



SEXUAL REORIENTATION

We can change any number of things about ourselves if we want to. We are in charge. But what if one day humans can alter their sexual orientation?

The origin of homosexuality in humans has long been debated. In fact, it wasn't that long ago (the 1970s) that the medical community viewed homosexuality as a form of mental illness. Forty years later, the landscape of science and society has dramatically changed. Years of research in genetics, psychology, and sociology have revealed that we still don't know conclusively what causes a person's sexual orientation.

The debate still rages. Do people choose to be gay or is it genetic from birth? What about environmental influence or evolution? Is it a combination of all the above or something completely different? A 2008 study published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* journal found similarities in brain structure between the brains of gay men and heterosexual women, and lesbian women and heterosexual men. A 1991 study published in *Science* researched the anterior hypothalamus, which "participates in the regulation of male-typical sexual behavior." This study found that certain cell groups in that area were "more than twice as large in the heterosexual men as in the homosexual men." Another study published in *Endocrine Development* in 2009 found that, "The presence of a substantial genetic component in the development of sexual orientation is apparent from family and twin studies. However, exactly which genes play a role is not yet clear. Given the complexity of the development of sexual orientation, it is likely to involve many genes."

All of this is to say that genetics and biology do influence, but perhaps do not concretely dictate, our sexual orientation, which undoubtedly leads to the question – what if we can someday alter our sexual orientation? And if possible, under what conditions is it morally and ethically responsible to undergo such a change?

It's a question that many GLBT people, myself included, have wondered. Like many of us who struggled with our orientation, I tried to "pray the gay away," and when that didn't work I tried to "straighten" my sexuality, and when that didn't work, I despaired. What about reparative therapy? The American Psychological Association stated in 2008, in an informative pamphlet on sexuality, "All major national mental health organizations have officially expressed concerns about therapies promoted to modify sexual orientation. To date, there has been no scientifically adequate research to show that therapy aimed at changing sexual orientation (sometimes called reparative or conversion therapy) is safe or effective." People with disabilities and those who are transgender have

encountered this situation before. If a procedure existed to alter an aspect of your being you found incongruous with who you are, should you accept it? A person who is deaf might be able to hear again with a cochlear implant. A person who is biologically male, but feels they are female, can change their gender. If a person is born gay, but finds homosexual attraction repulsive, is it acceptable for them to become straight or are they rejecting themselves?

The line at which people change for themselves or change because of societal expectations is barely a line at all. And "change" is the correct term here; no one is being cured, although, some would certainly view this as a "cure" for any sexuality or state of being that isn't hetero-normative. Sexuality in our society is still viewed in such a black and white manner that it's doubtful any person could distinguish between what they think they want and what society wants them to want.

Such change cannot be taken lightly. Even if we can change, it doesn't mean we should, and it certainly doesn't mean that everyone would. Our ability to change someday should not undermine the development of a tolerant society. The "born this way" argument could change into something far more ugly when we have the ability to change, and yet decline to do it. Change could be an option; tolerance should not

Science, politics, religion, and conjecture aside, an important point always seems lost in these discussions. Regardless of how anyone thinks that we "came to be," we are still human, and perhaps surprising to some, just like everyone else. To those who say that we make a choice to be who we are, what kind of choice is that to make? Why would anyone, in this day and age, make such a decision that results in others holding them in outright contempt, in immeasurable hatred? The simple truth is that no one would.

The choice we do make, to the vexation of others, is to act upon our attractions, feelings, and emotions, which is inherently human. Animals follow instinct and biological imperatives, but humans don't always play by the rules. The capability to think and act, to rationalize and moralize, to feel and love, is what makes us unique in this world. To deny another's sexual orientation is to deny part of their humanity.

And to be hated for an aspect of our being that is beyond our control is to know hatred in its purest form. §

Scott MacDonald is an award winning young journalist originally from Idaho. He writes The Simple Truth for *Just Out*. Reach Scott at Scott@JustOut.com