistics tell us only the facts about something, not what to *do* about the facts. Whether left-handers are 3 percent or 10 percent of the population doesn’t answer the question of whether left-handedness should be corrected or accepted.)
- *on compassion.* Acts of derision, harassment, intimidation, and violence toward anyone violate Christ’s teaching. Our faith mandates love.
- *on the incompleteness of the science.* The causes of sexual orientation are just beginning to be understood. Because the scientific story is far from complete, any simplistic pronouncement (“Sexual orientation is programmed by our genes!”) likely errs.
- *that science, rightly interpreted, has much to offer.* As people of faith in times past have allowed science to inform their understanding of the physical universe, so scientific findings may today inform our understanding of sexual orientation.
- *that science cannot, however, resolve values questions.* Even if science someday explains *why* people differ in sexual orientation, we will still have to decide whether to regard a homosexual orientation as a normal variation (as with left-handedness) or as an abnormality to be corrected (as with dyslexia). And whether straight or gay, we all face moral choices over options that include abstinence, fleeting “hook-ups,” and long-term

commitment. As scientific explanation advances, moral responsibility does not recede.

Differences in How We View Sexual Orientation

Despite this considerable and growing common ground, differences remain. But by reaching across to one another in Christian love, we can view our differences as springboards for conversation rather than contention. Friends of kindred faith wrestle with their lingering differences on two key issues:

- *Should sexual orientation be regarded as a natural, given disposition or as a moral choice?* Is our sexual orientation something we're endowed with, by some combination of biological and environmental factors, or do our own choices also shape our sexual attractions? (The rest of this chapter engages this question.)
- *Can those wishing to change their sexual orientation undertake the effort with some reasonable hope of success?* Or are they better advised to "accept with serenity the thing that cannot be changed"? (The next chapter engages this question.)

One's answers to these two key questions, combined with one's biblical understanding, inform the Christian debate over two other big issues:

- *Are sexual intimacy and marriage for heterosexuals only?* Should gay and lesbian people refrain from expressing their sexuality even if in a committed relationship that is the social equivalent of marriage? Should the church advise celibacy for those not disposed to heterosexual marriage? Or is the satisfaction of our needs to belong and to share intimacy something for all humans to enjoy under a vow of commitment, faithfulness, and love?
- *How should the church respond to homosexual people?* Should monogamous, homosexual Christians be welcomed into church membership? Be invited to teach or sing in the choir? Be able to hold church offices? Be ordained?

Is Sexual Orientation a Choice or a Given Disposition?

“Homosexuality is a choice that people make, while race is something you cannot change,” claims Rena Lindevaldsen, a lead attorney in the Liberty Counsel’s efforts to challenge same-sex marriages.⁵

Others disagree. One lesbian Christian said that telling her she chose her sexual orientation is like telling her she chose the color of her eyes. “The color of my eyes is simply a natural part of me,” she explained. “Oh, I could cover them up for a while, wear blue or brown contacts, but that wouldn’t change the reality. My eyes are green, and my sexual orientation is gay.”⁶

Is sexual orientation, as many believe, a moral or lifestyle choice? (Was your sexual orientation your choice?) Are heterosexuals those who’ve chosen wisely? Are homosexuals simply misbehaving heterosexuals?

The persistence of one’s sexual attraction to either men or women suggests that sexual orientation is, for most if not for all, an enduring disposition. So, what determines our disposition?

Does Environment Influence Sexual Orientation?

Under Freud’s influence, early explanations of sexual orientation assumed that childhood experiences bent the twig. To sleuth the twig-bending factors, researchers have asked questions such as these:

- Is homosexuality linked to problems in a child’s relationships with parents, such as a boy’s relationship with a domineering mother and an ineffectual father, or a possessive mother and a hostile father?
- Does homosexuality involve a fear or hatred of people of the other gender, leading individuals to direct their sexual desires toward members of their own sex?
- As children, were many homosexuals molested, seduced, or otherwise sexually victimized by an adult homosexual?

The answers appear to be no, no, and no. Consider, for example, the findings of lengthy Kinsey Institute interviews with nearly one thousand homosexuals and five hundred heterosexuals.⁷ The investigators assessed nearly every imaginable influence on sexual orientation—parental relationships, childhood sexual experiences, peer relationships, dating experiences. Their findings: neither a close maternal relationship nor having a cold father explained the variation in sexual orientation.

And consider this: If “distant fathers” were more likely to produce homosexual sons, then shouldn’t boys growing up in father-absent homes more often be gay? (They are not.) And shouldn’t the rising number of such homes have led to a noticeable increase in the gay population? (It has not.)

Homosexual people do, however, appear more often in certain populations. For example, one study of the biographies of 1,004 eminent people found homosexual and bisexual people overrepresented (11 percent of the sample) especially among poets (24 percent), fiction writers (21 percent), and artists and musicians (15 percent).⁸ In America’s dozen largest cities, the percentage of men identifying themselves as gay jumps to 9 percent, compared with only 1 percent in rural areas.⁹ (The 2000 U.S. Census found the highest percentage of same-sex unmarried partners in San Francisco, Miami, and Santa Fe.)¹⁰ Probably, however, this reflects people’s gravitating to agreeable vocations and cities rather than vocation and location affecting sexual orientation.

So, what does determine sexual orientation? One environmental theory proposes that people develop same-sex erotic attachments if segregated by gender at the time their sex drive matures.¹¹ Indeed, gay men tend to recall going through puberty somewhat earlier, when peers are more likely to be all male.¹² But even in a tribal culture in which homosexual behavior is expected of all boys before marriage, heterosexuality prevails.¹³ (As this example illustrates, homosexual *behavior* does not always indicate a homosexual *orientation*.) Another environmental theory proposes the opposite: that people develop romantic attachments to those who *differ*

from, and thus are more fascinating than, the peers they associate with while growing up. “The exotic becomes erotic.”¹⁴

Environmental theories of sexual orientation continue to come and go, and one of these theories may someday find scientific support. For now, we can say that if there are environmental factors that influence sexual orientation, we do not yet know with any certainty what they are. Even today’s more tolerant and accepting environment seems not to have altered rates of sexual orientation (despite fears about the influence of gay role models such as Ellen DeGeneres and Elton John). Nor has being reared in a straight, conservative home predetermined sexual orientation, as the gay or lesbian children of Vice President Dick Cheney, of the conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly, and of Pete Knight, a California state senator and the sponsor of California’s anti-gay-marriage Proposition 22, could testify. Moreover, children reared by gay parents, like children reared by straight parents, usually grow up to be heterosexual. The bottom line: if someone were to ask us, “What can I do to influence my child’s sexual orientation?” our answer would have to be “We haven’t a clue.”

Does Biology Influence Sexual Orientation?

As every psychology student knows, life experience and biology interact. A biological predisposition to obesity gets expressed in environments that offer abundant rich food with minimal energy expenditure. Biology plus environment equals obesity. Moreover, experiences leave footprints in our biology. Learning is written on the brain. Also, biological traits influence how our environment reacts to us. Studies indicate that homosexual men often were gender-nonconformist boys who had little interest in physical sports. This could have either an environmental or a biological explanation—or both. Perhaps, for example, a naturally less masculine-seeming child might be treated in ways that steer him toward homosexuality.

In general, though, environmental explanations of sexual orientation have receded and biological explanations have expanded.

“Evidence suggesting that biology plays an important role in the development of male and female sexual orientation is rapidly increasing,” concluded psychologist Scott Hershberger after reviewing the available research.¹⁵ Many other scientists agree with him. Data suggesting this conclusion are striking.

Same-sex attraction in animals. Two male penguins named Wendell and Cass at Coney Island’s New York Aquarium are devoted, sexually active partners. So, too, are the Central Park Zoo penguins Silo and Roy. These and other “gay” penguins have much company in the wild kingdom. Nature is teeming with animals in which same-sex relations have, at least on occasion, been observed—more than 450 species, reports Bruce Bagemihl in *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*.¹⁶ The list includes grizzlies, gorillas, flamingos, owls, and even several species of salmon. In these animals, as in humans, opposite-sex contact is prevalent or the species would die out; but a minority exhibit same-sex attraction. Among rams, for example, some 6 to 10 percent—what breeding sheep ranchers call the “duds”—display same-sex attraction by shunning ewes and seeking to mount other males.¹⁷

Genes and sexual orientation. We can look for biological influences at three levels—genetic, neural, and biochemical (see Fig. 1). Our genes help organize our brains, which operate electrochemically. So, starting at the genetic level, can sexual orientation be passed on as part of heredity?

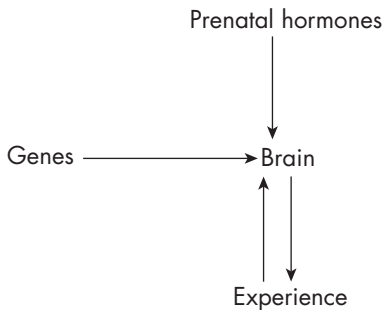


Fig. 1. Possible influences on sexual orientation

The available research does not, as yet, give a clear and consistent answer. There is, however, some tendency for sexual orientation to run in families.¹⁸ “Studies indicate that male homosexuality is more likely to be transmitted from the mother’s side of the family,” reports a behavior-genetics team led by Robert Plomin.¹⁹

Because family members share environments as well as genes, scientists prefer to examine genetic factors by comparing fraternal twins (who typically share environments) with identical twins (who also are genetic clones). A pair of early 1990s studies conducted by Northwestern University psychologist Michael Bailey and his colleagues looked at the twin siblings of homosexual men and women.²⁰ Their finding: compared with fraternal twins, identical twins were more than doubly likely to share a homosexual orientation.

Because many identical twins have differing sexual orientation, we know that genes aren’t the whole story. Moreover, new studies using more diverse samples of Australian and American twins have found somewhat lower rates of sexual similarity—although, again, identical twins were more likely than fraternal twins to share homosexual feelings.²¹ This is the sort of pattern we expect to see when genes are having some influence but other factors are, too.

The search for an X-chromosome-linked “gay gene” also has yielded mixed results. With a single transplanted gene, scientists have caused male fruit flies to display homosexual behavior.²² With humans, one well-publicized apparent discovery of a gay gene has not been consistently replicated, leaving the finding in doubt. One National Institutes of Health–funded five-year study of the genetics of male homosexuality, conducted by Alan R. Sanders and begun in the fall of 2003, will analyze blood samples from some one thousand pairs of homosexual brothers.²³ In time, we likely will know more.

The very idea of genetic influences on sexual orientation is puzzling. Just as people ask, “Why do men have nipples?” so people ask why “gay genes,” had they ever existed, would not have disappeared from the human gene pool (given that same-sex partners cannot reproduce). Researchers offer several possible answers:

- *Kin reproductive success.* One theory reminds us that many of our genes also reside in our kin. Perhaps, then, gay people's genes lived on through the survival and reproductive success of their relatives (who also carry many of those genes.)
- *A composite of adaptive traits.* Another theory speculates that different genes predispose different adaptive traits that, in combination, may result in homosexuality. Different genes, for example, may predispose attractive male traits such as sensitivity, empathy, and kindness. When the genetic lottery brings these all together, perhaps, in combination with unusual hormone levels in the womb, homosexuality may be the natural result.
- *The mother's successful genetics.* A recent Italian study confirms what others have found—that homosexual men have more homosexual relatives among their maternal than their paternal relatives. The data also showed that maternal relatives of homosexual men produce more offspring than those of heterosexuals.²⁴ Perhaps, surmised the researchers, genes that predispose a reproductive advantage in mothers and aunts can influence sexual orientation in their sons and nephews.

The brain and sexual orientation. Neuroscientists have uncovered some brain structures that appear linked to sexual orientation. Simon LeVay discovered one such structure while studying sections of the hypothalamus taken from deceased heterosexual and homosexual people.²⁵ As a gay scientist, LeVay wanted to do “something connected with my gay identity.” He knew he had to avoid biasing the results, so he did the study “blind,” without knowing which donors were gay. For nine months he peered through his microscope at a cell cluster known to be involved in sexuality. Then one morning, he sat down and broke the codes. His discovery: the cell cluster was reliably larger in heterosexual men than in women and homosexual men. As the brain difference became apparent, “I was almost in a state of shock. . . . I took a walk by myself on the cliffs over the ocean. I sat for half an hour just thinking what this might mean.”²⁶

Given that everything psychological is also biological (we are embodied beings), it should not surprise us that brains differ with sexual orientation. The critical question is, when did the brain difference begin? At conception? In the womb? During childhood or adolescence? Did experience produce the difference? Or was it genes or prenatal hormones (or genes via prenatal hormones)?

LeVay does not view this neural center as a center for sexual orientation; rather, he sees it as an important part of the neural pathway engaged in sexual behavior. He acknowledges that sexual behavior patterns influence the brain's anatomy. In fish, birds, rats, and humans, brain structures vary with experience—including sexual experience, reports sex researcher Marc Breedlove.²⁷ So maybe, said skeptics, the sexual history, or the AIDS illness that claimed many of these lives, explained the difference. But LeVay believes that in this case it's more likely that brain anatomy influences sexual orientation. "Gay men simply don't have the brain cells to be attracted to women," he conjectured.²⁸ His hunch recently was confirmed by the discovery of a similar hypothalamic difference between the 6 to 10 percent of rams that display same-sex attraction and the 90-plus percent attracted to females.²⁹ Moreover, University of London psychologists Qazi Rahman and Glenn Wilson report that "the neuroanatomical correlates of male homosexuality differentiate very early postnatally, if not prenatally."³⁰

Neuroscientists Laura Allen and Roger Gorski have independently concluded that another part of brain anatomy also predicts sexual orientation. Their discovery, which awaits replication, is that a section of the anterior commissure (fibers connecting right and left hemispheres) is one-third larger in homosexual men than in heterosexual men.³¹ All in all, concluded Brian Gladue in a research synopsis, "the emerging neuroanatomical picture is that, in some brain areas, homosexual men are more likely to have female-typical neuroanatomy than are heterosexual men."³²

Prenatal hormones and sexual orientation. Hormone levels in adults give us no clue to people's sexual orientation. But prenatal

hormone exposure does. In animals and some exceptional human cases, sexual orientation has been altered by abnormal prenatal hormone conditions. The German researcher Gunter Dorner pioneered this research by manipulating a fetal rat's exposure to male hormones, thereby "inverting" its sexual behavior toward rats of the other sex.³³ Feminized male rats (male rats deprived of prenatal testosterone) will raise their rump, inviting other male rats to mount them; masculinized female rats (female rats exposed to excess prenatal testosterone) will mount other females. Female sheep will likewise show homosexual behavior if their pregnant mothers are injected with testosterone during a critical gestation period.³⁴

With humans, a critical period for the brain's neural-hormonal control system may exist between the middle of the second month and the fifth month after conception.³⁵ Exposure to the hormone levels typically experienced by female fetuses during this time appears to predispose the person (whether female or male) to be attracted to males in later life.

Prenatal influences may also help account for some other curious findings:

- *Male birth order.* Men who have older brothers are somewhat more likely to be gay, report Canadian psychologists Ray Blanchard and Anthony Bogaert.³⁶ Assuming that the odds of homosexuality are roughly 3 percent among first sons, they rise to about 4 percent among second sons, 5 percent among third sons, and so on for each additional older brother. The reason for this phenomenon—what researchers call the *fraternal birth-order effect*—is unclear. Blanchard suspects a defensive maternal immune response to foreign substances produced by male fetuses. The maternal antibodies may become stronger after each pregnancy with a male fetus and may prevent the fetus's brain from developing in a male-typical pattern. Women with

older sisters, and women who were womb mates of twin brothers, exhibit no such sibling effect.³⁷

- *Fingerprint patterns.* Curiously, in some (but not all) studies, gay men have had fingerprint patterns rather like those of heterosexual women.³⁸ Most people have more fingerprint ridges on their right hand than on their left. Jeff Hall and Doreen Kimura first observed that this difference was greater for heterosexual males than for females and gay males.³⁹ Given that fingerprint ridges are complete by the sixteenth fetal week, the researchers suspected that the difference was due to prenatal hormones.
- *Handedness.* Prenatal hormones also are a possible explanation for why data from twenty studies revealed that “homosexual participants had 39 percent greater odds of being non-right-handed.”⁴⁰
- *Hearing.* Lesbians may likewise have more male-typical anatomy. In one study, the cochlea and hearing system of lesbians had developed in a way that was intermediate between those typical of heterosexual females and those typical of heterosexual males, a difference that seemed attributable to prenatal hormonal influence.⁴¹
- *Spatial ability.* One of the few consistent and fairly substantial gender differences is males’ greater average spatial abilities, as illustrated in their scores on mental rotation tasks such as the task illustrated in figure 2. (Which of the four figures could be rotated to match the target figure at the top?) A study by Qazi Rahman and colleagues with an ample sample of heterosexual and homosexual males and females illustrates the common finding that homosexual persons (both male and female) score *between* heterosexual males and females.⁴²

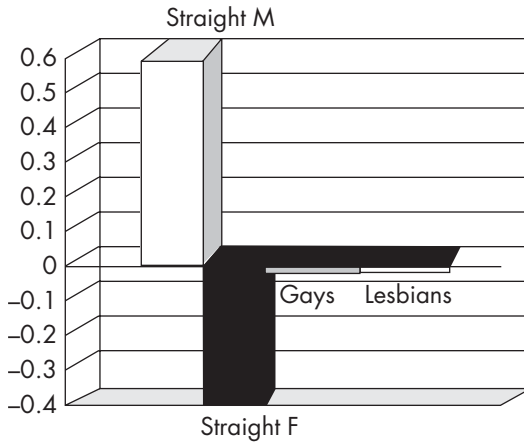
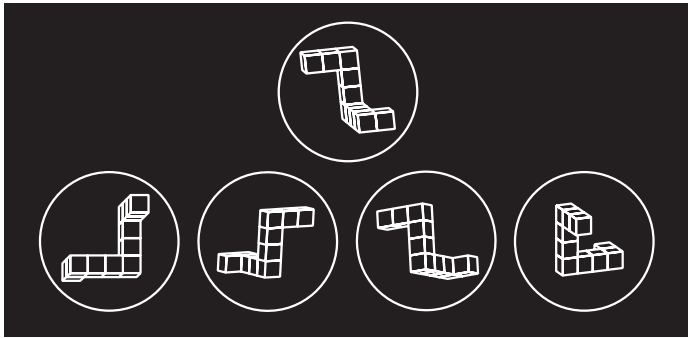


Fig. 2. Mental rotation scores, by sexual orientation (Z-scores from Qazi Rahman, Glenn Wilson, and Sharon Abrahams, "Biosocial Factors, Sexual Orientation and Neurocognitive Functioning," *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 29 [2004]: 867–81. Sixty people per group.)

Conclusions

Accumulating evidence points to brain differences and prenatal hormonal influences as helping to explain sexual orientation. Studies have also found that heterosexual and homosexual individuals vary in other ways unlikely to have been influenced by upbringing or choice, including fingerprint patterns and spatial abilities, and also physical size (gay men tend to weigh less), and

even subtle differences in relative finger lengths, female eye-blink patterns, and length of sleep (one study found gays and lesbians sleeping somewhat less, and other research has found a brain difference that could account for such a difference).⁴³ The tendency of homosexual individuals of both sexes to fall between heterosexual females and males crosses many of these traits.

Some of these findings are preliminary, and some may be disconfirmed by further research. Even so, the table of evidence has an increasing number of legs underneath, legs supporting the conclusion that sexual orientation is naturally predisposed. Virtually all of us agree that this conclusion also finds support in our own experience. We didn't choose our fantasies and longings directed toward persons of our own sex or persons of the other sex. Like Web-site pop-up ads, they just started appearing. The key is arousal, not behavior.

Two cautionary notes: First, women's sexual orientation has been less often studied (there are more gay men than lesbians) and is, as one recent scientific review put it, "poorly understood."⁴⁴ Women's sexual orientation also tends to be less strongly felt and potentially more fluid and changeable than men's, note psychologists Lisa Diamond, Anne Peplau, and Linda Garnets.⁴⁵ Men's lesser sexual variability is apparent in this and many other ways as well, notes social psychologist Roy Baumeister.⁴⁶ Across time, across cultures, and across situations, women's sexual drive and interests are more flexible and varying than men's—a phenomenon Baumeister calls the gender difference in "erotic plasticity." Diamond writes that some of the recent questioning and reconceptualization of women's sexuality "does not deny potential biological contributions to women's same-gender sexual desires" but grants them less weight.⁴⁷

Second, we as yet glimpse only in a dim mirror the precise ways in which biology and experience interact. Rather than specifying sexual orientation, perhaps biological factors predispose a temperament that influences sexuality in the context of experience.

Perhaps, theorizes Cornell psychologist Daryl Bem, genes carry a code for prenatal hormones and brain anatomy, which predispose temperaments that lead children to prefer gender-typical or gender-atypical activities and friends, which preference then directs their sexual orientation.⁴⁸ If experience does play a role in programming sexual orientation, it's just an alternate method for shaping the brain. (Nature and nurture both make deposits in the brain, notes neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux, much as you get the same result whether wiring money into your bank account or handing cash to a teller).⁴⁹

Regardless of the process, the consistency of the genetic, neural, and biochemical findings has swung the pendulum toward a greater appreciation of biological influences. If biology indeed proves critical (perhaps especially so in certain environments), such would explain why we do not experience our own sexual orientation as a choice.

But is it subject to change? To that we turn next.