

'Born this way'? It's way more complicated than that

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For decades, “born this way” has been the rallying cry of the mainstream gay rights movement, a simple slogan cited as the basis for both political change and cultural acceptance.

Gay rights advocates used it to make the case for legal equality. Allies declared it when standing in solidarity. Lady Gaga in 2011 released her triumphant gay anthem "Born This Way" and that same year co-founded the Born This Way Foundation, which this very week is the beneficiary of a set of [Starbucks drinks](#).

Getting America to believe that people are born gay — that it’s not something that can be chosen or ever changed — has been central to the fight for gay rights. If someone can’t help being gay any more than they can help the color of their skin, the logic goes, denying them rights is wrong. But many members of the LGBTQ community reject this narrative, saying it only benefits people who feel their sexuality and gender are fixed rather than fluid, and questioning why the dignity of gay people should rest on the notion that they were gay from their very first breath.

“There are a lot of lesbians who subscribe to the ‘born this way’ narrative, in part because it's become almost an obligatory story,” said Jane Ward, a professor of gender studies at the University of California-Riverside and author of *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men*. “If you support gay rights then you have to believe that. But there's now almost 50 years of scholarship on how people come to understand their queerness,” and Ward says for some people, queerness is something they claim ownership of more deliberately, over time.

The opposite of “I was born this way” is not “I chose this way.” In [a 2016 article](#) on sexual orientation published in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, researchers wrote that “whether sexual orientation is a choice” is a poor phrase for advancing our understanding of sexuality. We choose our actions, they wrote, not our feelings. Words like “choice,” “preference” and “lifestyle” are loaded because they've been used to oppress sexual minorities.

What the science says about human sexuality

If you know anything about sex research, you know Alfred Kinsey. Though the work he conducted in America in the 1940s and '50s is largely controversial — some questioned his survey methods and say he made broad claims his research couldn't support — there is generally agreement that he kickstarted modern sex research. Ever heard of [the scale for human sexuality?](#) It measures sexuality on a continuum from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual. That's Kinsey. Have you heard the statistic that 10% of men are gay? That's from Kinsey's research, too.

For all of the criticism the Kinsey Reports received (and still do), Kinsey is recognized for taking into account the complexities of human sexuality. But that was 70 years ago: what has science told us since?

The story we've long been told is that a combination of genes (such as xx or xy chromosomes) and early exposure to sex hormones (such as testosterone or estrogen) make us who we are. They influence the formation of “male brains” and “female brains,” and that same process, it’s been said,

also shapes “gay brains” and “straight brains.” We’ve accepted that biological factors drive our sexual desires, our personalities, what toys we play with as children, what jobs we choose when we become adults. Differences in our brains have been used to explain why there are [fewer women in STEM](#) and why young [male traders on Wall Street brought the economy to the brink of collapse](#). Gay and straight. Male and female. We’re just wired differently.

But as the patchwork of studies that make up this story receive more and more scrutiny, holes appear.

In her seminal book, *Brain Storm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences*, renowned sociomedical scientist Rebecca Jordan-Young broke down 13 years of exhaustive analysis on hundreds of studies on sex, gender and the brain. Her conclusion? Biology matters. But we really don't understand how.

In 1991, Simon LeVay [reported](#) he had found a difference in the brain structures of gay and straight men, which was broadcast as proof of "The Gay Brain." The hypothalamus, which is involved in sexual behavior, was smaller in gay men. But Jordan-Young said it wasn't clear if the brain differences observed in LeVay's study and others like it caused differences in behavior and desire, or resulted from them.

"How could gayness take a single identifiable form in the brain when it takes such varied forms in people's lives?" she wrote.

Studies on identical twins show that while there is a genetic "contribution" to sexuality, there is not genetic "determination." Despite the fact that identical twins share 100% of their genes, research shows gay/gay twin pairs are less common than gay/straight twin pairs.

How do the bodies we're born with shape sexual orientation and other parts of who we are? Scientists are still trying to answer that.

"Biology and culture interact to shape our sexuality," Jordan-Young said. "Anybody who says 'X% of sexuality is biological' or 'X%' is cultural' really misunderstands the situation. You can't even say 'it's mostly biological' or 'it's mostly cultural,' because the two domains are interdependent. All the culture in the world can't shape human sexuality without some kind of body to enable our actions and reactions, and there is simply no such thing as a human body outside of culture."

Why our understanding of human sexuality comes up short

Human sexuality is incredibly complicated, and there are limitations to what science can tell us.

“The science of whether sexual orientation is biological is pretty sparse and full of disparate, mixed and unreplicated findings,” said Sari van Anders, a professor of psychology and women's studies at the University of Michigan [who studies how social behavior affects testosterone](#) in men and women. “So that is one reason why there is a lot of confusion about it. Because a study will come out that says ‘This gene!’ And then another study will say ‘Oh, we didn’t find that same gene, but we found this gene.’”

An important reason why the science on sexual orientation is limited, van Anders says, is that the ways in which scientists define sexual orientation for the purposes of their studies — who counts as

gay, who counts as lesbian, who counts as bisexual — assumes we can draw bright lines, when we can't. Are you gay if you have same-sex desire, but never act on it? What if you're a man who has had sex with other men, but you're married to a woman and don't identify as gay?

"There's sort of this idea that ... if someone's gay they're gay in the exact same way. Everything is the same, so it would be the same biological origin, which denies the reality that people experience sexualities and live their sexualities very diversely," van Anders said. "Stripping that diversity away for the sake of scientific simplification ends up providing what you might arguably call impoverished science. A science that doesn't take into account sexual diversity probably isn't going to give us very satisfying answers, even if they're simple ones."

Where we're headed, and why it matters

Sexuality is a fundamental part of most people's lives, but much of the science on it remains opaque.

It's impossible to know if we'll ever be able to map all the complexities of human sexuality we know exist, but van Anders said it's "vital for people to understand how much work we have to do."

"I think we need to ask ourselves, 'Why do we want to know the science and biology of sexual orientation?' What do we hope to get out of it?" van Anders said.

Meg-John Barker, an activist-academic in sex, gender and relationships and author of *Queer: A Graphic History*, said that people "often assume that something being biological makes it somehow more 'real' than something being social." But there are plenty of social constructions with biological factors that people understand as being very real and feel very deeply. Like race. Or gender.

"Most aspects of human experiences are actually biopsychosocial: a long word which means that they involve our biology, our psychology, and the social world around us, with all of those things influencing each other in complex feedback loops, making it impossible to tease apart each element or the direction of any cause-effect relationships," Barker said.

The "born this way" mantra of the gay rights movement is both simple and absolute, despite the science that shows human sexuality is complex and fluid. Transgender people, for example, do not believe their biology matches who they truly are. Bisexuals, some of whom identify their sexuality as fluid, make up the largest share of LGBT Americans, [according to the Pew Research Center](#), even though they are a smaller part of the mainstream narrative.

Continuing to embrace the slogan, social scientists and legal scholars say, is not only limiting but unnecessary.

According to a 2016 [article](#) published in the *Journal of Sex Research* that reviews U.S. legal decisions which ruled in favor of LGBT rights, many high-profile decisions were made based on factors other than sexual orientation being biological and fixed.

Edith Windsor, the 83-year-old widow of Thea Spyer, is seen in her home in Manhattan, N.Y., on November 12, 2012. The "born/chosen" debate was invoked in amicus curiae briefs filed to the Supreme Court in the 2013 United States v. Windsor case on same-sex marriage, but the final decision ultimately did not take up the question of immutability (whether sexual orientation is fixed). (Photo: Jennifer S. Altman, for USA TODAY)

Gay or straight, male or female, the bodies we're born with don't determine everything about who we are. There is nothing inevitable about our lives based on our DNA.

"What we need now is a way to cultivate and reinvigorate curiosity about how the body really matters in the development of human personality and behavior, because curiosity and skepticism are the real engines of scientific discovery," Jordan-Young writes at the conclusion of *Brain Storm*. "What good is a science that doesn't tell us anything new?"

