

Homosexuality Has Evolutionary Benefits to Individuals and Society

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In June 1971 I marched in my first gay pride parade. I walked up Market Street in San Francisco, from the Civic Center to the Ferry Building. The parade was one of the biggest I had ever seen, and the sidewalks on both sides were packed six deep. I had heard that 1 in 10 people is gay or lesbian, but had always felt this number exaggerated. At this parade, though, I began to realise for the first time that the number of gays may indeed plausibly reach that figure.

This number of gay and lesbian people posed a problem to me as a biologist. My discipline teaches that homosexuality is some sort of unexplained anomaly. If the purpose of sexual contact is reproduction, as the standard explanation has it, how can all these gay people exist? One might argue they are somehow defective, that some developmental error or environmental influence has misdirected their sexual fantasies. If so, gay and lesbian people are here for a brief time during our species' evolution, awaiting removal when natural selection prunes those with lower Darwinian fitness.

Hmm. I began to wonder about the evolutionary puzzle of homosexuality. If a theory says something is wrong with so many people, then perhaps the theory is wrong, not the people.

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Sexual Selection Theory Is Wrong

But I feared I would have to leave the puzzle unsolved. In a few months I was to come out as a transgendered woman. I didn't know whether I would be fired from my professorship at Stanford University, California, and find myself working as a waitress in a transgender bar. In the event, I wasn't fired—although I was removed from all administrative responsibilities—and I wound up with more time to investigate how evolution has led to diverse manifestations of gender and sexuality.

Many animals, indeed, do not even sort neatly into two sexes at all.

I found that evolutionary theory had followed a wrong path that leads inexorably back to [Charles] Darwin—specifically to his theory of sexual selection, which I have concluded should be declared not only false but unfixable. Although I believe many biologists acknowledge that recent findings about gender and sexuality are problematic, few go as far as me in recommending that Darwin's theory of sexual selection be tossed out completely. So let me sketch the steps that have led me to this rather drastic and provocative conclusion—and to a better understanding of the biology of homosexuality and gender.

There are two glaring flaws in Darwin's thinking. In 1871 he wrote, "Females choose mates who are 'more attractive . . . vigorous and well-armed'" just as "man can give beauty . . . to his male poultry" by selective breeding. Hence the peacock's tail, Darwin's frequent example, is supposed to reflect peahen taste in male fashion, and antlers a preference for strong warrior stags. "Males of almost all animals have stronger passions than females," he wrote, and, "The female . . . with the rarest of exceptions is less eager than the male . . . she is coy." In