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A Defense of Gay Science. Review of Timothy F. Murphy, *Gay Science: The Ethics of Sexual Orientation Research*

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Abstract

It is a measure of the strength, clarity, and coherence of this outstanding book that the reader will sometimes be uncomfortable with its precise logic. Timothy Murphy, a professor of medical humanities at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Chicago, builds a strong argument in support of sexual orientation research despite the fact that a scientific marker for sexual behavior would make possible a host of draconian bodily controls. These could include drug therapies and the selective abortion of fetuses marked by undesired sexuality. The possible reduction in the number of gay individuals that such science could conceivably produce is not a sufficient reason, in Murphy's interpretation, to constrain the choices of adults either to refuse to parent a gay child or to seek medical therapy themselves for their own unwanted desires.

Disciplines

Bioethics and Medical Ethics | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine

A defense of gay science

M. Susan Lindee

Gay Science: The Ethics of Sexual Orientation Research

By Timothy F. Murphy

New York: Columbia University Press, 1997

288 pp. Clothbound, \$29.95 ISBN 0-231-10848-6

It is a measure of the strength, clarity, and coherence of this outstanding book that the reader will sometimes be uncomfortable with its precise logic. Timothy Murphy, a professor of medical humanities at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Chicago, builds a strong argument in support of sexual orientation research despite the fact that a scientific marker for sexual behavior would make possible a host of draconian bodily controls. These could include drug therapies and the selective abortion of fetuses marked by undesired sexuality. The possible reduction in the number of gay individuals that such science could conceivably produce is not a sufficient reason, in Murphy's interpretation, to constrain the choices of adults either to refuse to parent a gay child or to seek medical therapy themselves for their own unwanted desires.

Murphy's is the most informative and compelling account I have seen of the ethical problems posed by sexual orientation research. He questions the premises and assumptions guiding recent scientific studies—such as Dean Hamer's work on the gay gene and Simon LeVay's interpretation of the hypothalamus—but also questions the prevailing critiques of these studies. And his analysis is covertly much broader, for the issues he explores are relevant to parental and individual rights in general and to many other ethical issues raised by standards of normalcy and deviance as filtered through the contemporary life sciences. On the brink of the "biological century" when germline gene therapy and human cloning have begun to seem almost inevitable, Murphy's study is particularly timely. Research on homosexuality raises a rich nexus of problems relating to reproductive freedom and human rights. Gay science, in Murphy's treatment, is a place where these issues are starkly visible.

The book begins with a discussion of contemporary sexual science research, goes on to propose that sexual science research could actually be of benefit to gay people, and then further defends in principle the practice of therapy for dissatisfied homosexuals, the control of sexuality in children, and the use of sexual orientation tests. Murphy believes that more scientific knowledge of sexuality has at least the potential to benefit gay people and that even if such science can injure gay people it remains ethically defensible.

His discussion of the definition of homosexuality is a sophisticated critique of contemporary scientific research on this question. Murphy does not interpret "the

homosexual” as a well-defined category, either social or biological. In the course of a lifetime, he points out, sexuality can take many forms, and the physical and social cues to erotic desire can shift in dramatic ways. The 20-year-old, for example, may find the idea of sex with a 50-year-old repulsive, but at age 50 find it appropriate to flirt with the gray-haired next door neighbor. Surely the differences—social, physical, emotional—of age are as important and interesting as the differences of bodily sex. Why does same-sex desire seem to be a scientific problem, while same-age desire is not? What does science need to explain? The assumption that heteroeroticism is “uncaused” seems to underlie much current research, but Murphy proposes that sexual orientation research could conceivably aim to understand the entire domain of human sexuality including sexuality not identified as socially deviant.

Murphy acknowledges that some commentators take the position that homosexuality is inherently outside the purview of the life sciences. In this construction, sexual behavior has no reliable biological underpinnings and depends entirely on culture and environment. Murphy, however, compares sexuality to other complicated human behaviors and suggests that biological factors are relevant or potentially relevant even in cases where those factors are not obvious and not determinative. While sexual behavior might be, like dietary behavior, a product of choice mediated by available cultural options, that does not mean that it has no biological basis. Nor does he propose that the existence of a gay gene, if such could be found, would preclude the social constructivist argument that sexual behavior depends on culture. His position is not deterministic in any sense. Sexuality, he suggests, is a biological phenomenon and it is reasonable to consider its biological properties in general; biology may not be decisive but that does not make it irrelevant.

In his treatment of the sciences of sexual orientation therapy, Murphy demonstrates just how far he is willing to push his argument, for here he proposes that despite its dismal history, ineffectiveness, and entanglement in homophobia, sexual orientation therapy is potentially ethical. Physicians and psychiatrists seeking to shift sexual desire have subjected homosexual patients to aversive electroshock therapy, oppressive reconditioning regimes, and dangerous, sometimes fatal, drug therapies. With some future system of proper controls in place, however, Murphy suggests that therapies to change sexual orientation, if voluntary, safe, and informed by a critique of the heteronormativity that sustains them, could be ethical, particularly in light of the emotional suffering that some homosexuals experience.

As Murphy recognizes, a complete science of sexual orientation could presumably lead to therapies that actually worked. If homosexuality were the result of exposure to a particular hormone during fetal development, the exposure could be manipulated to either avoid or produce it.

This leads to his discussion of the control of sexual orientation in children and to his acceptance of the ethical legitimacy of an imagined “magic pill” that parents could use to *intervene in their children’s sexual development*. He does not construe sexual orientation as dramatically different from the many other traits that parents routinely try to control in

their children. If the form the control takes is not oppressive and damaging (or at least no more oppressive and damaging than enforced piano lessons or the selection of high quality sperm from an elite sperm bank) then it can be ethically acceptable.

Like many scholars and scientists addressing these issues, Murphy is himself gay and an advocate for gay people. He believes that increasing the numbers of gay people would be a social good, as would increasing social tolerance of sexual diversity. He is also an advocate for science, and he is not convinced that scientific knowledge has inherent consequences. Technological and scientific fixes that have historically been used to pathologize homosexuality, he argues, can also become resources for increasing gay people's civil rights.

When he turns to the possible use of sexual orientation tests, however, he has a difficult time construing such tests as both ethical and beneficial for gay people. He notes that sexual orientation tests are potentially dangerous instruments of discrimination. They could "subvert gay people's capacity to protect themselves from various kinds of social voyeurism, inimical policies and outright malice." But he proposes that, in a society willing to protect the rights of gay people, such tests could facilitate those rights. This may be true, but his hypothetical examples bear no resemblance to historical reality. In one case he proposes a future government cash compensation program limited to gay patients with AIDS, based on the premise that social ostracism and repression forced gay men into "fast-lane" sexual behaviors, and they are therefore owed additional public support (\$10,000 cash) to help them deal with their illness. A biological test that could unequivocally sort gay from straight patients, in such a context, would benefit those who had the gay biological marker.

I think Murphy is in fact caught in a historical bind. Research on the causes of homosexuality over the last two centuries has generally reflected a pathological view of homosexual behavior. While it is possible to imagine a sexual orientation science that does not incorporate this perspective, such a science does not yet exist. What does exist is a long history of scientific interpretations that constructed homosexuality in ways that abrogated the rights of gay people. Attitudes about sexuality and the control of the body are not undergoing rapid change. As Murphy acknowledges, many parents—including many homosexual parents—would not choose to have a gay child because of the social ostracism the child could be expected to experience.

I share Murphy's sympathy for the potential of the natural sciences to produce social good. And I agree that sexual orientation science as currently practiced cannot be taken as representative of the full potential of scientific analysis. I also admire his efforts to reconcile his faith in science with his full knowledge of its historical inadequacies.

As genomic science promises to initiate an era of complete control of the body—with in theory all of its various frailties and failings to be engineered out of existence—the issues that Murphy tackles with such intellectual integrity have a general resonance. This is a beautifully written, thought-provoking book.