

July 25, 2015

Time to lay 'born this way' to rest

BYLINE: Lisa Grossman

SECTION: OPINION; No. 1257

LENGTH: 1253 words

Much of your work explores what you call "sexual fluidity". What does it mean?

It means that people are born with a sexual orientation and also with a degree of sexual flexibility, and they appear to work together. So there are gay people who are very fixedly gay and there are gay people who are more **fluid**, meaning they can experience attractions that run outside of their orientation. Likewise for heterosexuals. Fluidity is the capacity to experience attractions that run counter to your overall orientation.

How did you end up doing this kind of research?

The classic answer is, well, I'm a lesbian and I'm a developmental psychologist, so I guess I'll study the development in this area. People ask me if I am a really **fluid** lesbian, and actually I'm not: I'm a garden-variety lesbian and initially I had a lot of trouble understanding that people had very varied experiences. After I had interviewed women in depth and followed them over time, I just found these unbelievable twists and turns in their experiences that were fascinating and contrary to what I had come to believe based on the scientific literature. As a scientist you look for those opportunities.

Many advocates of gay rights say people are "born this way" - which is at odds with the idea of fluidity. Where did this view originate?

It really dates back to a campaign against the gay community back in the 1960s and 70s, led by American singer and activist Anita Bryant. Her whole argument was that gay people were a threat because they were going to recruit young people to be gay. She specifically said homosexuals are made, not born; they can't reproduce, so they're trying to recruit our children. Gay people said, that's ridiculous, we're not trying to recruit your children - that wouldn't even work! This isn't something you can be recruited into. It's just the way we are.

Did that argument feature in the recent Supreme Court case that legalised same-sex marriage throughout the US?

What was interesting was that Justice Anthony Kennedy actually said, almost as an offhand comment, that studies suggest sexual orientation is immutable. It's kind of hilarious because he doesn't elaborate: he sort of throws it out there - like "oh, we all know that" - but importantly, that was not the basis on which the ruling was made. That shows still holds the idea that sexual orientation is immutable, but that's not the basis for legal reasoning in the US. And it shows that we don't need to be considered a protected class in order to make strong and successful arguments about civil rights.

What other arguments do opponents of same-sex marriage make?

They are concerned that children would grow up seeing, wow, gays can get legally married, that must mean our society thinks that being gay is okay. So people will then be more likely to consider gayness themselves and over time there will be

an increase in the number of gays out there. And frankly, regardless of the basis of their fear, they're right about the result. Over the past 20 years, every survey repeated over time has shown that the number of individuals who self-identify as gay has been going up, especially people who identify as bisexual or who identify as heterosexual but who have had some same-sex sexual experiences.

So what is behind the increase in people reporting same-sex sexual experiences?

Probably there's a core part of the population that is about as gay as the day is long, and they don't appear to be affected at all by social acceptance, whether you put them in South Africa or America or 1920 or 1980. They're like, "I am gay and I'm going to find some way to be gay". But the most common form of same-sex attraction is not exclusive attraction but a bisexual form. You can imagine that these people are likely to be influenced by social acceptance of same-sex **sexuality**. If you are bisexually attracted you may think, "Wow, the world is going to hate me if I end up with someone of the same sex, my life is going to be a lot easier if I end up with someone of the opposite sex." So you end up focusing on that.

How does science support these ideas about the rise in same-sex **sexuality**?

For a start, same-sex attraction does not appear to be contagious. There have been a number of really cool social network studies done over the years looking at whether some traits, such as obesity, can spread through social communities. And they can. So researchers used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, took the same analytic technique and applied it to same-sex attraction. If a lot of your friends are same-sex attracted, are you more likely to be same-sex attracted? Are the attractions themselves spreading? And they found that they were not.

So it's not the attractions that are growing, it's the awareness of them and the ability to articulate and act on them. It's social acceptance that is contagious.

Does this mean that many people are born with an inclination for same-sex attraction?

Yes. I think all the evidence suggests that we're born with an underlying capacity, and then that capacity interacts with a whole bunch of other influences. Some of them are prenatal; some maybe in the first year of life. We still don't know whether there's a point at which things become more fixed. We're clear that there is some environmental input, but there is absolutely no evidence that the family dynamic, in terms of closeness or distance with mom or dad, has anything to do with same-sex **sexuality**. I think it's an important finding because a lot of parents think they are the cause - what did I do? I think we can pretty much say you did nothing. People hear the word "environment" and think family environment. When scientists talk about the environment, they're talking about things like the amniotic **fluid** the fetus grew in. We're talking about everything that is around you. Even a genome is not as fixed as we thought.

But there is a genetic component to sexual attraction...

Yes, twin studies show that there's a genetic contribution - but that is not the only thing going on. There are so many interacting causes for sexual orientation that two different individuals can be gay for a different combinations of reasons. Some people know at earlier ages than others, some are bisexual rather than gay, some show more change over the course of their life. All this means that whenever someone comes up with a tag line like "we're born that way", they ultimately do everyone involved a disservice.

What would you like to happen to that tag line?

It is time to just take the whole idea of **sexuality** as immutable, the born this way notion, and just come to a consensus as scientists and as legal scholars that we need to put it to rest. It's unscientific, it's unnecessary and it's unjust. It doesn't matter how we got to be this way. As a scientist, I think it's one of the most fascinating questions out there and one that I will continue to investigate. As a lesbian and a progressive, I think it's totally irrelevant and just politics.

Interview by Lisa Grossman

Gay rights shouldn't depend on how a person came to be gay, says Lisa Diamond, and we should embrace the fact that our **sexuality** can change throughout life

Time to lay 'born this way' to rest

Profile

Lisa Diamond is a professor of developmental and health psychology at the University of Utah. Her work focuses on sexual-orientation development, sexual identity and bonding

"Same-sex attraction is not contagious, but social acceptance is"

Time to put 'born this way' to bed

LOAD-DATE: August 4, 2015

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Magazine

Copyright 2015 Reed Business Information, UK, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc.
All Rights Reserved