

Social (In)Queery*Social Data for the Queer Revolution...***No One is Born Gay (or Straight): Here Are 5 Reasons Why**Posted on [March 18, 2013](#) by [ejaneward](#)This post has been elaborated [here](#).

1. Just because an argument is politically *strategic*, does not make it *true*: A couple of years ago, the Human Rights Campaign, arguably the country's most powerful lesbian and gay organization, responded to politician Herman Cain's assertion that being gay is a choice. They asked their members to "Tell Herman Cain to get with the times! Being gay is not a choice!" They reasoned that Cain's remarks were "dangerous." Why? "Because implying that homosexuality is a choice gives unwarranted credence to roundly disproven practices such as 'conversion' or 'reparative' therapy. The risks associated with attempts to consciously change one's sexual orientation include depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior."



Cynthia Nixon (right) and wife Christine Marinoni (left)

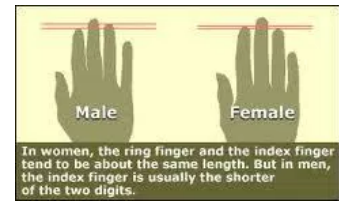
The problem with such statements is that they infuse biological accounts with an obligatory and nearly coercive force, suggesting that anyone who describes homosexual desire as a choice or social construction is playing into the hands of the enemy. In 2012, the extent to which gay biology had become a moral and political imperative came into full view when actress Cynthia Nixon, after commenting to a [New York Times Magazine](#) reporter that she "chose" to pursue a lesbian relationship after many years as a content heterosexual, was met with outrage by lesbian and gay activists. As one horrified gay male writer proclaimed, "[Nixon] just fell into a right-wing trap, willingly. ...Every religious right hater is now going to quote this woman every single time they want to deny us our civil rights." Under considerable pressure from lesbian and gay advocacy groups, Nixon recanted her statement a few weeks later, stating instead that she must have

been born with bisexual potential.

Yes, it's true that straight people are more tolerant when they believe that lesbian and gay people have no choice in the matter. If homosexual desire is hardwired, then we cannot change it; we must live with this condition, and it would be unfair to judge us for that which we cannot change. By implication, if we *could* choose, of course we would choose to be heterosexual. Any sane person would choose heterosexuality (not so. see [here](#)). And when homophobic people come to the opposite conclusion—that homosexual desire is something we *can* choose—then they want to help us make the right choice, the heterosexual choice. And they are willing to offer this help in the form of violent shock therapy and other "conversion" techniques. In light of all this, I can absolutely understand why it feels much safer to believe that we are born this way, and then to circulate this idea like our lives depend on it (because, for some people, this truly is a matter of life and death). Indeed, most progressive straight people and most gay and bi people—including Lady Gaga herself—hold the conviction that our sexual orientation is innate. They have taken their lead from the mainstream gay and lesbian movement, which has powerfully advocated for this view.

But the fact that the "born this way" hypothesis has resulted in greater political returns for gay and lesbian people doesn't have anything to do with whether it is true. Maybe, as gay people, we want to get together and *pretend* it is true because it is politically strategic. That would be interesting. But still, it wouldn't make the idea true.

2. The science is wrong (Part 1): People like to cite “the overwhelming scientific evidence” that sexual orientation is biological in nature. But show me a study that claims to have proven this, and I will show you a flawed research design. Let’s take one example: In 2000, a team of researchers at UC Berkeley conducted a [study](#) in which they found that lesbians were more likely than heterosexual women to have a “masculine” hand structure. Presumably, most men have a longer ring finger than index finger, whereas most women have the opposite (or they have index and ring fingers of the same length). Lesbians, according to this study, are more likely than straight women to have what we might call “male-pattern hands.” The researchers concluded that this finding supports their theory that lesbianism might be caused by a “fetal androgyn wash” in the womb—that is, when female fetuses are exposed to greater levels of a masculinizing hormone, it shows up later in the form of female masculinity: male-pattern hands and... attraction to women. But this study makes the same error that countless others have made: it does not properly distinguish between *gender* (whether one is masculine or feminine) and *sexual orientation* (heterosexuality or homosexuality). Simply put, the fact that a woman is “masculine” (itself a social construction) or has been introduced to greater levels of a male hormone need not have anything to do with whether she is attracted to women. We would only assume this if we had already accepted the heteronormative premise that masculine people (or men) are naturally attracted to femaleness and that normal (i.e., feminine) women are naturally attracted to men. Herein lies the bias. Many “masculine” women who are heterosexual (have you been to the rural South?) would like us to know that their gender does not line up with their sexual desire in any predictable way. And many very feminine lesbians would like us to know this too. The bottom line is that ideas about sexual desire are so bound up with misconceptions about gender and with the presumption that heterosexuality is nature’s default, that science has yet to approach this subject in an objective way. For a comprehensive examination of the flaws in the most widely cited research on sexual orientation, see Rebecca Jordan-Young’s brilliant book *Brain Storm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences* (Harvard University Press, 2011).



3. The science is wrong (Part II): An even greater problem with the science of sexual orientation is that it seeks to find the genetic causes of gayness, as if we all agree about what gayness is. To say that “being gay” is genetic is to engage in science that hinges on a very historically recent and specifically European-American understanding of what being gay means. In Ancient Greece, sex between elite men and adolescent boys was a common and normative cultural practice. According to historians Michel Foucault and Jonathan Ned Katz, these relationships were considered the most praise-worthy, substantive and Godly forms of love (whereas sex between a man and a woman was, for all intents and purposes, sex between a man and his slave). If men having frequent and sincere sex with one another is what we mean by “gay,” then do we really believe that something so fundamentally different was happening in the Ancient Athenian gene pool? Did some evolutionary occurrence enable Plato’s ancestors to get rid of all of those heterosexual genes? And what about native cultures in which all boys engage in homosexual rites of passage? Do we imagine that we could identify some genetic evidence of propensity to ingest sperm as part of a cultural initiation into manhood? What about all of the cultures around the globe in which male homosexual sex does *not* signal gayness except for under certain specific circumstances (e.g., you are only gay if you are the receptive sexual partner, or if you are feminine)? And while I am on this subject, what about the fact the United States is precisely one of those cultures? When young college women lick each other’s boobs at frat parties, or when young college men stick their fingers in each other’s butts while being hazed by their frat brothers, we don’t call this *gay*—we call this “girls gone wild” or “hazing.” My point here is that *a lot* of people engage in homosexual behavior, but somehow we talk about the genetic origins of homosexuality as if we are clear about who is gay and who is not, and as if it’s also clear that “gay genes” are possessed only by people who are *culturally* and *politically* gay (you know, the people who are *seriously* gay). This is a bit arbitrary, don’t you think?

Just 150 years ago, scientists went searching for the physiological evidence that women were *hysterical*. Hysteria, by Victorian medical definition, meant that a woman’s uterus had become dislodged from its proper location and

was floating around her body causing all sorts of trouble—like feminism, and other matters of grave concern. And guess what, they *found* the evidence, and they published books and articles to prove it. They also looked for and found the evidence that all people of African and Asian ancestry were intellectually and morally inferior to people of European Ancestry. Many books were published dedicated to establishing these obviously absurd and violent beliefs as legitimate and indisputable scientific facts. Similarly, the science of sexual orientation has a long and disturbing history. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was believed that homosexuals had beady eyes, particularly angular facial structures, and “bad blood.” Today, we apparently have gender variant fingers and gay brains.

Is it possible that people who identify themselves as “gay” in the United States (again, keep in mind that “gay” is a culturally and historically specific concept), share some common physiology? Perhaps. But even if this is so, do we really know *why*? Indeed, we may find (as Simon LeVay did) that men who identify as gay share a certain trait—a larger VIP SCN nucleus of the hypothalamus, for instance. But how do we know that this “enlargement” is a symptom or cause of their homosexuality, and not, say, a symptom or cause of their general propensity for *bravery, creativity, or rebellion*? In a homophobic culture, you need some bravery (and other awesome traits) to be queer. Perhaps these personality traits are what are actually being observed under the microscope.

And, of course, there is the time-eternal question: why aren’t scientists looking for the genetic causes of *heterosexuality*? Or masturbation? Or interest in oral sex? The reason is that none of these sex acts currently violate social norms, at least not strongly enough to be perceived as sexual aberrations. But this was not always true. In the 19th century, scientists were interested in the biological origins of the “masturbation perversion.” They were interested because they believed it was pathological, and because they wanted to know whether it could be repaired.

At the end of the day, what we can count on is that the science of sexual orientation will produce data that simply mirror the most crass and sexist gender binarisms circulating in the popular imagination. This research will report that women are innately more sexually fluid than men, capable of being turned-on by almost anything and everything (hmmm.... other than in Lisa Diamond’s research, where have I seen that idea before? Ah yes, heterosexual pornography.) It will report that men are sexually rigid, their desires impermeable. It will tell us that straight men simply cannot be aroused by men and that gay men are virtually hardwired to be repulsed by the thought of sex with women. Regardless of what else we might say about the soundness of these studies, what is evident to me is that they have been used to authorize many a straight man’s homophobia, and many a gay man’s misogyny.

4. Just because you have had homosexual or heterosexual feelings for as long as you can remember, does not mean you were born a homosexual or heterosexual. There are many things I have felt or done for as long as I can remember. I have always liked to argue. I have always loved drawing feet and shoes. I have always craved cheddar cheese. I have always felt a strong connection with happy, trashy pop music. These have been aspects of myself for as long as I can remember, and each represents a very strong impulse in me. But was I *born* with a desire to eat cheddar cheese or make drawings of feet? Are these desires that can be identified somewhere in my body, like on one of my genes? It would be hard to make these claims, because I could have been born and raised in China, let’s say, where cheddar cheese is basically non-existent and would not have been part of my life. And while I may have been born with some general artistic potential, surely our genetic material is not so specific as to determine that I would love to draw platform shoes. The point here is that what we desire in childhood is far more complex and multifaceted than the biological sciences can account for, and this goes for our sexual desires as well. Some basic raw material is in place (like a general potential for creativity), but the details—well, those are ours to discover.

5. Secretly, you already know that people’s sexual desires are shaped by their social and cultural context. Lots of adults worry that if we allow little boys to wear princess dresses and paint their nails with

polish, they might later be more inclined to be gay. Even some liberal parents (including gay and lesbian parents) worry that if they introduce their child to “too much” in the way of queer material, this could be a way of “pushing” homosexuality on them. Similarly, many people worry that if young women are introduced to feminism in college, and if they become too angry or independent, they may just decide to be lesbians. But if we all *really* believed that sexual orientation was congenital—or present at birth—then no one would ever worry that social influences could have an effect on our sexual orientation. But I think that in reality, we all know that sexual desire is deeply subject to social, cultural, and historical forces. We know that if the world today were a different place, a place where homosexuality was culturally normative (like, say, Ancient Greece), we would see far more people embracing their homosexual desires. And if this were the case, it would have nothing to do with genetics.

The concept of “sexual orientation” is itself less than 150 years old, and almost equally recent is the notion that people should partner based on romantic attraction. Most of what feels so natural and unchangeable about our desires—including the bodies and personalities we are attracted to—is conditioned by our respective cultures. The majority of straight American men, for instance, will tell you that they have a strong, visceral aversion to women with bushy armpit hair. But this aversion, no matter how deep it may now run in men’s psyches and no matter how nonnegotiable it may feel, is hardly genetic. Up until the last century, the entire world’s female population had armpit hair, and somehow, heterosexual sex survived.

People like to use the failure of “gay conversion” therapies as evidence that homosexuality is innate. First of all, these conversions do not always fail; if you make someone feel disgusted enough by their desires, you can change their desires. Call it a tragedy of repression, or call it a religious awakening—regardless, the point is that we can and do change. For instance, in high school and early in college, my sexual desires were deeply bound up with sexism. I wanted to be a hot girl, and I wanted powerful men to desire me. I was as authentically heterosexual as any woman I knew. But later, several years into my exploration of feminist politics, what I once found desirable (heterosexuality and sexism) became utterly unappealing. I became critical of homophobia and sexism in ways that allowed these forces far less power to determine the shape of my desires. If this had not happened, no doubt I’d be married to a man. And if he wasn’t a complete asshole, I’d probably be happy enough. But instead, I was drawn to queerness for various political and emotional reasons, and from my vantage point today, I believe it to be one of the best desires I ever cultivated. [Does this mean that your daughter may decide to be a lesbian if she takes some women’s studies courses? Yes. Whatcha gonna do now?!]

Perhaps most importantly, the fact that we might cultivate or “choose” something doesn’t mean that it is a trivial, temporary, or less a vital part of who we are. For instance, is religion a choice? Certainly it is if we define “choice” as anything that isn’t an immutable part of our physiology. But many religious people would feel profoundly misunderstood and offended if I suggested that their religious beliefs were a phase, an experiment, or a less significant part of who they are then, say, their hair color. Choices are complex. Choices run deep. And yes, choices are both constrained and fluid—just like our bodies.

Post script: Ultimately, the terms set forward in the public debate about this subject—biology versus “choice”—are quite limited, mainly because “choice” is not the most useful term for describing all of the possibilities that sit apart from biology. Several social, cultural, and structural factors can shape our embodied desires and erotic possibilities. The fact that these factors are not physiological in origin does not mean that they aren’t coercive or subjectifying, resulting in a real or perceived condition of fixity or “no choice.” We know that social factors also become embodied over time. And yet, I remain somewhat committed to the concept of “choice”—or something like it—to describe the possibility of a critical and reflexive relationship to our sexual desires. Personally, the idea that I don’t have control over who or what I desire is a big turn-off to me, so I am constantly pushing back on what feel like the limits of my own desires. For instance, I went through a period of pushing myself to date femmes because I had some good reasons for being suspicious about why I had ruled them out from my dating pool. When it felt like I could never be nonmonogamous, I made it a goal to at least try. Then when I realized I only really felt attracted to alcoholic rebels, I nipped that in the bud too. Just when I thought I’d never think hairy men were hot,

I allowed myself to face my attraction to Javier Bardem. When my tastes and proclivities start to feel like they are solidifying, I get suspicious and disappointed. So, in the interests of full disclosure, I am writing from the perspective of someone who finds sexual fixity pretty uninteresting, and who believes that there are really good feminist and queer reasons to take regular, critical inventory of the parts of our sexuality that we believe we cannot or will not change.

Check out another post by Jane Ward [here](#).

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527 Responses to *No One is Born Gay (or Straight): Here Are 5 Reasons Why*



Yvonne Zylan says:

March 19, 2013 at 11:19 am

How do I love this? Let me count the ways...

Seriously, this is the best thing I've read about LGB/queer politics and identity in perhaps...I'm gonna go with "forever". Thank you.

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dellagracevolcano says:

March 19, 2013 at 11:41 am

I SECOND THAT E MOTION! Great stuff. Am recommending it to my partner for the psych students s/He teaches.

[Reply](#)



Fuck Faggots says:

January 26, 2014 at 2:20 am

The weird thing is that I am naturally born with an innate desire to hate homosexual and lesbian people. It's true!! My parents are not religious or any thing it's just ever since I was young and I very first learned that there were people in world that didn't even use their own genitalia correctly it made me extremely angry inside! I've always felt this way and it not inspired by religion or anything I've just felt like this but only about people who behave this way, it's one of the only things that ever makes me feel like this except maybe someone punching in the face, but I have always naturally been born with these feelings of anger and pure hatred towards homosexual and lesbian people! I find very offensive that people attack me and call me a bigot even though these feelings that I have are natural feelings that I felt completely naturally without any persuasion from any other person since my youth 3-4 years of age. I have finally decided to come out of the closet about these honest and truthful feelings that I've had since my youth. I honestly think people with these sexual preferences should all be placed in mental institutions until they either die or realize how to correctly use their reproductive organs. These are my honest feelings and anyone who attacks these feelings that I naturally feel is clearly a bigot!!! I was born this way and for anyone to mock these natural feelings that I was born with is attacking the natural person that I am!