Gays Should Lean on Justice, Not Science

Genetic studies are disputable and unlikely to sway opponents of gay rights. Better to seek equality for its own sake.

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Many lesbians and gays are embracing recent genetic and biological studies on homosexuality too quickly and without serious thought. The studies have generated theories but no conclusive results. Dependence on them risks not only factual dispute but deeper social and political problems.

This kind of research has been going on for more than 30 years with consistently inconclusive results. Most of these studies involve correlational findings, but just because two traits are connected does not indicate that one caused the other. Yet, each finding was similarly touted and praised as the definitive study, only to be refuted within years of publication. Likewise, genetic research into alcoholism, schizophrenia and manic depression (the nature of the other areas being pursued by geneticists are worth note) made news until other studies failed to replicate earlier results. Genetic explanations remain inconclusive.

We in the gay community pin our hopes for civil rights and equal treatment on tentative research, only to be contradicted in later studies. I fear that we are heading in the direction of another "10%" debacle, when we pinned too many of our political arguments on a Kinsey study's finding that gays and lesbians are 10% of the population, then were caught in fruitless arguments about later studies that argued for a lower figure.

We cannot make genetic or biological claims as the basis for our civil rights. The way science works will too often lead to further studies that contradict these earlier results. Besides, even if a genetic component can be definitively found as a cause of homosexuality (and I don't doubt that genetics contributes something to the many complex reasons for our sexual feelings and acts), the studies do nothing to persuade our enemies on the religious right and can only lead to possible calls for genetic engineering. It may be an academically interesting puzzle as to why we are gay (note the question of why some people are heterosexual is never posed), but it is much more interesting and important to find out why people are homophobic.

In addition, there is no scientific evidence that demonstrates that genetic findings about homosexuality will cause people to change their minds and endorse equal rights for lesbian and gay people. Furthermore, the argument that genetics will be relevant to legal cases based on immutability is misguided. After all, height is genetically determined, and discrimination based
on height is legal for certain occupations, such as police and firefighters. Skin color is genetic, and discrimination continues against people of color. For some reason, people believe that if a behavior or characteristic is learned that it is in some way mutable. But it would be extremely difficult for me to unlearn English at this point in my life. It is immutable. Similarly, plastic surgery, skin color treatments, and sex-change operations have highlighted how easy it is to alter genetically determined characteristics. So much for immutability.

No, civil rights for gays and lesbians must be based on values basic to our democracy: freedom, dignity, justice and equality. Anything short of that will result in a scenario of “dueling research studies”—we can already see that happening with the dissemination of the discredited research of Paul Cameron by the Family Research Institute in Washington. They are using his material to contradict decades of legitimate research demonstrating that that gays and lesbians are not the mentally and physically ill people we are made out to be.

The gay and lesbian movement needs to consider seriously its grounds for demanding equal treatment under the law. We must be alert to how genetic and biological studies might be misused in the future and ask what is gained by these academic questions. We need to be sure that researchers seek knowledge about all forms of sexuality, not just homosexuality, and about all forms of discrimination and hatred against those of us who vary from whatever the sexual statistical norm might be. Finally, we need to be sure that our demands for equal treatment are based not on scientific studies but on solid moral arguments of justice and dignity.

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