

The background of the entire page is a photograph showing the lower legs and feet of two people walking away from the camera on a highly reflective, polished floor. The scene is lit by a low sun, creating a strong golden glow and long, dark shadows. The person on the left is slightly ahead of the person on the right.

The Only Question That Matters

Do People Choose Their Sexual Orientation?

By Chandler Burr



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The Only Question That Matters

The raging debate about gay rights ultimately turns on one simple question. And, bizarrely, the fact that answering this question will put a definitive end to the national battle over gay rights is almost completely unknown, not only in America in general, but among gay people as well. At its core, the answer to this question is the only one that matters, the one that determines the most appropriate public policy course, and the one that will win the political struggle over gay rights: Is homosexuality a lifestyle choice or is homosexuality an inborn biological trait? Put another way, does someone choose to be gay or are they just born that way? You may be surprised to find out that we already know the answer to this question. In fact, surprising as it may be, we've known the answer for several decades.

The importance of this question to the debate about gay and lesbian rights in America has been clear for years. Poll after poll has shown that if sexual orientation is, in all human beings, an inborn trait like race, eye color, or gender, an overwhelming majority of Americans accept it—and support equal rights for gay people. In 1997, *U.S. News & World Report* and Bozell Worldwide, a global marketing company that specializes in gathering opinion data, did a nationwide poll on how American attitudes change in the face of evidence that traits are inborn. They surveyed several different traits including mental illness, alcoholism, drug addiction, and homosexuality. The results were dramatic. 41% of those surveyed strongly favored funding for alcohol and drug rehab. However, among those who then believed alcoholism and drug addiction are biological 51% and 54% of them respectively favored this funding, which is over 10% higher—and as we are all aware now, on voting issues, a 10% change can determine most elections. 54% of all those polled strongly favored funding for mental illness research, while the figure was 63% among those who say it's genetic. But these stats were nothing compared to homosexuality. 45% of Americans favored gay rights. Among voters who believe homosexuality is a biological orientation, the figure was 70%.

The political power of the choice vs. sexual orientation question has

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actually *grown*: What was the single most contentious question in the 2004 Bush-Kerry debates? Bob Schieffer from CBS News asked both candidates, "Do you believe homosexuality is a choice?" The answer to this question has an amazingly high correlation to support for gay and lesbian equality. Case in point, a November 2004 poll by Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates asked about support for civil unions and gay marriage. 79% of people who think human beings are born with a sexual orientation support civil unions or civil marriage equality. Among those who believe being straight or gay is a choice, support for civil unions or civil marriage for gay people is only 22%. That's a difference of almost 60%. It's crystal clear that an American voter's view of sexual orientation is close to a foolproof predictor of the way he or she votes on gay rights.

All of which makes the debate astoundingly odd, given that we've known the answer to this question for years.

The Answer

A bit of Biology 101: For every human trait they study, clinicians and biologists assemble what's called a "trait profile," the sum total of all the data they have gathered clinically (clinical research basically means research done through 1. questions and 2. empirical observation to answer the questions) about a trait. Researchers gather groups of subjects from different areas of the world, question them about their trait, observe the trait in them, and record the data. The various aspects of the trait are precisely described: gradations and variations in eye color are assessed, eye color's correlation or lack thereof with gender, geography, race, or age is noted, scientists observe the way eye color is passed down through generations—all of which are clues as to

whether or not eye color is a biological trait. The data are summarized in papers and charts and published in the scientific literature. That, in sum, makes up the trait profile.

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Here is the profile of a trait on which clinical research has been done for decades. It is taken from the published scientific literature. The trait should be rather obvious:

1) This human trait is referred to by biologists as a "stable bimorphism"— it shows up in all human populations as two orientations— expressed behaviorally.

2) The data clinicians have gathered says that around 92% of the population has the majority orientation, 8% has the minority orientation.

3) Evidence from art history suggests the incidence of the two different orientations has been constant for five millennia.

4) The trait has no external physical, bodily signs. That means you can't tell a person's orientation by looking at them. And the minority orientation appears in all races and ethnic groups.



5) Since the trait itself is internal and invisible, the only way to identify an orientation is by observing the behavior or the reflex that expresses it. However—and this is crucial —

6) —because the trait itself is not a "behavior" but an internal, invisible orientation, those with the minority orientation can hide, usually due to coercion or social pressure, by behaving as if they had the majority orientation. Several decades ago, those with the minority orientation were frequently forced to behave as if they had the majority orientation — but internally the orientation remained the same and as social pressures have lifted, people with the minority orientation have been able to openly express it.

7) Clinical observation makes it clear that neither orientation of this trait is a disease or mental illness. Neither is pathological in any observable way.

8) Neither orientation is chosen.

- 9) Signs of one's orientation are detectable very early in children, often, researchers have established, by age two or three. And one's orientation probably has been defined at the latest by age two, and quite possibly before birth.

These data indicated that the trait was biological, not social, in origin, so the clinicians systematically asked more questions. And these started revealing the genetic plans that lay underneath the trait:

- 10) Adoption studies show that the orientation of adopted children is unrelated to the orientation of their parents, demonstrating that the trait is not created by upbringing or society.
- 11) Twin studies show that pairs of identical twins, with their identical genes, have a higher-than-average chance of sharing the same orientation compared to pairs of randomly selected individuals; the average rate of this trait in any given population — it's called the "background rate"—is just under 8%, while the twin rate is just above 12%, more than 50% higher.
- 12) This trait's incidence of the minority orientation is strikingly higher in the male population — about 27% higher—than it is in the female population. Many genetic diseases, for reasons we now understand pretty well, are higher in men than women.

- 13) Like the trait called eye color, the familial studies conducted by scientists show that the minority orientation clearly "runs in families," handed down from parent to child.



- 14) This pattern shows a "maternal effect," a classic telltale of a genetic trait. The minority orientation, when it is expressed in men, appears to be passed down through the mother.

Put all this data together, and you've created the trait profile. The trait just described is, of course, handedness.

Right-handedness is the majority orientation, left-handedness, the minority. It's handedness for which lefties are 27% more numerous in men than women, the background rate of left-handedness is 12% as opposed to 8%, and left-handedness is an unchosen, immutable, internal, instinctive orientation; you can force left-handed people to write with their right hands as was regularly done up through the 1950s in Catholic schools where left-handedness was believed to be evil and a moral failing, but that's just behavior masking the true orientation.

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It turns out that the trait profile for human handedness is astonishingly similar to a profile clinicians and geneticists have assembled of another human trait—sexual orientation. Heterosexuality, the majority orientation, accounts for roughly 95 percent of us, while homosexuality, the minority orientation, accounts for roughly 5 percent. (The "10 percent gay" figure has always been merely a statistical concoction of some overly-aggressive gay activists.) Clinical research clearly shows that homosexuality is heritable, like left-handedness. Neither trait correlates with any environmental factors. All the twin studies indicate biology. (Just to make it clear: Everyone agrees that being right- or left-handed is a biological trait, but probably there are some genes creating handedness and some non-genetic biological factors like hormones and neural structure. Which is why with many identical twins, one twin is right-handed and the other left-handed. The same for sexual orientation in identical twins. But—surprise—with sexual orientation, both twins share the trait homosexuality *more often* than they do left-handedness—yet no one would claim this is evidence that left-handedness is a "chosen alternative lifestyle" because left-handedness isn't seen as a moral issue—any more. It used to be. Then society changed.) The sexual orientation, like the handedness, of adopted children bears no relationship to that of adoptive parents (a powerful control demonstrating that environment is not a factor in creating sexual orientation). And both show a "maternal effect" pointing towards the X chromosome.

The Gay Gene

Two Trait Profiles—Human Handedness & Human Sexual Orientation

	Human Handedness	Human Sexual Orientation
Distribution [1]	Stable bimodalism, behaviorally expressed	Stable bimodalism, behaviorally expressed
Population distribution:	Majority orientation: 92% Minority orientation: 8%	Majority orientation: 95% Minority orientation: 5%
Population distribution of orientations according to sex	Male: 9% Female: 7%	Male: 6% Female: 3%
Male : Female ratio for minority orientations	1.3:1 Minority orientation 30% higher in men than women	2:1 Minority orientation 100% higher in men than women
Does minority orientation co-relate with a.) race? b.) geography? c.) culture? [2] d.) Mental or physical pathology? [3]	No No No No	No No No No
Age of first behavioral appearance of trait:	Around age 2	Around age 2
Is either orientation chosen?	No	No
Is either orientation pathological?	No	No
Can external expression be altered?	Yes	Yes

	Human Handedness	Human Sexual Orientation
Can Interior orientation be altered clinically?	No	No
Does trait run in families?	Yes	Yes
Pattern of familiarity:	"Maternal effect" implies X-chromosome linkage.	"Maternal effect" implies X-chromosome linkage. [4]
Parent-to-child segregation?[5]	Little to none. Handedness of adopted (i.e. non-biological) children shows no relationship to that of adoptive parents, indicating a genetic influence.	Little to none. Handedness of adopted (i.e. non-biological) children shows no relationship to that of adoptive parents, indicating a genetic influence.
Do siblings of those with minority orientation have increased rates of minority orientation?	Yes. Elevated rate of left-handedness in families with other left-handed children.	Yes. Elevated rate of homosexuality in families with other homosexual children.
Are monozygotic (identical) twins more likely to share minority orientation?	Yes	Yes
MZ concordance for minority orientation [6] (vs. background rate):	12% (vs. 8%, so MZ rate is 1.5 times higher)	25% (vs. 5%, so MZ rate is 5 times higher)

Genes Are Irrelevant to Choice

Here's another thing most people don't understand: We don't need to discover the genes to know that you don't "choose" your sexual orientation any more than we need to find eye-color genes to know you don't "choose" your eye color. We're closing in on the genes that make us heterosexual or homosexual. Geneticists, using the clinician's research, have begun to look for the underlying biological determinants of heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality. In ten, twenty, or thirty years, we'll probably have figured it out. We've got the basics already. In early 2005 in the highly-respected biomedical journal *Human Genetics*, the team of Dr. Brian Mustanski of the University of Illinois at Chicago identified three chromosomal regions linked to sexual orientation in men: 7q36, 8p12, and 10q26. Which is very interesting on a biological level—and it's interesting on a political level in that with only a little more research we may be able to start testing fetuses *in utero* for their sexual orientation—but it's completely irrelevant to the questions of choice, pathology, distribution in populations, etc. No one questions that blue eyes occur more frequently in Caucasians than in Asians, but we don't know this by finding the genes for eye color; we know it by clinical observation of the distribution of eye color in people all over the world. No one questions that about 7.8% of all human beings are left-handed, but we don't get that information from genes—in fact, as of yet, we have no idea where the genes for handedness are—we get it, again, from clinical observation. The Catholic Church's position is the empirically correct position—the Catholic Church holds that homosexual orientation is an "innate instinct," not a choice or a "lifestyle," and the Church didn't need genes to come to that conclusion; it used empirical observation. We don't need to find the genes for sexual orientation to know that people don't "choose" to be heterosexual any more than we need to find genes for handedness to know that people don't "choose" to be right-handed. Among scientists, this is as obvious as the sky being blue.

What This All Means

It is odd to move from this data, which has been accepted by scientists as an unremarkable given for years now, to the highly emotional reactions of those whose preconceptions are contradicted by the facts. The emotional pain is as strong as the conceptual upheaval, and the conceptual upheaval is total: The clinical data demand a change in the most basic terms in which the debate is carried out. The most basic, and yet for lots of people the most difficult, fact to

understand about sexual orientation is ridiculously simple: *Behavior is not sexual orientation*. When you understand that the human trait left-handedness is pretty much identical to homosexuality, you understand that a closeted gay man who, hiding from the world, marries a woman and secretly has sex with men isn't "bisexual"; he's homosexual and closeted and living in a society that pressures him into lying to this woman, to his co-workers, and to his family to camouflage his true nature. He's engaging in heterosexual behavior in order to fool the outside, but he's not heterosexual in any way.

Behavior isn't sexual orientation, and the difference between behavior and orientation is as obvious as lying: When you tell a lie, you know perfectly well what the truth is inside; if you felt you were able to tell the truth you'd behave differently and say different things. The scientific facts show how many people are incapable of even the most basic discussion of homosexuality. They refer to it as a "sexual preference" or a "lifestyle," though both these terms are as nonsensical as saying that a person has a "handedness preference" or that someone is leading the "left-handed lifestyle." If you can't comprehend the difference between a "lifestyle" and a sexual orientation, you'll never come out with the correct solution to the question of gay rights. And those people who can't comprehend sexual orientation, who think sexual orientation is somehow weirdly "chosen," who are terrified of the empirical, clinical fact that homosexuals and left-handed people simply have biological givens, the impact of this research is, unfortunately, terrifying. It renders ideologues on both sides of the political aisle apoplectic and irrational. The socially conservative far Right is so terrified of gay rights that it clings desperately to a demonstrable falsehood. The ideological Left is so deeply attached to the false Marxist dogma that biology can determine nothing about the character, thinking, and instincts of human beings (to the Left, we are all created entirely by social forces, which is why certain social programs are crucial) that it argues, as anti-scientifically as the Right, that the gay gene cannot exist. And it then argues that research into the gay gene shouldn't be done because it might be used to biologically eliminate gay people—which exactly contradicts its first contention that there is no gay gene.



But for those who are not fanatic Right or Left, for those able to consider facts over fear, facts are never scary. They simply are. And they are accepted and dealt with calmly. Years ago, an English politician, faced with new information, changed his position on an important policy. When an opponent rose to criticize him, he looked at him and said, "When the facts change, I change my opinion. What do you do?"

In this world, there are many who cling to mistaken ideas and old notions that comfort them, bring order to the chaos of life, and reassure them, and when these ideas are proven wrong, these people flounder helplessly. Science has never been easy. In 1859, an English naturalist named Charles Darwin published a book called *The Origin of the Species*. People forget that both Right *and* Left erupted in screams. The Conservatives assaulted Darwinism for threatening their creationist view of the human species. And Darwinism equally threatened the bizarre, Leftist, Rousseau view of human nature that propounded a utopian, perfectible mankind. Leftists feared and despised a Darwinist human nature that determined human instincts to selfishness, sexual desire, greed, violence, intelligence, social hierarchy, and gender. And now discover, sexual orientation. The majority orientation, heterosexuality. And the minority orientation, homosexuality. Both running in families, both un-chosen, non-pathological, and immutable. Just like left-handedness.

The upheaval is not new, and we struggle to help those whose beliefs are proven wrong and, then, suffer from this. In Chapter 21 of his 1871 *The Descent of Man*, Darwin wrote to the Right and to the Left: "Many of the views [I] have... advanced [here] are highly speculative, and some no doubt will prove erroneous; but I have in every case given the reasons which have led me to one view rather than another.... Man is [not] the work of a separate act of [divine] creation.... [When the facts are considered], we thus learn that man is descended from a hairy quadruped, furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in its habits.... The main conclusion arrived at in this work... will, I regret to think, be highly distasteful to many persons.... But we are not here concerned with hopes and fears, only with the truth as far as our reason allows us to discover it."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Chandler Burr is a journalist who contributes regularly to *The New York Times* and has written for *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker*. He is author of two books, 'A Separate Creation: The Search for the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation' and 'The Emperor of Scent: A Story of Perfume, Obsession, and the Last Mystery of the Senses.' He lives in New York City. His website is [website www.chandlerburr.com](http://www.chandlerburr.com)

Endnotes

From: *A Separate Creation: The Search for the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation*

Sources: I.C. McManus, "The Inheritance of Left-Handedness," *Biological Asymmetry and Handedness*, Ciba Foundation Symposium 162. (Chichester) John Wiley & Sons: 1991, 251-267; J. Michael Bailey and Richard Pillard, "A Genetic Study of Male Sexual Orientation," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 48 (December 1991): 1089-1096; Dean Hamer et al., "A Linkage Between DNA Markers on the X Chromosome and Male Sexual Orientation," *Science* 261 (July 16, 1993): 321-327

1. Both traits show a very small number of humans are ambi-oriented. Handedness shows almost none for both men and women—McManus: "Measures of handedness usually show a bimodal distribution with few subjects appearing truly ambidextrous." Sexual orientation, likewise, shows almost none for men but a still small though significant number for women.
2. However, may highly influence *expression*.
3. There is currently fierce debate over the existence of a correlation between left-handedness and certain pathologies, most notably schizophrenia. Some researchers assert that handedness, thought to reflect one aspect of brain lateralization, may be a result of a cause—in some manner a concomitant—of schizophrenia's etiology or pathophysiology. A study done by Charles Boklage ("Schizophrenia, brain asymmetry development, and twinning," *Biol. Psychiatry* 12, 19-35, 1997) powerfully developed the hypothesis, and Nancy Segal ("Origins and implications of handedness and relative birth weight for IQ in monozygotic pairs," *Neuropsychology* 27, 549-561, 1989) also supports some form of correlation. On the other hand, Luchins et al. (1980) and Lewis et al. (1989), in their respective replication attempts of Boklage's work, found little support, and Gottesman et al. ("Handedness in twins with schizophrenia: was Boklage correct?" *Schizophrenia Research* 9, 83-85, 1993) conclude that there does not appear to be an association between handedness and schizophrenia. (See Gottesman for a more complete bibliography.) The point, however, is the distinct difference between the trait profile of handedness and that of sexual orientation: while there is clinical debate in scientific and research circles over whether handedness correlates in some way with psychobiological abnormalities, no such debate exists regarding sexual orientation, and neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality are implicated in any mental or physical pathology.
4. A subset of gay men show the maternal effect. It does not appear in women.
5. "Segregation" is a genetic term of art meaning the way the trait shows up in individuals down through generations.
6. Indicates that genetics play a significantly greater role in sexual orientation than in handedness.

About the Liberty Education Forum

The Liberty Education Forum (LEF) is a nonpartisan educational foundation based in Washington, DC. LEF educates people about the importance of achieving freedom and fairness for all Americans, regardless of sexual orientation. The Liberty Education Forum's educational mission rests on the principle that knowledge has the power to transform our nation. LEF conducts a variety of educational outreach efforts on issues such as faith and sexual orientation, HIV/AIDS, Don't Ask, Don't Tell, family protections, and issues of basic fairness for gay and lesbian Americans. LEF conducts groundbreaking research on issues of importance to gay and lesbian Americans. Our highly acclaimed white papers have influenced government policy on employment non-discrimination, HIV/AIDS, and other issues.

The Liberty Education Forum is launching an important initiative to make new allies in parts of the country where large majorities oppose basic fairness for gay and lesbian Americans. LEF's new program, called "Reaching the Heartland," will develop new allies in the Middle American Heartland and South. This educational program aims to reach conservatives, Republicans, and people of faith as we spread our message of freedom and fairness throughout all parts of America. This new initiative will begin to change hearts and minds across America.

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