

What is the mechanism for learning a sexual orientation?

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The automatic unit of our mind establishes our sexual preferences through learning, but can we be more specific about the mechanism for such learning? Yes, we can: the mechanism is Pavlovian conditioning, and in this meeting we will analyze how it works.

Context

In this meeting, we will continue analyzing the nature of human sexuality, as we have done in prior meetings:

- ◆ **Where do we get our sexual preferences?**
- ◆ **Is sexual promiscuity genetically endowed?**
- ◆ **How can we change our sexual orientation?**

We will now use our knowledge of Pavlovian conditioning to illuminate the process of acquiring a sexual orientation and other sexual preferences. Here is an overview of these insights.

Overview

A person is genetically endowed with the physiological functioning of sexual organs and sexual hormones, and a person's sexual behavior beyond these basic physiological functions is the result of learning and personal choice. Thus, just as humans are biologically endowed to feel pleasure in a sweet taste and feel displeasure in a bitter taste, so humans are biologically endowed to feel pleasure in genital stimulation. Our preferences beyond such basic physiological functions are the result of learning and personal choice.

Here is what happens in acquiring a sexual orientation. A human is biologically endowed to feel pleasure in genital stimulation, and through Pavlovian conditioning they learn to associate some other stimulus with the pleasure of genital stimulation, just as a dog in Pavlov's experiment learns to associate the ring of a bell with the pleasure of eating food.

This learning is implemented by the automatic unit of our mind, and when such learning becomes highly automated over time, it seems inherent in our personality as if it were biologically endowed. But we can deduce that it isn't biologically endowed because it is too psychologically complex. More specifically, there are no biological mechanisms that could endow sexual orientation and that can also explain what we know about human sexuality. By contrast, we can readily explain all that we know about human sexuality in terms of learning and personal choice.

Now let's analyze the process of acquiring a sexual orientation, and other sexual preferences, in greater detail.

Pavlovian conditioning

Pavlovian conditioning is a learning mechanism whereby the automatic unit of our mind associates a new triggering stimulus for an existing automatic mental activity or behavioral activity.

The most famous example from Pavlov's work is that a bell comes to trigger salivation in a dog because the sound of the bell is presented in conjunction with dispensing food so, as a result, the sound of the bell

becomes highly predictive of the pleasure of eating food. Stimuli that may play a similar role in human life include the following: the sight of food, the smell of food, and the display of 12 noon on our watch if our lunch break occurs at that time.

Learning a sexual orientation

How does the Pavlovian paradigm apply to learning a sexual orientation? It works as follows.

Let's imagine a teenage boy who recently reached puberty. He is eventually bound to discover that he can bring himself pleasure through genital self-stimulation. This is similar to bringing yourself pleasure through eating food. The boy is also eventually bound to associate visual stimuli with the activity of genital self-stimulation. The visual stimuli may be either imaginative stimuli or physical stimuli that the boy looks at. Such visual stimuli will, accordingly, get associated with the pleasure of genital stimulation, and through Pavlovian conditioning, the stimuli will acquire the ability to cause sexual arousal in the boy.

By the time that a typical boy has reached puberty, he has long been trained in conventional gender roles, so a typical boy will associate visual stimuli of females with genital self-stimulation. This is how the boy will learn to associate sexual arousal with females and will, as a result, acquire a heterosexual orientation. More specifically, this is how a boy will learn to associate sexual arousal with only a small subset of females whom he finds physically and personally attractive, and this is why the subset changes over time as the boy ages and matures.

An analogous scenario is possible for a girl, as well, but there is an alternative scenario, as follows. Consider an earlier age of history when a teenage girl wasn't exposed to pervasive sexual stimuli through her culture and when a girl would be given away in marriage soon after she reached puberty. Such a girl may not have trained herself through genital self-stimulation, and, instead, she may be trained through genital stimulation when engaging in sexual activity with her husband.

Let's refer to the two scenarios as follows:

- ◆ **Self-training: training in sexual orientation through genital self-stimulation**
- ◆ **Interpersonal training: training in sexual orientation through interpersonal genital stimulation**

Now suppose that a person trained in heterosexuality, as depicted above, has an opportunity to engage in sexual activity with someone of the same sex. If the heterosexual person is open to participating in such activity — by virtue of their values and their situation in life — then they can also get trained in homosexuality, as well. The result is bisexuality.

I think that training in homosexuality will normally occur through interpersonal training. This is because the opportunities for homosexual activity are pervasive throughout childhood, long before puberty. Due to cultural restrictions on mixing boys and girls in private, it is far easier for a child to get access to a member of the same sex in private, where the two can experiment with sexual activities. And a boy or a girl who engages in homosexual experimentation before puberty establishes a precedent that they may follow through with after puberty. Alternatively, an older person who has reached puberty may introduce a younger person to homosexual activity before or after the latter reaches puberty.

We can think of a line segment running from 10 on the left to 0 in the middle to 10 on the right, with the left-hand 10 representing an exclusive preference for homosexual activity and the right-hand 10 representing an exclusive preference for heterosexual activity. Due to social conventions and ethical values, most people are at the right-hand 10. But as deviations from convention are becoming ever more culturally accepted, more and more people will fall to the left of the right-hand 10. A person who has equal preference for heterosexual activity and homosexual activity will lie at 0.

I don't know if there is reliable data on the experiences of boys and girls that are crucial to their acquiring a sexual orientation. It would be fascinating to see such data, but the problem in acquiring such data is

that the sexual activities of a minor are restricted by law, by cultural norms, and by ethical norms. As a result, it may not be possible to ask people about their sexual activities until they are of age, and by this time, a person may not be able to accurately remember the steps that led to establishing their sexual orientation.

More specifically, most people think that their sexual orientation is an inherent part of their nature and could not have been different, and this indicates that people are not aware of how their mind works — in conjunction with their experiences — to establish their sexual orientation. As a result, as a person progresses through childhood, they may not be aware of the steps that will lead to establishing their sexual orientation, so by the time that they are of age, they may be unable to recall these steps.

Learning an arbitrary sexual preference

I invite you to think of some sexual activity that you've heard that some people engage in but that you find disgusting or even repulsive to think about. Have you ever wondered how a person acquires an interest in such activity? More puzzling, have you ever wondered how a person can find such activity sexually arousing? A person can choose to engage in an activity, but a person can't choose to become sexually aroused just as they can't choose to salivate. Sexual arousal, like salivation, is an automatic operation of our mind and body.

Now, suppose that a person in the foregoing scenario tells you the following about the sexual activity of interest. "The sexual activity feels completely natural to me, so my interest in it must have been the result of my genetic constitution or other aspects of my biological nature." Would you believe them? If not, how would you explain the fact that the activity feels natural to them and that it is sexually arousing for them?

I invite the reader to pause to answer the question in light of the prior analysis.

The answer is that a person can acquire virtually any sexually-arousing preference through Pavlovian conditioning if their mind is open to it and if they can get the relevant training: self-training, interpersonal training, or both.

To be specific, let's consider the serial killer Ted Bundy, who was known to have had sexual intercourse with the bodies of women whom he had murdered. How did Bundy develop a mind that found the idea of sexual intercourse with a dead body sexually arousing? We can infer that he trained himself through Pavlovian conditioning.

And now you know how a man can come to be sexually aroused by a prepubescent girl, by a prepubescent boy, or by...you name it.

Notes

There may be psychological features of the human mind that limit the set of potentially sexually-arousing stimuli, but if there are, we'll probably never know what the limits are since this topic isn't likely to be experimentally explored. Furthermore, the limits don't matter for the purpose of our core understanding of human sexuality.

When I refer to genital stimulation, I refer to touching and stroking that is relatively gentle.

Meeting format

I will present the foregoing ideas interactively. Then we'll discuss all ramifications of the topic that are of interest to the participants.