

1 **CONSTRUCTING AND DECONSTRUCTING THE ‘GAY GENE’:**
2 **MEDIA REPORTING OF GENETICS, SEXUAL DIVERSITY AND ‘DEVIANCE’**

3
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9
10
11 1. INTRODUCTION

12 “My mother made me a Lesbian”

13 “If I give her the wool will she make me one too?” (Graffiti)

14
15
16 The graffiti cited above plays with, and subverts, psychological theories about the causes
17 of lesbianism. It refuses to blame mothers for causing their daughters’ homosexuality.
18 Indeed, it inverts the assumption that being a lesbian is a problem to be ‘explained’ and
19 refuses the very premise which justifies enquires about the aetiology of homosexuality.
20 The joke is on the experts who seek to pathologies sexual diversity. This graffiti reflects a
21 long history of lesbian and gay men’s engagement with, and resistance to, attempts to
22 account for our ‘deviance’.

23
24 Sexual deviance is often presented as not only a psychological malfunction. It is also (or
25 instead) seen as being written on the body itself. Just as criminal tendencies used to be
26 read off from primitive physical features (see Dingwall et al. this volume) so homosexual
27 inclinations have been detected by careful attention to the physique and physical
28 development of the suspect. Such ideas are not just imposed on ‘deviants’ by a
29 heterosexual majority; gay scientists, social theorists and writers have actively promoted
30 ideas about the biological origin of (or elements in) homosexuality. Karl Ulrich, for
31 example, the mid 19th century lawyer, amateur scientist and gay activist, campaigned to
32 reform the laws on sodomy. He argued that gay men had male bodies, but female minds
33 due to faulty foetal development (cited in Rose, 1996)¹. Similarly, in the 1920s, Radclyff
34 Hall’s pioneering and, at the time, highly controversial book, *The Well of Loneliness*,
35 appealed for tolerance on the grounds that lesbians were an intermediate sex ‘flawed in
36 the making’. Hall’s book was endorsed as “scientifically accurate” by the leading sexologist
37 of the day, Havelock Ellis (Kitzinger, C. 1987: 120).

38
39 In the past it was the enlarged clitoris or strong, masculine hands of the invert which
40 betrayed her as a lover of her own sex, the high-pitched voice, wide hips and limp wrist of
41 the gay man which revealed his true nature. Today, ideas about the role of biology in
42 homosexuality are likely to be explored through more subtle associations between
43 behavioural tendencies and prenatal hormone exposure, brain chemistry or genetics.
44 Recent research into the gay body includes, for example, various work with animals such
45 as genetically engineered ‘gay’ fruit flies (Ryner et al., 1996). It also extends to

¹ Fundamental ideas about the way in which sex, gender and sexuality are linked are deeply implicated in such theories. Sexual orientation is usually assumed to be dimorphic: men ‘programmed’ for attraction to women, women usually programmed for attraction to men. ‘Male homosexuals are thus assumed to have female programming, and lesbians to have male programming’ (Peterson 1999: 172).

1 observations on human beings exploring gay brain structures (LeVay, 1993), differences in
2 finger lengths (Williams et al., 2000) or features such as the 'partial masculinization' of the
3 inner ear of lesbians (McFadden and Pasanen 1998). The most high-profile recent
4 example of research into the biology of homosexuality however, occurred in 1993 when
5 Hamer and colleagues published a crucial scientific paper asserting an association
6 between an area of the X chromosome (Xq28) and Male Sexual Orientation (Hamer et al.
7 1993). This paper provoked widespread controversy, strong reactions from the religious
8 and moral right and a renewed debate within the gay community. In typical subversive
9 style it was greeted by some gay men beginning to wear T-shirts bearing the legend:
10 "Xq28 - thanks for the genes, Mom!"

11
12 In this chapter I analyse how the UK press represented the discovery of what came to be
13 dubbed "the gay gene" and explore the validity of criticisms thrown at the media by political
14 analysts on the one hand, and scientists on the other. I then use this case study to reflect
15 on wider issues about the relationship between science and the media. This is a
16 relationship which generates a great deal of heat. Scientists routinely complain about
17 media (mis)representation and consequent public misunderstanding of their work.
18 Journalists are blamed for creating 'scares' about scientific experiments leading to
19 unnecessary public concern and conjuring up alarmist science fiction visions of the future
20 (Kitzinger, J. and Williams, 2005), sensationalising and over-simplifying scientific
21 discoveries, giving undue attention to mavericks or introducing inappropriate prejudices
22 (Williams et al., 2003). The media profile of research into human genetics has been a key
23 focus of such criticism and there have been intensive efforts to reform journalists (or train
24 scientists to be better communicators). The human genome project, for example, has
25 involved major international initiatives and huge economic implications. It has also raised
26 cutting edge ethical issues and provoked public disquiet. It is hardly surprising, therefore,
27 that those investing in, and developing such scientific innovation have engaged in
28 intensive efforts to influence its media profile and to inform, shape or encourage public
29 understanding and debate. Much of the attack on the media's role, however, is based on
30 misapprehensions about what journalists should, and could, be doing. The focus on
31 journalists 'getting it wrong' also can serve to evade key questions about how scientists
32 should relate to society. In the case of the 'gay gene' story I argue that attacks on the
33 media for promoting genetic determinism and homophobia are largely misdirected. We
34 need a more considered and focussed critique of how the dispute played out. My analysis
35 demonstrates that the mass media, in the UK at least, were no more deterministic or
36 'homophobic' than science journals and were arguably *better* at locating the research in its
37 social context and discussing its limitations, assumptions and implications. A totally
38 pessimistic reiteration of standard critiques of the media is not only inaccurate; it also
39 obscures important points of potential engagement in this debate. It does not take into
40 account the achievements of pressure groups (in this case predominantly gay male
41 activists) and, at the same time, fails to attend to the more subtle problems of
42 contemporary reporting, including the exclusion of feminist voices and the promotion of a
43 liberal erasure of gay identity under a celebration of human sexual plasticity. Above all,
44 ritually scape-goating the media is problematic because it mis-assigns blame, letting
45 scientists off the hook and serving to preserve the image of science as a distinct value-
46 free activity which is then misrepresented and distorted by journalists.

47 48 2. A BRIEF HISTORY AND POLITICS OF BIOLOGICAL THEORIES ABOUT 49 HOMOSEXUALITY 50

51 Concepts of nature are always used in the performance of culture. Any scientific
52 investigation into genetic diversity raises issues about which bodies, characteristics or

1 practices attract scientific attention and under what circumstances these are explored.
2 Such investigations also beg questions about how diversity is categorised and the way in
3 which any findings are socially interpreted. These questions are particularly pertinent for
4 biological theories about homosexuality. For some critics the very notion of searching for a
5 cause of homosexuality is suspect. Sedgwick, for example, argues “there currently exists
6 no framework in which to ask about the origins or development of individual gay identity
7 that is not already structured by an implicit, trans-individual Western project or fantasy of
8 eradicating that identity” (cited in Peterson, 1999: 165; see also Kaplan, 2000: 104).
9 Whatever the motivation behind the search for a cause, the *consequences* of this search
10 have profound social implications.

11
12 For a start, notions about causation are deeply implicated in personal biographies for
13 many lesbians and gays men in contemporary western societies. ‘Am I really gay?’ and
14 ‘what made me this way?’ are questions that face the young teenage boy falling in love
15 with a male classmate, or the fifty year old married woman suddenly lusting after her best
16 friend. ‘Where did I go wrong?’ is an equivalent question confronting parents whose
17 children ‘come out’. These questions can be inverted (‘what makes you straight?’). They
18 can also be refused, resisted or subverted. However, they cannot be completely avoided.

19
20 Beyond the private and interpersonal realm, ideas about the causes of homosexuality also
21 have extensive political resonance, carrying with them implications about what should be
22 ‘done’ about ‘the problem’. Different ideas about the causes of homosexuality are
23 associated with different ideas for control, punishment or treatment - whether that involves
24 exorcism, incarceration, electric shock treatment, religious counselling, legal ‘protection’,
25 therapy or tolerance.

26
27 Gay men and lesbians thus engage with questions about the causes of our deviance as
28 individuals, as citizens, as friends, as parents, as sons and daughters and collectively
29 within self-defined communities. Often such engagement is quite self-consciously political.
30 Indeed, debates about the nature of both sexual desire and sexual identity are at the heart
31 of much feminist theorising (Jackson, 1981; Kitzinger, C. 1987). Such issues are also hotly
32 debated within the shifting rainbow alliances and oppositions between gay/ lesbian/
33 transgendered/ bisexual and queer communities (Mort, 1994; Weeks, 1994). In attempting
34 to locate a genetic element in homosexuality genetic science thus enters an explosive
35 arena not only of our personal biographies, but also in relation to key policy geographies
36 and political landscape. Lesbians and gay men can be highly sophisticated analysts and
37 operators - initiating and responding in diverse ways to competing theories about our
38 bodies, sexualities and identities.

39
40 Some lesbians and gay men argue in favour of emphasising biological explanations. This
41 accords, they say, with the scientific evidence and/or resonates with their personal
42 experience of feeling fundamentally different at a very early age. To ignore the embodied
43 self, and the potential role of biology, is to cut ourselves off from understanding the range
44 and complexity of our own experience. In any case, there are good socio-political
45 arguments in favour of promoting biological explanations for homosexuality. Such
46 explanations, they argue, are certainly preferable to the alternative theories which present
47 us as the product of poor parenting (normal development distorted by a distant father or
48 over-powering mother), the victims of corruption (seduced by predatory older men or
49 women) or as self-indulgent sinners choosing to engage in sheer, wilful wickedness. The
50 idea that we are born gay can relieve lesbians and gay men (and their parents) from guilt.
51 It is also used to invalidate psychotherapeutic interventions or any attempts to make
52 people ‘go straight’. If gays are ‘born not made’ then legislation introduced to protect young

1 people from being 'mised' can also be challenged. There is no need for an unequal age of
2 consent to protect boys who are uncertain about their sexuality from being seduced into
3 the wrong path; nor can the State justify restricting gays and lesbians from working or
4 living with children (hence challenging job discrimination and the long history of lesbians
5 and gay men losing access to their children). Over and above this some activists hope that
6 locating biological determinants of homosexuality might bestow scientific authority on calls
7 for tolerance and might have specific legal consequences. In the UK context ideas about
8 the genetic basis of homosexuality were used to challenge the notorious Section 28 (UK
9 legislation against the 'promotion' of homosexuality). In the context of the U.S.A it was
10 hoped that establishing homosexuality as an immutable characteristic might extend to
11 homosexuals the constitutional protections of the fourteenth amendment. For all these
12 reasons then, the notion of a 'gay gene' was to be welcomed.

13
14 However, other lesbians and gay men beg to differ. They argue that such biological-based
15 explanations of homosexuality are inaccurate, inadequate or unhelpful and might even
16 collude with homophobia and heterosexism. Biological theories may not accord with their
17 own experiences of sexual transitions and choices (or, indeed, their experiences of gay
18 sex with 'straight' people). Such theories may also not be seen as based on 'good
19 science'.² Alternatively (or additionally) such explanations may be rejected on strategic
20 grounds. Theories of natural differences have never guaranteed equality - if this were the
21 case then racism and sexism would no longer be a problem and discrimination against
22 those born with an impairment would be unthinkable (see Shakespeare, this volume). It is
23 thus, they argue, naïve to hope for progressive policy making on the basis of discovering a
24 genetic basis for homosexuality. On the contrary, the discovery of the 'gay gene' could
25 feed into oppressive responses such as calls for eradication through abortion or genetic
26 pre-selection. In any case, the notion that lesbians and gays should be tolerated because
27 they can't help it is hardly a progressive position. Rather than assure normal society that
28 we are not a threat, some lesbians and gay men argue for a more confrontational
29 affirmation of our politics and identities. The radical, direct action group, Lesbian Avengers,
30 for example, refuses to be cowed into claiming that lesbians are born not made. Their t-
31 shirts defiantly declare: 'Lesbian Avengers - we recruit'

32
33 Those who challenge the search for a biological basis for homosexuality often draw on
34 (and contribute toward) a more sociological, anthropological, feminist and/or historical
35 analysis. This includes work which explores homosexuality as a potential choice for
36 anyone. A feminist badge popular in the late 1970s, for example, declared "Any woman
37 can be a lesbian" and pamphlets circulated at the time discussed lesbianism as a political
38 choice to advance women's liberation. Several influential theorists have presented
39 archaeology of knowledge about homosexual acts and their location within discourses
40 about sin, crime or sickness across different times and cultures (Weeks, 1994; Plummer,
41 1981). This approach was increasingly explored during the 1980s including in books such
42 as "*The making of the modern homosexual*" (Plummer, 1981) and "*The social construction*
43 *of lesbianism*" (Kitzinger, C, 1987). The founding father of such approaches is often
44 identified as Foucault who famously declared that although previously "the sodomite had

² The research by Hamer and colleagues was challenged by subsequent studies – see Rice et al., 1999. This led to subsequent headlines a few years later such as 'Scientists cast doubt on 'gay gene' theory' (*Independent* 23 April 1999) 'Scientists dismiss gay gene theory' (*The Times* 23 April 1999) and 'No tears for passing of 'gay gene'' (*Observer* 25 April 1999). However this analysis focuses on the original reporting about the Hamer et al. study and the scientific validity or invalidity of the original work is not the issue that concerns me here.

1 been a temporary aberration', in the late 19th century, "the homosexual was now a species"
2 (Foucault, 1978). The point is, as Mary McIntosh argued a decade earlier, that instead of
3 "seeing homosexuality as a condition that has causes" we should examine it "as a social
4 category rather than a medical or psychiatric one" (McIntosh, 1968).

5
6 It is against this background of theorising and activism that the science of 'sexual
7 orientation' needs to be considered. The paper authored by Hamer and his colleagues
8 which linked Xq28 with male homosexuality appeared in 1993, after over 20 years of gay
9 liberation and feminism as well as a decade of AIDS activism. The following section
10 reviews the intense media interest generated by the research. I start by outlining the
11 criticisms of this press coverage and then go on to assess the reporting itself. I examine
12 the evidence for, and against, claims that the press coverage was deterministic and
13 homophobic.

14 15 3. CRITICISMS OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE GAY GENE AND AN ASSESSMENT 16 OF THE EVIDENCE

17
18 The media coverage of the Hamer et al. article was subject to intense controversy.
19 Scientific journals accused the media of "ignoring" the science, "dramatizing" the findings,
20 passing off "inference as fact" and indulging in "fantasies" (See, for example, articles in
21 *Nature* and *Nature Genetics* cited in Miller, 1995: 275). Broadsheet journalists (those
22 working on the more 'high brow' papers) criticised their colleagues on the tabloids (more
23 popular or 'down market' newspapers) for "hysteria" and "over simplification".³ Critics from
24 a more political perspective attacked the heterosexist bias of coverage (e.g. McKellen,
25 1993).

26 27 3.1. EVIDENCE FOR DETERMINISM AND HOMOPHOBIA IN THE PRESS

28
29 On one level such criticisms are well founded. It is easy enough to compile a selection of
30 headlines which promoted genetic determinism and/or presented overtly anti-gay attitudes.
31 Some newspapers immediately dubbed Xq28 "the gay gene", talked of children "born to be
32 gay", conjured up visions of selective abortions and/or took the opportunity to reiterate
33 offensive stereotypes. Headlines from tabloid newspapers included: "Proof of a poof"
34 (*Sunday Sport* 18 July 1993); "Mums pass gay gene to sons say doctors: parents may
35 demand abortions after tests" (*Sun* 17 July 1993) and, perhaps the most infamous and
36 disturbing headline of all, "Abortion hope after "gay genes" finding" (*Daily Mail* 16 July
37 1993).

38
39 Several newspapers suggested that there would soon be a clear diagnosis for the gay
40 gene, either in utero or in adolescence. Indeed, one report seemed to envisage queues of
41 eager school boys lining up outside the school nurse's office. "Scientists are on the brink of
42 a gene test breakthrough for boys to discover whether they are homosexual" declared the
43 *Sunday Express*: "A simply blood test to determine the adult leanings of boys aged 13-14
44 could be available within two years." The newspaper added, almost regretfully, that "girls

³ British papers are divided into 'broadsheet' newspapers (traditionally seen as the more serious and up-market outlets read by the middle and upper classes) and tabloids (more popular newspaper, more likely to be read by lower middle and working class people). The UK newspaper scene is also divided into left-of-centre newspapers such as the *Guardian* and the *Mirror*, and right-of-centre papers such as the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*.

1 will have to wait until scientists identify the gene linked to lesbianism” (Schoolboys could
2 take a Gay test, *Sunday Express* 18 July 1993).

3
4 Alongside such genetic determinism some viciously anti-gay statements were published in
5 the letters pages of both the tabloid and the broadsheet press. The *Evening Standard*
6 printed a letter from the Conservative Family Campaign reasserting that, regardless of
7 claims for a genetic basis for homosexuality, it was clearly “a perversion” (*Evening*
8 *Standard* 2 August 1993). Another letter reminded readers that homosexuality was “an
9 abomination” according to the Bible, while a third equated the moral standing of
10 homosexuality and paedophilia. (Letter from Nisson Shulman, Coordinator, Centre for
11 Medical Ethics, Jew’s College, *The Times*, 27 July 1993; Letter from E.R. Kermode,
12 *Telegraph* 18 August 1993). Most controversially of all, the ex chief rabbi, and member of
13 the House of Lords, Lord Jakobovits wrote to *The Times* describing homosexuality as “a
14 grave departure from the natural norm which we are charged to overcome like any other
15 affliction” (*The Times*, 17 July 1993). Lord Jakobovits, argued that the discovery of a gene
16 ‘for’ homosexuality did not justify it any more than if there were a gene for kleptomania,
17 adultery or murder. Jakobovits denied advocating abortion but, in a subsequent letter,
18 argued that “the errant gene” should be “removed or repaired” to free the children of their
19 “disability” (*The Times* 30 July 1993). (A position which, of course, reaffirms some
20 analysts’ assertions that finding a biological basis for homosexuality would not usher in a
21 new era of tolerance)

22
23 Such vehemently anti-gay views were mainly confined to half a dozen contributions to the
24 letters pages but were given additional publicity because they generated strong reactions
25 from gay activists and were the focus of several further articles. Although most journalists
26 attacked the anti-gay attitudes of the letter writers, some critics have argued that the very
27 *structure* of the debate was problematic. As Sir Ian McKellen, founder of the gay rights
28 group, Stonewall, comments: “The one over riding issue [covered by science
29 correspondents, leading articles and the letters pages] was whether a mother should or
30 should not have the right to abort her gay foetus. In other words, what a problem we gays
31 cause our parents” (McKellen, Through a gay viewfinder, *Guardian* 22 July 1993)

32
33 Such challenges to the media coverage stake out important rhetorical territory. However,
34 they do not address the full range, or even the majority of reporting. In addition to such
35 critiques on media homophobia it is also instructive to look at how journalists sometimes
36 *challenged* genetic determinism and anti-gay attitudes and what opportunities there were
37 for more nuanced debate.

38 39 3.2. EVIDENCE AGAINST DETERMINISM AND HOMOPHOBIA IN THE PRESS –

40
41 Looking beyond the selection of offensive headlines reveals a slightly different picture of
42 media coverage than some of the summaries above imply. Headlines are, of course,
43 penned by editors and sub-editors and may not reflect the journalists’ report beneath. In
44 fact the most homophobic headlines routinely cited by critics do not reflect overtly
45 homophobic articles. A headline quoted by some critics as “advocating” a “search and
46 destroy” mission against gay foetuses, for example, actually reads “Seek out and destroy
47 *fears*” (my emphasis) (See Kitzinger, C, 1995: 310). This article opens with the following
48 statement:

49
50 “Gay groups and medical ethics experts yesterday demanded urgent laws to
51 prevent parents aborting babies who may be born homosexual. The uproar followed

1 the Doomsday scenario that scientists could soon be able to tell in the womb if a
2 male foetus is likely to be born gay". (*Mirror* 17 July 1993)

3
4 The piece includes quotes from Stonewall and The Campaign for Homosexual Equality
5 and appears under interviews with "two leading gays": Cashman and McKellan. The
6 captions beneath their respective pictures reads: "Wounds: prejudice cuts deep, says Mike
7 Cashman" and "Campaign: human rights at issue says Ian McKellan". The content of this
8 article is a far cry from advocating search and destroy. Similarly the article beneath the
9 *Daily Mail's* notorious and offensive headline: "Abortion hope after 'gay genes' finding" (16
10 July 1993) is not quite what one might expect. The headline refers to abortion 'hope', the
11 article itself focuses on the abortion/screening fears raised as concerns by the gay
12 community. Indeed, these concerns were raised by gay activists *before* any interventions
13 from the moral right publicised the screening and in utero treatment "solution" and in spite
14 of the fact that no one openly advocated abortion per se.

15
16 Most headlines, and the reports that followed, did not adopt a simple deterministic or
17 overtly homophobic stance. Instead, most journalists pointed to the controversial status of
18 the gay gene and adopted a liberal 'pro-gay' approach. Headlines included:

- 19 • 'Gay gene' claims spark anger and dismay. (*Evening Standard* 16 July 1993)
- 20 • Sex studies are 'open to misuse' - Homosexual fears. (*Telegraph* 17 August
21 1993)
- 22 • Genes, gays and a moral minefield. (*Daily Mail* 17 July 1993)
- 23 • Who is to judge what is normal? (*Telegraph* 17 July 1993)
- 24 • Why we should be glad to have gays. (*Evening Standard* 24 July 1993)
- 25 • Three cheers for gays (*Sunday Telegraph* 18 July 1993)
- 26 • My fear is having straight children (*Independent* 17 July 1993)

27
28
29 Gay men were high profile contributors to this debate - both as journalists and as guest
30 writers (e.g. Matthew Parris, *The Times* 17 July 1993 and Ian McKellan, *Guardian* 22 July
31 1993). The coverage also included some striking images of gay activists and prominence
32 given to their messages - even in tabloids with a reputation for anti-gay reporting. The
33 right-wing *Daily Mail*, for example, carried a picture of demonstrators holding a placard
34 reading "Justice, equality, freedom for lesbians and gay men" (*Daily Mail* 17 July 1993).
35 The populist newspaper, the *Sun* carried a similar image - with the prominent banner
36 "Queer is Cool" and an enlarged inset quote from Gay rights group Stonewall "don't try to
37 eradicate us" (*Sun* 17 July 1993). Gay men were also used as key informants by
38 journalists through out the reporting, across a wide range of newspapers. A systematic
39 study by David Miller of all articles about the gay gene in the national UK press on the 16th
40 and 17th of July (around the launch of the scientific paper) identified 29 quotes from
41 scientists, 20 from gay activists, 15 from medical ethicists and only 4 from the moral right
42 (Miller, 1995: 68). The initial reporting thus clearly identified gay men, rather than the moral
43 right, as the appropriate commentators. This reflects, among other things, the strong
44 relations forged between the media and gay organisations in the context of the AIDS crisis
45 (Miller, 1995). Although Miller does not remark on it - his findings also demonstrate
46 another point. They highlight the dramatic exclusion of women's voices from the debate.
47 Only 2 out of 68 quotes recorded by Miller are from women, and my own review of the
48 archives shows that feminist perspectives - on abortion, women's choice and on sexuality -
49 are notable by their absence. (See also Steinberg, 1999).

50
51 In spite of intense attention to the idea that a 'gay gene test' might lead to abortion there is
52 not a single example of anyone actually advocating abortion (as opposed to genetic

1 therapy in utero) in any article or letter. This is perhaps not surprising given that right-wing
2 politics which favour discrimination against gay people also is often anti-abortion. Rather
3 than advocating abortion using a 'gay gene' diagnosis, the very notion of a woman's 'right
4 to choose' on this basis was often presented with horror. One columnist, writing for the
5 *People* tabloid newspaper, for example, declared that only a "warped dysfunctional
6 monster" would consider abortion as a way of avoiding "raising a gentle, caring boy who
7 might - only might, mind you - grow up to love another gentle, caring boy" (cited in Miller,
8 1995: 272).

9
10 My analysis of the UK press reporting thus tallies with Miller's findings that, in the UK: "The
11 gay gene story was predominantly framed by the assumption that the ethical implications
12 were important and that the potential for discriminating against lesbians and gay men was
13 a serious and feared possibility" (Miller, 1995: 272. See also Conrad and Markens, 2001:
14 382).

15
16 In addition, the press coverage was not as genetically deterministic as might at first
17 appear. Far from assuming that genes map out our future, many journalists highlighted the
18 role of choice and culture in developing sexual identities and explicitly disassociated
19 themselves from genetic determinism. Headlines included, for example:

- 21 • Don't panic: take comfort, it's not all in the genes. (*Telegraph* 17 July 1993)
- 22 • It's not in the genes, it's in the culture. (*Independent* 19 July 1993)
- 23 • Gene talk won't wash. (*Today* 21 July 93)
- 24 • The myth of the gay gene. (*Observer* 18 July 1993)

25
26 The themes in such headlines were followed through in the text of these, and many other,
27 articles. In fact journalists repeatedly included caveats about Xq28 at the very most
28 "influencing" but certainly not *determining* sexuality. Readers were informed, for example,
29 that the scientists have "not discovered a gene that causes homosexuality" and "no one
30 expects to discover a gene which 'causes' homosexuality" and even that there is "no such
31 thing as a gay gene" (*Independent on Sunday* 17 July, 18 July 1993, *Daily Mail* 17 July
32 1993).

33
34 Both tabloids and broadsheets sometimes mocked the gay gene story. One journalist
35 commented, for example, "Of course when you start to poke around this tale it tends to
36 sag a bit. It turns out that this gene - which they haven't well, actually, found - might only,
37 possibly, sort of, well, predispose somebody to homosexuality. One person might have it
38 and not be gay, another might not have it and be Julian Clary [a famously camp
39 performer]" (*Sunday Times* 18 July 1993). Humour was also used to challenge the
40 science. The *Independent*, for example, published the following satire:

41
42 "Having published their evidence connecting Xq28, an area of the X chromosome,
43 with homosexuality, the team led by Dean Hamer ... returned to their microscopes
44 and began surveying the contiguous Xq29. Only this time their microscopes were
45 even more powerful than before, and what they saw made them gasp with
46 amazement. What they saw, in perfect minuscule detail, was as follows:

- 47 - a complete set of well-used Judy Garland LPs;
- 48 - a complete season of Bette Davis films;
- 49 - Barbara Cartland's complete pink outfit [...]
- 50 - a feather boa [...]

51 The team realised that what they had stumbled upon was utter dynamite. They had
52 located the genetic determinant of High Camp." (*Independent* 19 July 1993)

1
2 On the few occasions that journalists offered very deterministic readings of the gay gene
3 findings, this was sometimes in the service of quite distinct agenda. The most extreme
4 deterministic presentation appeared in the *News of the World* in an article which, in fact,
5 was not focused on the gay gene story at all. Instead, this was a story about smoking. The
6 article was framed in a way typical of this popular and iconoclastic news paper which often
7 adopts a 'playful' relationship with notions of truth and official expertise, and is at pains to
8 support readers in their own (presumed mainstream/traditional) life style choices. The
9 main point of this particular article was to reassure readers that it was OK to carry on
10 smoking because the causes of cancer were primarily genetic. The *News of the World*
11 used the example of the 'the gay gene' to 'prove' that genetics has a powerful determining
12 role to play in all aspects of human life. Thus this article opened by declaring that
13 "American scientists are near to proving that inherited genes via the mother are the cause
14 of homosexuality". This, it stated shows that "what's in our genes sets most of our life
15 patterns" and that lung cancer is "preordained by your genes". Hence, the *News of the*
16 *World*, declared, the Department of Health is wrong to be "blindly obsessed by the fallacy
17 that smoking's the villain." (*News of the World* 18 July 1993).

18
19 Such simple genetic determinism as was evident in the *News of the World* article cited
20 above was, however, the exception. Indeed, instead of using the gay gene story to
21 promote genetic determinism (as in the rather convoluted example above), several
22 journalists used it in precisely the opposite way. The 'gay gene' research was used as an
23 opportunity to challenge the notion of simple genetic causation. The opening sentence of
24 one article read: "The boggy of genetic determinism needs to be laid to rest. The discovery
25 of a so-called 'gay gene' is as good an opportunity as we'll get to lay it" (*Telegraph* 17
26 July). Several articles or editorials also used the gay gene story as an early opportunity to
27 question the whole enterprise of mapping the human genome and the associated ethical
28 issues. The *Independent on Sunday*, for example, carried an editorial, under the headline
29 "The Genetic Tyranny" (18 July 1993). The gay gene story in this sense offered the
30 opportunity to make human genetic research 'newsworthy' and raise fundamental ethical
31 issues. (An opportunity which was, in fact, quite rare back in the early 1990s, see
32 Kitzinger, J. and Reilly, 1997).

33
34
35 Some newspapers, most clearly the broadsheets, challenged the whole enterprise of
36 searching for a gay gene in the first place. Thus, although few articles questioned the
37 status of the scientific method per se (e.g. statistical significance or sampling method, see
38 Conrad and Markens, 2001), several journalists arguably offered a more fundamental
39 challenge to the science.⁴ They drew on sociological and historical analyses of
40 homosexuality and gay identity (such as those outlined in the introduction to this chapter)
41 in order to question the underlying thesis and politics informing the search for a genetic
42 link.

43

⁴ Criticisms of biological research into homosexuality include criticisms about what is defined as homo or hetero-
sexual activity (e.g. in one study the mounting male rats are assumed to be heterosexual even when mounting other
male rats see Schuklenk et al, 1998: 134). Other criticisms include assumptions about the background rate of
homosexuality in the population as a whole (Schuklenk et al, 1998: 136), a reliance on small samples, the absence of
normal controls or inappropriate assumptions about what is cause and what is effect (Rose, 1996: 58)

1 The morality, validity, utility or politics of the search for a cause of homosexuality was
2 explicitly questioned in several reports in the UK press. One journalist dismissed such
3 knowledge as “useless” and argued that one might as well search for a gene for people
4 who were poor at Morris dancing (*Today* 21 July 1993). Another cited Stonewall’s point of
5 view that the question should not be “why are we gay?” but “when will we have the right to
6 live our lives without fear of discrimination and persecution”? (*Independent* 17 July 1993).
7 The *Independent on Sunday* informed readers that “science has had quite a lot to say
8 about homosexuality in the past, most of it rubbish” (*Independent on Sunday* 18 July
9 1993). The *Telegraph* referenced historical notions such as that homosexual men have a
10 feminine distribution of body fat (17 July 1993). The *Guardian* compared the search for a
11 gay gene with efforts to identify a crime gene and its racist implications. This journalist also
12 reminded readers of some of the more ridiculous historic claims for genetics. “In 1919 one
13 respected US biologist published a monograph suggesting that the ability to be a naval
14 officer was an inheritable trait, passed only through the male (because there were no
15 female naval officers)” (*Guardian* 17 July 1993).

16
17 The very notion of the homosexual as a type of being was challenged in some reporting.
18 Homosexuality was identified as a social construct. A contributor to the *Sunday Times*
19 commented that the very identity of “the homosexual” was “historically a new idea that
20 even now in many cultures simply doesn’t exist” (*Sunday Times* 18 July 1993). The
21 *Independent* pointed out that: “Homosexuality is an abstract noun, a cultural construct with
22 a short historical life, as was famously pointed out by Foucault. Neither the ancient Greeks
23 nor the ancient Romans had a word for homosexuality” (*Independent* 19 July 1993)⁵ Parts
24 of the media also drew attention to the apparent plasticity of human sexuality. The
25 *Guardian* asserted that human sexuality is a “fluid and creative force” and that “everyone
26 has a capacity” for homosexuality. A *Telegraph* article criticised the gay gene argument
27 because: “It polarises homosexuality and heterosexuality rather than seeing them as part
28 of a continuum” (18 July 1993). A report in the *Observer* illustrated this anecdotally. It
29 opened with the story of a happily married man (“Mr Nelson”) who occasionally liked one
30 night stands with men. This, according to the journalists, “demonstrates that homosexuality
31 goes far beyond the province of the gay community. After a week of media hysteria about
32 the sources of sexual orientation the experiences of families like the Nelsons should be
33 kept firmly in mind” (*Observer* 18th July 1993).

34 35 36 4. CONCLUSION 37

⁵ Similar challenges to the authority of ‘the boffins’ is evident in some coverage of the ‘finger length research. Holliman and colleagues draw attention to a front-page banner advertisement, which links to an article published further inside this edition, which asks the question: ‘Can your index finger really determine your sexuality?’ (*Daily Mail* 31 March 2000). The article inside answers this question in the headline: ‘That’s handy - the pictures that prove your index finger doesn’t determine your sexuality’ (*Daily Mail* 31 March 2000). The paper claims to put the research to the test so that readers can make their own decisions. This involves a series of pictures of celebrities holding their hands up to the camera. These celebrities have all been chosen on the basis of their sexuality, for example: ‘self-confessed lesbian, tennis champion Martina Navratilova [...]’ and ‘[...] notorious womaniser Rod Stewart [...]’. Almost all the pictures and captions challenge the proposed theory about finger length and sexuality. (Holliman et al., 2002)

1 Reviewing UK press reports about the ‘gay gene’ shows that it is wrong to characterise the
2 coverage of Xq28 as largely naïve and deterministic or as overwhelmingly and uniformly
3 ‘homophobic’ in any simple sense. The newspapers included some extreme examples of
4 such coverage but were, in general, more cautious in their reporting of Xq28 and less
5 overtly anti-gay than some critics have implied. I do not wish to be an apologist for the
6 media but when we generalise about newspapers in ways which are insensitive to
7 differences (e.g. between sub-editors and journalists, between letters pages and editorials,
8 or, indeed, between UK and US contexts) we can miss opportunities for intervention.
9 When we reiterate the most pessimistic view of the media we can fail to acknowledge and
10 build on lobbying successes (e.g. the impact of pressure groups such as Stonewall and
11 Outrage). By focusing on the most obvious and gross examples of homophobia we can
12 also miss more subtle assumptions and exclusions. In this case, for example, it might be
13 worth reflecting, on the politics of arguing for a ‘bisexual continuum’ and what this might
14 mean for some sort of post-modern symbolic annihilation of gay identity. It is also certainly
15 worth noting the exclusion from the debate of feminist perspectives on either sexuality or
16 abortion and the way in which pregnant women are framed in the coverage of Xq28
17 (Epstein, 1999).

18
19 The most important point I wish to make here is that to scapegoat the media for
20 misrepresenting the gay gene findings is dangerous because it lets science off the hook.
21 When scientists complain about media distortion they are sometimes refusing to address
22 the social and political implications of their work. When they bemoan media ‘hype’ they are
23 failing to acknowledge the P.R. activities of their own profession (Rose, 1999). There is no
24 evidence that the media reporting of the Xq28 story was ‘worse’ than the discussions
25 which took place within scientific circles - and there is some evidence that the media
26 coverage was actually ‘better’. It is true that the media gave the Hamer et al’s paper a
27 great deal of coverage but then the journal ‘*Science*’ itself was engaged in extensive pre-
28 publication publicity, priming the media that this was a big story and the lead author made
29 himself widely available for interviews with journalists to promote the findings (Miller, 1995:
30 275).⁶ It is true that the press release from Hamer and colleagues did not state that a ‘gay
31 gene’ had been ‘discovered’ (Conrad and Markens. 2001: 379), but then neither did most
32 of the mass media reporting. However references to a gene “for homosexuality” or a “gay
33 gene” appeared in the title of articles discussing Hamer’s work in a range of popular and
34 respectable scientific journals such as *Science* (Pool, 1993), *New Scientist* (Holmes,
35 1993) and *Scientific American* (Horgan, 1995) (see Petersen 1999). It is true that the
36 media focussed a great deal on tests and abortions (often prompted to do so by gay
37 activists). However in doing so they drew attention to the social context of such research
38 and scientists quite explicitly collaborated in this debate. Hamer said he would seek to stop
39 a mythical test (for the gay gene) coming into existence by patenting his discovery, while
40 LeVay (of the ‘gay brain’ fame) added to the debate by saying that he felt bound to support
41 women’s choice to abort (on basis of mythical test) (Rose, 1996: 62).

42
43 Rather than castigate the media for ‘misrepresenting’ science or ‘taking it out of context’ it
44 is as valid to say that the media actually reintroduced important social perspectives. As
45 Miller concludes: “the scientific journals’ coverage of the debate was significantly narrower
46 than that found in the mass media” (Miller, 1995: 269). It was also considerably less

⁶ For a discussion of factors influencing the coverage see Conrad and Markens 2001. They highlight, for example, how reporting of the ‘gay gene’ in the UK and the USA was influenced by the prestige of the sources, the ‘sexiness’ of the topic, the context of reporting (e.g. the previous LeVay study), the development of source-journalist relations and the promotion activities of scientists as well as different cultural contexts (Conrad and Markens, 2001: 39).

1 reflective. Reporting in the scientific journals, for example completely failed to explore the
2 distinction between 'homosexual' and 'gay' or acknowledge the historical and social
3 significance of these terms but the press did, at times, examine precisely this (see
4 Petersen, 1999: 171, 175).

5
6 Scientists blame the media for 'hype' yet seeking publicity is an integral part of efforts to
7 promote their research profiles and secure funding (see Kitzinger, J. and Williams, 2005).
8 They accuse the media of rhetorical manipulation, but are themselves skilled manipulators
9 (Williams et al 2004). They blame the media for introducing 'prejudice', yet fail to address
10 the social values informing the scientific enterprise. The gay gene was not invented by the
11 media but was the creation of powerful social forces, scientific efforts and individual
12 strategies. As Hilary Rose concludes "the gay gene thesis has been produced not simply
13 by the media misinterpreting science - as scientists commonly claim - but directly through
14 the language and activities of scientists themselves" (Rose, 1996: 62). If we wish to
15 problematise the gay gene as a concept then the media representation is not the main
16 problem. The role of heterosexism and the place of science in society is a more crucial
17 target for challenge; the press can, in some cases, act as a forum for exposing prejudice
18 and pursuing critique and resistance.

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