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From Exotic to Erotic

Roots of sexual orientation found in personality, childhood friendships

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Homosexuality sparks bitter political wrangles and impassioned scholarly debate in the United States. From the embattled policy of "don't ask, don't tell" in the armed services to controversial attempts to certify same-sex marriages, legislators appear far from gay, in the traditional sense of that word, when confronted with such divisive issues.

Policy disputes regarding homosexuality often seem to rest on the assumption that if you choose, you lose. Battle lines form over whether homosexuals heed strong inborn impulses (a notion favored by gay activists and others who want to extend legal protection for homosexuals) or consciously decide to consort with members of their own sex (the position held by many of those who oppose such laws).

Academics face off across their own conceptual divide. Biology-oriented researchers point to mounting evidence linking homosexuality to a gene or genes, prenatal exposure to excessive amounts of masculinizing or feminizing hormones, and changes in brain structure. Biological factors such as these mastermind the erotic pull to one's own sex, this camp argues.

An opposing school of thought, known as social constructionism, regards sexual orientation as a malleable concept that varies greatly from one culture to another. The extent of homosexuality and public attitudes toward homosexuals oscillate markedly across societies and historical eras, this group holds.

Enter Daryl Bem of Cornell University. Bem, a respected social psychologist, boldly claims that he can weld these factions into a cohesive explanation of how individuals become sexually attracted to the same sex, the opposite sex, or even both sexes. His theory rests on what he sees as a fundamental facet of human development. He calls it "exotic becomes erotic."

More precisely, children frequently view the opposite sex, and in a minority of cases regard the same sex, as dissimilar, or exotic. Exotic peers elicit physiological tingles and jolts that seem offensive at first but that fire up sexual desire later in life.

If true, this idea would put a new spin on the enthusiasm with which many grade-school boys and girls brand the opposite sex as "yucky," or worse.

Scientists express mixed reactions to Bem's proposal. Some suspect it will inspire a rethinking of how sexual proclivities develop, while others classify his theory as vague and unpromising.

Regardless of who proves correct, Bem—who has previously engaged in controversial research (SN: 1/29/94, p. 68) outside the roiling waters of sex studies—hopes to inject greater theoretical rigor into studies of sexual orientation.

Though many researchers assume that genes directly cause same- or opposite-sex attraction, they have not spelled out the pathway by which genes lead to sexual behavior, Bem holds. That tempts scientists and the media alike to herald biological features linked to homosexuality as probable causes of same-sex attraction. However, researchers have yet to examine whether these ballyhooed biological factors actually regulate temperamental or personality traits that raise the likelihood of becoming homosexual in certain types of cultures, Bem argues.

"The public can be forgiven for believing that research is but one government grant away from pinpointing the penis-preference gene," he remarks.

Bem's theory, which appeared in the April PSYCHOLOGICAL REVIEW, outlines a sequence of events presumed to ensure that exotic becomes erotic for most men and women, at least in cultures that emphasize or exaggerate sex differences through divisions of labor and power.

Nearly all cultures, past and present, meet that requirement, Bem contends.

Genes and other biological factors orchestrate temperaments that, in turn, gear kids toward pursuing sex-typical or sex-atypical activities and peers, Bem proposes. These temperamental traits probably include the pursuit or avoidance of aggressive interactions and rough-and-tumble play, in his view.

Sex-typical preferences lead children to feel different from opposite-sex peers; sex-atypical preferences create a sense of estrangement from same-sex counterparts and similarity with opposite-sex peers. Youngsters perceive members of the "different" sex as exotic, Bem suggests.

The presence of exotic peers sparks physiological arousal, evidenced by a rapid heartbeat and other signs. Children incorporate these reactions into a sense of fear and anger. In adolescence or adulthood, the same bodily reactions infuse the erotic draw of exotic peers, according to Bem's theory.

"I assume that the psychological processes that transform exotic into erotic are universal properties of the human species," he asserts. "That's it. Everything else is cultural overlay, including the concept of sexual orientation itself."

In other words, a single biological process creates enough heterosexuals to sustain the species and a consistent minority of homosexuals.

Many findings from studies of sexual orientation stride comfortably under the banner of exotic becomes erotic, Bem states.

One critical source of data is a 1981 study of about 1,000 homosexual men and women and 500 heterosexual men and women interviewed by researchers at the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research in Bloomington, Ind.

The Kinsey findings yielded no support for the theory advanced by psychoanalysts that disturbed relations with the opposite-sex parent while growing up foster homosexuality. The only childhood measures that bore a significant link to later sexual orientation involved conformity or nonconformity to sex roles, Bem notes.

For instance, gay men were far more likely than heterosexual men to report that as children they had not enjoyed what had traditionally been boys' activities (such as football and baseball), had liked girls' activities (such as hopscotch and playing house), had felt "nonmasculine," and had had girls for friends. Likewise, lesbians cited a greater childhood fondness for what were considered boys' activities than did heterosexual women.

Seven prospective studies also tie adult male sexual orientation to childhood peer relations. A large majority of boys who did not conform to sex roles became homosexual or bisexual adults, these investigations find; only a minuscule proportion of boys who behaved in culturally sanctioned ways became homosexual or bisexual.

Just as Eros smiles upon that class of people seen as exotic during childhood, the god of erotic love flees from those who evoke a sense of familiarity and liking early on, Bem asserts.

For more than a century, researchers have noted that children who spend their formative years together—siblings, boys and girls destined for arranged marriages who grow up in the same household, and youngsters living on Israeli kibbutzim—do not find each other sexually attractive as adults (SN: 10/19/91, p. 248). Some researchers suspect this reaction stems from an evolved psychological mechanism for avoiding incest.

On the other hand, there is no evidence that children experience physiological arousal in the presence of peers whom they consider unfamiliar, Bem acknowledges. Moreover, the way in which feelings attached to the supposed heightened arousal would eventually transform from unease to weak-in-the-knees is unclear, he adds.

For now, he suspects that at least three mechanisms bridge the gap from exotic to erotic. First, studies of heterosexuals indicate that physiologically aroused individuals, who may have

watched an anxiety-producing videotape or run in place for a few minutes, exhibit elevated sexual interest when shown slides or videos of attractive members of the opposite sex. As people mature, Bem suggests, physiological arousal may readily signal erotic attraction, even if it previously had different connotations.

Second, intensely negative reactions to a situation may trigger a physiological process that dampens those emotions and, over time, yields positive feelings under the same circumstances. For example, parachutists on their first jump grapple with a terror that sets their hearts pounding, causes them to breathe irregularly, and renders their bodies curved and stiff during the trip earthward. Upon reaching the ground, they typically remain mute and inexpressive for a few minutes, then enter a period of mild euphoria in which they talk excitedly. Eventually, fears of plummeting through the sky recede and seasoned parachutists regularly enjoy jump-induced highs.

Similarly, Bem suggests, boys who get taunted relentlessly by male peers as being "sissies" or otherwise failing to act in appropriately masculine ways initially react with fear and anger. But those responses may diminish over time and give way to sexual attraction toward men.

Finally, a form of sexual imprinting may occur, in which exposure to an exotic peer group during childhood establishes an attraction to that class of individuals well before sexual maturity. An analogous mechanism appears in ducks, chickens, and some bird species, he says; an animal's exposure to opposite-sex members of the same species during a critical period early in life guarantees mating with the opposite sex later on.

The exotic becomes erotic process may be supplemented or overridden in cases of bisexuality, Bem theorizes. For instance, some bisexual individuals may decide to ignore or suppress early feelings of same-sex arousal, substitute heterosexual relations in their place, and after a number of years also accept homosexual relations into their erotic repertoire. Indeed, the 1981 Kinsey Institute study noted that bisexual participants usually had added same-sex contacts to a heterosexual orientation during young adulthood.

Some women may move from heterosexual to bisexual or lesbian behavior as a result of encounters with male sexual coercion or rape, as well as for other social or political reasons, Bem maintains. In the United States, he adds, liberalized attitudes toward appropriate female behavior in the past generation have allowed more girls than boys to regard children of both sexes as friends. That may have contributed to a preference, noted in a 1994 national survey, for bisexuality over exclusive homosexuality among women but not men.

It also suggests that culture influences not only the types of sexual orientation that emerge but also the ways in which natives of a culture think about sexual orientation, according to Bem. In a culture that somehow managed not to estrange boys and girls from either sex, erotic and romantic preferences would crystallize around a more diverse set of attributes, he predicts.

"Gentlemen might still prefer blondes, but some of those gentlemen, and some ladies, would prefer blondes of any sex," Bem argues.

The Cornell scientist's theory has evoked a wide range of responses. "This is an exciting, theory that I hope will guide further research for some years to come," remarks Charlotte J. Patterson, a psychologist at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

William Byne, a psychiatrist at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, also welcomes Bem's effort. "We need a better alternative to current biological views about sexual orientation," contends Byne, who has previously criticized arguments for direct biological causes of homosexuality. "There seems to be some truth to the exotic becomes erotic process."

Psychologist J. Michael Bailey of Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., approaches Bem's theory more cautiously. The proposal is "intriguing," but the possibility remains that an under-

lying biological process impels some children both to behave in ways that deviate from the norms for their sex and to become homosexual, Bailey holds. Bailey has coauthored twin studies indicating that genes make a substantial contribution to male and female homosexuality (SN: 8/22/92, p. 117).

Future tests of Bem's proposals, which should include an examination of whether children indeed exhibit signs of physiological arousal in the presence of dissimilar peers, will prove critical to its acceptance, adds Kenneth J. Zucker, a psychologist at the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto. For now, Zucker suspects that Bem has exaggerated the degree to which culture shapes sexual orientation.

Some scientists express much deeper skepticism about Bem's approach. "I don't think it's very promising or presents any truly testable hypotheses," contends Simon LeVay of the Institute for Gay and Lesbian Studies in West Hollywood, Calif. LeVay, who suspects that biology is destiny with regard to sexual orientation, has found preliminary evidence of an anatomical difference between the brains of gay and heterosexual men (SN: 8/31/91, p. 134).

Bem has advanced an "interesting and provocative hypothesis, but what sexual orientation research needs now is more facts, not more theories," asserts geneticist Dean Hamer of the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Md. Hamer and his coworkers have found an association between male homosexuality and the inheritance of genetic markers on the X chromosome (SN: 7/17/93, p. 37).

Bem anxiously awaits the facts that Hamer alludes to, including independent replications of Hamer's and LeVay's reports. Nonetheless, the Cornell psychologist adds, scientists gathering such facts should check for the possibility that personality traits account for any confirmed links between "the anatomy of our brains and the anatomy of our lovers' genitalia." □