Each semester I ask my students to write term papers that review the most current research in some area of human development. Often students select socially controversial topics like homosexuality, child care or divorce. Many times students who select these topics end up in my office after a few days of library research. They come because they find that the majority of social science studies on controversial topics reach conclusions that are contrary to their conservative religious values. The studies of controversial topics conclude things like: homosexuality is biologically determined; child care after 12 months of age causes no problems so long as it is of high quality; children will be little effected by divorce so long as their parents do not attempt to use them as vehicles of their animosity toward each other.

To understand the consternation my students are feeling it is necessary to understand some of the hidden basing factors in the social sciences. For example, concerning sexual orientation the Style Manual of the American Psychological Association, which sets the rules for much publishing in the social sciences, states: “Sexual orientation is not the same as sexual preference. In keeping with Guideline 2, Sexual orientation currently is the preferred term and is to be used unless the implication of choice is intentional.”

While this may sound innocent enough, its effect is to establish a position that will be assumed true unless shown otherwise. That is, to publish on this topic in any of the key journals in psychology or human development one must either make the assumption that gender affiliation is not a matter of choice or else one must bear the large burden of proving that reality is otherwise.

The standard of “proof” in scientific discussions involving humans is particularly high. Because of ethical concerns, scientific experimentation with humans is often not possible. Those who seek firm answers on important topics are often left with only the results of non-experimental that can be interpreted in a variety of ways, or unequivocal experiments involving animals that can be difficult to generalize. For example, most people would be surprised to learn that is was only in the past five years that it was scientifically established that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer in humans. Before that time, whatever had been established, had not been scientifically established.

Such high standards of proof in scientific discussions makes the political decision about what will be assumed to be true very important.

Returning to the matter of same gender attractions, most likely that which is currently termed “male homosexuality” is a variety of things that need to be better understood. Some types of same gender
attraction may indeed have their roots in biology.

Such biological differences may be useful in explaining the nonstandard desires and longing in some individuals. Perhaps such longings are analogous to the strong food cravings in some obese individuals. Similarly, there is a growing body of research from twin studies that suggest that tendencies like having a shy personality, being unusually disagreeable, or even tending towards political conservatism, have their roots in biogenetics. But does this explanatory rootedness preclude the exercise of personal and moral agency? Likely not. It may be more difficult for some, rather than others to resist the tendency to be shy, cranky, obese, gay, or republican. But choice is not removed by a genetic proclivity. Until more evidence is in, one would do well to be wary of sweeping pronouncements that appear to have their roots in science, but in reality constitute little more than truth by editorial fiat.

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