

SIMON LEVAY

GAY,
STRAIGHT,
AND THE
REASON
WHY



THE SCIENCE *of*
SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why: The Science of Sexual Orientation

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What causes a child to grow up gay or straight? In this book, neuroscientist Simon LeVay summarizes a wealth of scientific evidence that points to one inescapable conclusion: Sexual orientation results primarily from an interaction between genes, sex hormones, and the cells of the developing body and brain. LeVay helped create this field in 1991 with a much-publicized study in *Science*, where he reported on a difference in the brain structure between gay and straight men. Since then, an entire scientific discipline has sprung up around the quest for a biological explanation of sexual orientation. In this book, LeVay provides a clear explanation of where the science stands today, taking the reader on a whirlwind tour of laboratories that specialize in genetics, endocrinology, neuroscience, cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology, and family demographics. He describes, for instance, how researchers have manipulated the sex hormone levels of animals during development, causing them to mate preferentially with animals of their own gender. LeVay also reports on the prevalence of homosexual behavior among wild animals, ranging from Graylag geese to the Bonobo chimpanzee. Although many details remain unresolved, the general conclusion is quite clear: A person's sexual orientation arises in large part from biological processes that are already underway before birth. LeVay also makes it clear that these lines of research have a lot of potential because--far from seeking to discover "what went wrong" in the lives of gay people, attempting to develop "cures" for homosexuality, or returning to traditional explanations that center on parent-child relationships, various forms of "training," or early sexual experiences--our modern scientists are increasingly seeing sexual variety as something to be valued, celebrated, and welcomed into society.

Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why: The Science of Sexual Orientation Details

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Jessica says

This is a great book about sexual orientation. LeVay clearly has his own opinions about what causes homosexuality but he does a wonderful job of showing the research in an unbiased way and making note of when he is speaking of his own thoughts. There is some pretty scientific information included in the book but LeVay has a way of making it easy to understand. Very interesting and informative.

Maryam says

An interesting read, this book is written by a neuroscientist. LeVay refers to a lot of researches done in homosexuality and tries to do it on a unbiased way. I find the book informative but at some point similar data were repeated and with different results so it was a little bit confusing. Overall a great summary for scientific research done up to the book's publication point.

Theresa says

Very interesting book. Lots and lots of new information. Also challenged some assumptions I had about gender...very informative.

Meghan says

A lucidly-presented tour of the current state of published research on the subject which LeVay is multiply qualified to write.

Ernest says

First impressions: stunningly easy to understand; employs just the right amount of scientific skepticism; emotions and biases are kept nearly always at bay. Finally3x! This isn't the most in-depth book out there on sexual orientation -- Ramachandran's 'phantom penis' paper even appears to be absent -- but as far as I'm concerned, this is definitely one of the best.

Eric Black says

Spoiler

For those seeking cultural, sociological, or especially moral critique, you will find very little here. This is not LeVay's method.

LeVay is concerned primarily with reporting science, explaining research performed and the biases of particular studies and how those biases might be overcome through better-designed research. In that respect, it is definitely a worthy read.

For LeVay's ultimate conclusion (which I would say is also his presupposition), skip to the last paragraph of the book. His conclusion will not come as a surprise given his introduction. Knowing where he stands does not seem to affect the outcome of the research he reports.

Michelle says

This was an interesting read. Written by a scientist, and...it sounds like it. Not that it was especially technical, just lacked any authorial melodrama. He had a lot of sentences containing "but I'll talk about that in subsequent chapters," which I found a bit irritating. I also doubt this book will change people's mind about whether or not there is a biological basis for homosexuality--because studies are not all completely in agreement (of course) and people seem to have problems with that. So, it needed a little more explanation of science, perhaps. However, the book was interesting & the studies he discussed were informative and I feel like I learned a few things that I wasn't aware of.

Meagan says

This book is a great summary of all the scientific research that has been done on sexual orientation. LeVay discusses both his research and the research of others, as well as commenting on whether each study is reliable or not. He's very upfront and honest about what studies produced valid findings. So if you're worried about finding skeptical science in here, you may find some of that, but there's also a lot of compelling evidence that may very well point us in the right direction toward understanding sexuality.

Hlyan Htet Oo says

A worth-reading book for those who want to understand the science of Sexual Orientation.

Morgan Blackledge says

I conceptualize Human behavior as emerging from a confluence of biological, psychological and social factors.

As for the (tiered AF) nature v nurture debate.

I assume that nature (innate traits) writes the rough draft, and nurture (social and environmental factors) finishes the final edit.

Nature and nurture (a false dichotomy if ever there was one) feed back and forward upon one another and out pops everything Human.

When people debate between biological determinism and blank slate, contra-causal freedom I get crabby. It seems hopelessly last century.

Particularly when the subject becomes a political football.

The obvious examples that come to mind include the hideously inhuman eugenics movement of the early 20th century on the right, or the regressive and intellectually stultifying criticisms by factions on the 1960's era academic left of E. O. Wilson's writing on social biology i.e. evolutionary psychology in today's parlance.

Dude.

Trading out the lame AF nature v nurture (NvN) debate, for the LOVELY both nature and nurture (both/and) synthesis is one of my favorite things about this century.

That being said. Nothing resurrects the Spector of NvN like a reasonable, intelligent, systematic, naturalistic, adult conversation regarding the biological substrates of human sexuality.

Particularly sexual orientation.

On the left, you have people arguing that homosexuality is natural, but not biologically determined, because.....well I'm actually not sure why.

And on the right you have people arguing that homosexuality is against nature, and a lifestyle choice.

Umm no.

Not.

In Gay, Straight and the Reason Why, Simon LeVay offers a comprehensive, open minded overview of the current research on the biological, psychological and social determinants of human sexuality, gender identity and sexual orientation.

I love bio-psychology (an outdated term for what people are mostly calling neuroscience now-a-days).

Far from oppressive, I find biologically grounded explanations for human behavior to be normalizing and empowering.

And I LOVE the way LeVay putts Human sexuality on the slab for dissection. It's fun and it makes a lot of sense.

According to that one Darwin guy, animals (including us) evolved traits for survival and reproduction.

So I think it's at least a reasonable hypothesis that sexual orientation and gender expression are subject to

those same biologically based evolutionary processes.

I'm not saying we're just bags of chemicals.

Wait....no actually, I am.

Anyway. I for the life of me can't even come close to fathoming why everyone isn't in 100% agreement that this is the fucking coolest subject in the world!!!!

Get this book. If you're feeling adventurous, and if you're into this sort of thing it's a very interesting and entertaining read.

Allison says

LeVay presented varied and routinely underdeveloped areas of research methodically, objectively, and honestly, however, some of the research that he presented was, in my opinion, so shaky and devoid of anything significant or conclusive that I felt like he would have been best to omit it all together. That said, I think the book was often bogged down in explaining many different research methods and concepts when a clearer view of only the strongest studies might have been more convincing.

I took issue with LeVay's inclusion of some studies on cognitive traits that suggested a "gender-shift" in gay/lesbian subjects where the studies concluded things like that gay men performed worse on mental rotation tests than straight men, just like women do, and that they were therefore "feminized." If you read a book like Cornelia Finde's "Delusions of Gender" you can see that female aptitude (or lack thereof) in mental rotation tests is so hugely influenced by gender socialization and not by some intrinsic feminine cognitive shortfall that the tests hardly seem like accurate markers for "feminine."

Ultimately, I would only recommend this book to someone who had already read Finde's book or was otherwise well-versed in avoiding the traps of the gender binary. LeVay is well-intentioned and provides some intelligent information and some fascinating research, but there's certainly some room for improvement.

Zenninja says

This book puts forward a lot of solid scientific studies and manages to do so with fairly little bias, pointing out the potential failings of many its cited studies. It has done its research well (a good 1/4th of the book is bibliography. I can respect that XD).

However, while I must give the book credit for staying on topic, it left me with the feeling it has one glaring omission that was quite neatly skirted multiple times. Much of the research put forward in this book has to do with how hormone levels impact gender presentation and thus homosexuality. What it seems to me has been missed is the consideration that, while the two are undoubtedly related (according to the information presented in the book), it is also related to gender presentation or identification itself; sexual orientation is not the be all and end all here.

I don't expect this book to have gone into details on the topic of non-binary gender since it's topic WAS homosexuality, but it just seems to me that if the woman you are interviewing about liking women identifies as very masculine, perhaps you should clarify that? Maybe?

In many of the laboratory animal studies, the mice/rats were altered through hormones to behave like the opposite sex including (but NOT limited to) sexual orientation. To me this seems like it would have just as much bearing in a gender ID study than a sexual orientation one. Like, maybe instead of making lesbian mice they made "straight" FtM mice? Just food for thought.

The author did not conduct all the studies in the book so the oversight is not his fault, but he could have mentioned the possible discrepancy in terms a little clearer than he did.

Overall the book is a good summation of all the studies done on homosexuality over the years, but anyone with a knowledge of trans* issues may read it with a perpetual head tilt and/or the nagging feeling something potentially relevant is being overlooked.

Menglong Youk says

"Gay, Straight and the Reason Why: The Science of Sexual Orientation" mainly uses biology and psychology to deal with homosexuality. The author puts forward many researches conducted by various scientists for years and discusses each of them in this eleven-chapter book.

Not being knowledgeable enough in biology to understand most of the researches, I dare not assume that I know much about what's happening here. The author also admits that some researches can be doubtful. Homosexuality may be so complicated to be understood specifically, but one thing that we can be sure is that it is from no other than nature itself.

To quote a reviewer named Alison Dellit, "we still have no idea why some people are left-handed, but we have to accept who they are, and beating them for being different is a bad thing to do. Sometimes, it just feels to me that in our push to celebrate 'diversity', we really just want to expand the number of boxes we can fit people in to. You still have to choose one, we'll just add a new rainbow range of colours. I'm not sure if we'll ever get to the stage where we just accept people for who they are, without worrying who else fits into that category with them really just want to expand the number of boxes we can fit people in to. You still have to choose one, we'll just add a new rainbow range of colours. I'm not sure if we'll ever get to the stage where we just accept people for who they are, without worrying who else fits into that category with them."

Michael says

A valuable contribution on this controversial subject, despite subpar clarity. The author takes a balanced view of current research, usually acknowledging the various findings that are based on poor science. That's not to take away from his conclusions; simply to note that the body of knowledge is thin and in need of further honest observation. As for conclusions, testosterone levels in the mother during a critical prenatal period emerge as most likely the strongest biological cause of sexual differentiation. Biology emerges as a more important cause than any other (such as environment or conscious choice). LeVay is careful to note that sexual development is extraordinarily complex. I'd suggest reading the introduction and the conclusions

(highly relevant for all clergy, legislators, parents, and journalists) before deciding whether the rest of the book is worth the effort. It is challenging reading.

Alison says

This is really a 3.5 star review. LeVay's honest approach and commitment to thoroughly explaining the research makes this the most enlightening read on the "biology did most of it" side of the current debate around gender and sexual identity. I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and would unhesitatingly recommend it as part of a package of reading about behavioural sciences. Unfortunately, I don't think LeVay's evidence bears out his conclusions, and I think he overlooks some key areas of study. This is the last of a half-dozen books I've read on this subject now, and honestly, I think I'm out of the behavioural sciences business. All it's done is convince how little we know and how much we assume.

LeVay's argument is simple enough: men and women have a set of physical and behavioural differences, and gay men and women are the result of some process disrupting this, so that some of those behavioural differences, primarily attraction to the opposite sex, are disrupted. Lesbians are women who got a bit of masculinity in their dose, and gay men were somewhat feminised.

There are numerous problems in attempting to use studies of behaviour to determine the cause of same-sex attraction. Perhaps most insurmountably - how do you define gay? LeVay deals with in an offhand way - correctly pointing out that behaviour is not an accurate guide to someone's impulses - millions of closeted gay people attest to that - he suggests relying on description of attraction from the person. Most studies simply rely on subjects self-identifying as gay or straight. A nice illustration in this dilemma comes when LeVay discusses the only four identical-twins-separated-at-birth-with-at-least-one-gay-member that researchers have identified. (Such twins are the holy grail of determining hereditism as a characteristic). Of one pair, both are gay. Of two, one is gay and one is straight. The final pair, both men, have both have sexual encounters with men and with women. But one identifies firmly as straight and the other as gay. The researchers, and LeVay's, frustration is palpable through the paper. It would not be unreasonable, LeVay asserts, to describe them both as some kind of bisexual.

And indeed, it would not be unreasonable. But the kicker here is the main reason I can't take this research seriously - it's because researchers choose to interpret the data this way because it fits what they think is true. There are so many uncertainties in this world for us to fill with preconceived ideas. LeVay expresses dubiousness with a finding, based on self-reporting, that gay men have larger penises than straight men. His doubt is understandable - but it's based on his personal experience of gay men's value on penis size. A similar study, showing lesbians have lower sex drives, he accepts because it reinforces his idea of the truth. Our assumptions, our life experience, are all things we bring to the research table, especially with behavioural sciences, and they influence the conclusions we are going to draw from inconclusive data.

And boy is the data inconclusive. Degrees of hereditism from five separate twin studies came up with everything from 0% to 80%, and every figure in between. Studies undertaken by different research groups into the same topic almost never come up with correlating figures. In no single area is the evidence compellingly consistent, so LeVay relies on the fact that a huge number of diffuse studies tend to come up with something - but whether that is the something we expect to see, is left open to doubt. Some, such as occupation choice, are so palpably influenced by social factors, as to be able to be dismissed easily.

One of the key flaws in his approach is that he accepts as a given the assertion of Simon Baron-Cohen that

such behavioural differences are provable in men and women from birth - an assertion which is difficult to substantiate. He spends a single chapter essentially summarising Baron-Cohen's book, weeding out the most absurd and outdated studies, but still relying pretty heavily on the baby-looking-at-mobile survey which has been widely criticised, as well as the mental-rotation studies in their simplified form. This chapter is much less patronising and easy to read than Baron-Cohen's book and I'd recommend it as a substitute, actually. He does not refer to Baron-Cohen's critics at all.

Another is his starting point of homosexuality as a manifestation of cross-gender biology (probably hormone exposure at the fetal stage). Alternative explanations are barely explored. Given this, it is also a big gap that he ignores transgender individuals almost entirely. He mentions results of "transsexuals" in a couple of studies, but posits not theories into how transgender persons might come to be.

There is no avoiding the political import of arguments now around biology and sexuality. Lady Gaga's Gay Rights anthem, title of "Born this way" is significantly of a general approach the gay liberation movement has taken, of stamping their rights alongside the assertion that sexuality is biologically determined. There is real need as well for an approach which shuts down the tortorous process of trying to force gay and lesbian people to become straight. I'm not sure how much of this need rely, however, on an understanding of the mechanics of how people come to be straight or gay. We still have no idea why some people are left-handed, but we have accepted that they are, and that beating them for being different is a bad thing to do.

I didn't come out of this book agreeing with the author. I did come out feeling like I had a handle on the area of scholarship, and understanding the author's point of view. For that reason, I'd give this book 3.5 stars if I could, and I'm comfortable rounding up to 4.

Sometimes, it just feels to me that in our push to celebrate "diversity" we really just want to expand the number of boxes we can fit people in to. You still have to choose one, we'll just add a new rainbow range of colours. I'm not sure if we'll ever get to the stage where we just accept people for who they are, without worrying who else fits into that category with them.
