
EMOTIONALLY ABSENT FATHERS: FURTHERING THE UNDERSTANDING OF HOMOSEXUALITY

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Homosexuality is a complex and multi-factorial mosaic. The debate regarding the etiology of homosexuality ranges from the biological to psychological, from the essential / materialist to the constructionist. This study explored emotionally absent fathers as one variable in the understanding of homosexuality. The levels of father-son and mother-son emotional connectedness / distance, measured in terms of intimacy and intimidation, were studied among male Catholic seminarians in Canada. Results indicated that those seminarians who identified their sexual orientation as homosexual scored significantly lower on their level of intimacy with their fathers than did heterosexual seminarians. No such differences existed in the relationship of seminarians and their mothers. There were no significant differences on the intimidation scores. Results lend new credence to the "weak father" theory of homosexuality and to the importance of same-sex emotional connectedness in the psychosexual gender development of individuals. Implications for therapy are discussed with suggestions for further research.

Sexual orientation is an important and complex psychological variable, "a complex mosaic of biological, psychological and social/cultural factors" (Byne & Parsons, 1993, p.229). There is a lot of discussion in the current debate on homosexuality regarding its etiology and implications for therapy (Griffin, 1999; Schuklenk & Ristow, 1996; Tam, 1997). Currently there exists no scientific consensus on this subject.

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The purpose of this article is to study family of origin, especially the influence of intergenerational intimacy and intergenerational intimidation in the father-son and the mother-son relationship, and its possible impact on the emergence of same sex attraction. From a therapeutic perspective, different understandings of homosexuality and distinctive client realities call for sensitivity and expertise in dealing with clients who approach therapy to deal with issues of homosexuality, as will be discussed later in this article.

Perspectives on the Etiology of Homosexuality

A diversity of theoretical concepts, each with their proponents and opponents, exist that endeavor to explain the origins of homosexuality (Herek, 1991). The debate regarding the etiology of homosexuality often follows the nature/nurture divide (Byne, 1997; E. Stein, 1990; T.S. Stein, 1997; Herdt, 1992). The controversy seems to be between the essentialists and the constructionists (Stein, 1999). The essentialists, also called determinists and materialists (Yarhouse & Jones, 1996) accentuate the biological, inherited origins of sexual orientation probably has much to do with genes, hormones and brain structure, or "natural kinds" (LeVay, 1996). Essentialists assert that sexual orientation is a universalizing reality that fits all kinds of people across cultures and history (Stein, 1999). For the essentialist, sexual orientation is an enduring reality, an essence at the core of our being that occurs naturally. While there is suggestive but incomplete evidence for a biological basis (Bailey & Pillard, 1991; Levay, 1991), there is also critique (Byne, 1995, 1996; Fausto-Sterling, 1995, 1997). On the other side, the constructionists assert

that sexual orientations are not natural human kinds, but rather, need to be seen as social human kinds as a result of social process (Stein, 1999). Constructionists emphasize the developmental, environmental, and especially the family of origin influences on the homosexual, as well as the "repeatedly reinforced choices" made by individuals (Satinover, 1996). For the constructionists, sexual orientation is fashioned by shared cultural meanings and understandings and is experienced by people in different ways. Research here is also inconclusive (Kitzinger, 1995; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1993) and often this research is based upon self-identified lesbian and gay people. In other words, it is end-point research that pays little attention to how people reach that end point (Pattatucci, 1998). The debate continues in the realm of varying scientific theories and ongoing research.

Christian counsellors are also divided on how to approach the issue. Traditional approaches range from seeing homosexuality as a moral sin (Payne, 1986), or as a sickness or problem incompatible with Christian teachings (Hollings, 1972; Mickey, 1991), to attitudes of "love the sinner, hate the sin," to tolerance and acceptance (Graham, 1997; Marshall, 1997). Reparative therapies (Nicolosi, 1991), highly endorsed by some Christian groups, are seriously questioned both in terms of ethics and efficacy (Drescher, 1998; Tam, 1997). Thus, it can be seen that there are a wide variety of factors, approaches, and theories offered in the attempt to understand the etiology of homosexuality.

More and more, however, it seems that theorists and critics on both sides of the debate are leaning towards some middle ground, talking about complexity (Byne & Parsons, 1993), multiple pathways (Byne, 1997), multiple factors (LeVay, 1996), and "a mixture of both genes and environment" (Hamer & Copeland, 1994). Sexual orientation seems to be shaped through complex interactions of biological, psychological, and social factors.

"Weak Father" Theory

Bieber et al. (1962) suggested that parental psychopathology was the cause of homosexuality, and they identified family patterns presumed to be responsible. In particular, they selected the patient-mother-father unit for analysis. One aspect of this approach has become known as the "weak father" perspective of homosexuality, sometimes better expressed as a distant or hostile father. Socarides

(1978, 1990), working within the tradition of clinical psychoanalytic therapy, suggests that homosexuality may be the result of disturbances in the preoedipal phase and therefore a reflection of developmental arrest. Nicolosi (1991) concluded that there is support for the concept that the primary dynamic behind male homosexual desire is the failure of the father-son relationship, stating that homosexuals are more likely than heterosexuals to have had distant, hostile, or rejecting childhood relationships with their fathers or father figures. According to Nicolosi, a man is looking for emotional connectedness with his father through homosexual behavior. Alexander (1997) adds that it may not be so much that gay men's "early relationship[s] with their fathers were unfulfilling, but rather that the relationship they have always longed for with their fathers still seems unattainable" (p. 15). From this perspective, the issue of homosexuality is not primarily a problem of sex but a developmental and relational problem, indeed, a family of origin issue (Savin-Williams, 1998).

There are many critics of this psychodynamic perspective. Cohler & Galatzer-Levy (2000), while also arguing that there is little support for a biological basis for homosexuality, wrote "it is difficult to conclude that same-gender sexual orientation in men is an inevitable consequence of a domineering mother and a distant or hostile father" (p. 113). Since most of the components of the "weak father" perspective took their findings from a population in psychiatric treatment, interviews with non-clinical gay and straight men found little support for the Biebers et al. (1962) hypothesis (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981; Herdt & Boxer, 1996).

Most of the research on the "weak father" connection comes from qualitative, psychoanalytic accounts. This research presents a quantitative prospect within the context of family of origin theory within a non-clinical population.

Family of Origin Theory

Family of origin can be conceived as a living unit in which a person has his/her beginnings physiologically, psychically, and emotionally (Hovestadt, Anderson, Piercy, Cochran, & Fine, 1985). Family-of-origin theory holds that much of one's current self-image, values, behaviors, attitudes, and relations with others are, to varying degrees, formed by one's family-of-origin experiences.

The key variable affecting the quality of intimacy relationships is the level of differentiation people achieve (Bowen, 1976, 1978). Differentiation is a life-long process of striving to preserve oneself in close relationships. It refers to the person's ability to individuate, to operate in an autonomous manner without being impaired by significant others and without feeling overly responsible for them (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Thus, it may be hypothesized that an undifferentiated child is at greater risk for sexual identity confusion because of the lack of an autonomous and emotionally connected relationship with the parent of the same sex.

Williamson's (1991) concept of personal authority integrates Bowen's (1978) notion of differentiation with intimacy. The development of both a strong identity and loving relationships is a vital task for young adults (Erikson, 1968; Bowen, 1978). The development of personal authority involves leaving the parental home (at least psychologically, if not physically), individuating (especially resolving issues of intergenerational intimidation and triangulation), and establishing intimate relationships with peers and within the family (Rovers, DesRoches, Hunter, & Taylor, 2000; Williamson, 1991). Personal authority is achieved when a person can differentiate a self and then reconnect voluntarily in love and intimacy with family members, especially parents, and later, with peers and intimate partners.

The purpose of the current study was to explore the levels of emotional closeness and/or distance with their fathers and mothers, measured in terms of intimacy and intimidation, achieved by male Catholic seminarians in Canada, and to explore the relationship between these levels of emotional closeness/distance and sexual orientation.

METHOD

Participants

Data were collected by means of an anonymous, structured questionnaire sent to the whole population of 455 Roman Catholic seminarians across all regions of Canada (Rovers, 1996). One hundred and fifty four (154) seminarians answered questions on intimacy and intimidation with mothers and fathers. Eighty-four percent of seminarians identified themselves as being heterosexual, and 16% identified themselves as being homosexual.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to elicit data on sexual orientation and intergenerational intimacy and intimidation. The Personal Authority in the Family System Questionnaire—College Version (PAFS-QVC) is designed to measure key factors of individuation and intimacy within intergenerational familial and peer relationships (Bray & Harvey, 1992; Bray, Williamson, & Malone, 1984a, 1984b). The PAFS-QVC is a self-report instrument which assesses the current level of relationship with parents and peers. Items on the PAFS-QVC are rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Bray and Harvey (1992) measured test-retest reliability with correlations ranging from .56 to .80 with a mean of .67 ($N = 321$, 2 months) on the seven scales. Cronbach alpha coefficients, measures of internal consistency, ranged from .76 to .92 ($N = 712$). The validity of the PAFS-QVC was supported by significant correlations between the PAFS-QVC scales and self-report family measures.

The Personal Authority in the Family System Questionnaire—College Version (PAFS-QVC) consists of seven scales. This study utilized the Intergenerational Intimacy and Intergenerational Intimidation scales. Results on these scales were further broken down, grouping the questions relating to mother and father separately. Four new scales were thus created: Intimacy with Mother, Intimacy with Father, Intimidation with Mother and Intimidation with Father.

Procedure

Mean Intimacy with Mother, Intimacy with Father, Intimidation with Mother and Intimidation with Father scale scores were computed for Roman Catholic seminarians according to their sexual orientation. *T*-tests were performed to detect the presence of significant differences between homosexual seminarians and heterosexual seminarians.

RESULTS

Mean Intimacy with Mother, Intimacy with Father, Intimidation with Mother and Intimidation with Father scale scores for homosexual and heterosexual seminarians are presented on Table 1.

Significant differences were found on the Intimacy with Father scale between seminarians who identified their sexual orientation as homosexual and heterosexual, $t(152) = 2.55$, $p < .01$. No significant differences were found on the Intimacy with Mother

Table 1
Mean Intimacy and Intimidation Scores and Sexual Orientation of Seminarians

Scales	Sexual Orientation	
	Heterosexual N=130	Homosexual N=24
Intimacy with Father	M= 39.27 SD= 7.60	M= 35.00* SD= 7.01
Intimacy with Mother	M= 42.18 SD= 6.11	M= 40.04 SD= 5.40
Intimidation with Father	M= 18.23 SD= 2.41	M=17.58 SD=2.87
Intimidation with Mother	M= 18.32 SD= 1.90	M= 17.54** SD= 2.83

Note: Higher scores indicate more intimacy and less intimidation

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .09$

scale, and no significant differences were found on both Intimidation scales.

DISCUSSION

Results indicated that homosexual seminarians feel more emotional distance from their fathers than heterosexual seminarians. Whether these accurately reflect the emotional distance between the father and seminarian during earlier childhood is not definitive. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) and family of origin theory posit that the structure of relationships with one's parent is lifelong, a "straightforward continuation" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 208) of attachments in childhood. More recent studies suggest that attachments can be modified through ongoing interactions (Bartholomew & Perlman, 1994; Shaver & Hazan, 1993). These findings are consistent with the "weak father" theory of the etiology of homosexuality, however, cross-sectional associations do not directly address the underlying causal role of emotionally absent fathers. These findings can speak of a lack of childhood male role model (Bieber et al., 1962; Socarides, 1990), especially in the area of intimacy and relationships, or they could speak of the poverty of a present satisfying emotional connection with the father, needed to

promote the development of a healthy sexual identity (Alexander, 1997). Whether the father-son relationship, be that distant, hostile or rejecting, was present from childhood or developed in later life can be examined when doing therapy. These findings can be seen to be compatible with the hypothesis of the father-son unit as the basis for analysis of homosexuality. These results are also consistent with family of origin theory which emphasizes the centrality of the child-parental relationship, such as the male child's (lack of) relationship with his father. Emotional distance between father and son is one sign of poor differentiation and low personal authority.

Indeed, we believe the findings to be a small but significant piece of the overall puzzle. What is the nature and intensity of the child's experience of emotionally absent fathers? What is the complexity that yields one brother to become homosexual while another, who may have had the same emotionally absent father, become heterosexual (Byne & Parsons, 1993)? How might these family of origin factors interplay with biologically determined sensitivities that might influence different development in one son more than another? What other life experience and choices are made on the road to developing one's sexual orientation? We appreciate and embrace the interactionist hypothesis of the etiology

of homosexuality where multiple factors, including biologic, environmental, family, and choice need to be considered in therapy (Byne, 1997). We are cognizant that other etiological factors could contribute to a father being emotionally absent from his son. Current emotional distance could also be an uncomfortable father taking space from his openly gay son. The point is that the father-son relationship is an essential place for therapeutic investigation and therapists might be leaving pieces of unfinished business if they shy away from it.

Implications for Therapy

In therapy with clients struggling with issues of homosexuality or sexual identity confusion, one of the first goals for counselors is to review the client's developmental stages, especially when one considers the many definitions of being gay, as well as the individual differences in the developmental process. When homosexuality is seen as developmental, enmeshment with one's own family of origin becomes a central issue. The goal of therapy is the need to strive for personal authority and wholeness. Williamson (1991) states that personal authority is achieved when one can individuate and then reconnect voluntarily, in love and intimacy, with parents, peers, and partners. This study suggests that this reconnecting with the same sex parent may need to be a central ingredient in the therapy of the client struggling with issues of homosexuality. Family of origin theory is one perspective that provides a means to help clients understand and make sense of their lived experience and facilitate movement in the direction of personal authority so that they can move into a future of their own choosing.

The male client's relationship with his therapist, especially a male therapist, might become one arena where some of this unfinished business can take place. Male therapists who work with males in therapy can reproduce a positive emotional connection, an accepting atmosphere and be a father figure for the client. These therapists, besides being accepting of the male client presenting with issues of homosexuality, need to be comfortable in establishing a strong emotional connection with them. In the accepting homo-emotional healing/connecting environment of counselling, clients can review and grow through possible arrested developmental phases. In such a trusting climate, the client can learn to distinguish between a non-sexual affection and a romantic

(sexual) love for another male. It would help the client determine whether he is looking for affection, thereby filling the void left by his emotionally absent father. Because he may also be emotionally and/or sexually immature, therapy would help him distinguish this unfulfilled need of affection from a more involved sexual expression. We wish to clarify that these considerations are not presented as reparative therapy for homosexuality, but rather reparative therapy for aspects of developmental and family of origin issues that may need to be attended to.

Human sexuality and relationality require explanations that are rich and complex and include psychodynamic, sociocultural, biological, and environmental factors. This article is one attempt to add to the understanding of homosexuality in men, especially from developmental and family of origin perspectives. It is another question altogether whether such a focus in treatment would influence experiences of same-sex attraction. Rigidity in therapeutic approach, whether on the side of biological determinism (all one needs to do is accept their homosexuality and move on) or social constructivism (all one needs to do is review present constructs operative in life in order to move on) misses both the complexity of the person as well as opportunities for further growth and healing.

Further research to better understand the complexity of sexual orientation is essential, especially personal development within the family of origin and possible biological determinants of personality. A study of remembered childhood intimacy with fathers and mothers as well as a replication of this study with women would be appropriate. The creation of two new, untested sub-scales is also a methodological limitation. We wonder if there are specific sensitivities in these participants who are to become priests that might not exist in the general population. These variables need to be explored in further research. The small sample size is also noted.

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