

Introduction to the Special Section “The Puzzle of Sexual Orientation: What Is It and How Does It Work?”

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In 1995, with the financial support of the Eugene Garfield Foundation, Lee Ellis organized the first *International Behavioral Development Symposium on the Biological Basis of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Sex-Typical Behavior* in Minot, North Dakota. Word quickly spread that the “Minot Meeting” was the meeting to attend among sex researchers who conduct studies informed by biology. So successful was this first meeting that Lee went on to expand upon and host another one in 2000 and yet another in 2005. The participants were a who’s who of many of the world’s most innovative and respected sex researchers, as well as a younger contingent of up-and-comers. Many of the latter are now established, respected, and innovative sex researchers themselves. The presentations at these meetings were widely touted for their excellent content and polished execution. Invitations were highly coveted. Many participants felt that Minot’s relative isolation provided a key ingredient for success. In the absence of any big-city distractions, participants interacted intensively outside of the lecture hall, debating and discussing ideas over meals and even in their pajamas before bedtime in the university dorms that served as housing.

In 2005, anticipating his retirement, Lee Ellis asked Sergio Pellis and Paul Vasey from the University of Lethbridge to consider taking over the running of the meeting. Lethbridge—a small, relatively isolated city on the southern Alberta prairies—seemed like Minot’s Canadian doppelgänger. The location, coupled with the support for sex research at the University of Lethbridge, made it the ideal location for subsequent meetings. Lee confided that “Having organized the first three conferences, my feelings are a little like a parent giving up a child for adoption, but I know that the Lethbridge meeting is in good hands.” And so the

torch was passed to the Lethbians. Early in 2009, Paul Vasey and Martin Lalumière, in consultation with Sergio Pellis, began outlining their vision for a new generation of Lethbridge meetings.

First and foremost, we decided to keep the meeting small and concentrated on a particular research topic. Participants would address this topic from the standpoint of their particular research program. We thought that by implementing a small workshop model with roundtable discussions we could maximize the productive exchange of ideas. We also felt it was very important to incorporate undergraduate and graduate student participation in the workshop to nurture the next generation of sex researchers. In the process of choosing a unifying topic for the workshop, we came to realize through informal discussions that many of our colleagues were rethinking what was meant by “sexual orientation” and, in doing so, stretching this concept far beyond its original meaning. Like us, many of our colleagues were pondering how to characterize the sexual orientation of individuals whose peak sexual arousal and satisfaction results from unusual objects, activities, or locations. We believed that this nascent re-conceptualizing of sexual orientation held great theoretical promise and the potential to prompt all of us to rethink and possibly even reconfigure our research programs. In addition, we thought that this would be a great opportunity to gather together researchers who study gender preferences as well as those who study the paraphilias. As such, we settled upon *The Puzzle of Sexual Orientation: What Is It and How Does It Work?* as the theme for our 3-day workshop.

Over the course of the workshop, we aimed to more accurately identify what “sexual orientation” encompasses, so that we could then characterize the component parts of this phenomenon in an accurate and authentic fashion. In addition, a secondary, but ultimately related question that we addressed is “*How Does Sexual Orientation Work?*” As such, we examined how various proximate factors such as genes, hormones, neurobiology, learning, socialization, and culture influence sexual

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orientation. We also explored whether atypical sexual interests are disordered, non-pathological, or even adaptive. These questions were examined in light of various definitions of sexual orientation.

Reflecting back on the previous conferences, Lee Ellis recalled “When I first organized the *International Behavioral Development Symposium* back in 1995, I had no idea it would continue beyond that date. Back then, I also rather naively thought that once the best and brightest researchers studying sexual orientation had gotten together, they would be able to unravel the main causes of variations in sexual orientation rather quickly, certainly within my lifetime. As things have turned out, progress in understanding sexual orientation is certainly being made, but more slowly than expected. Fortunately, the Symposium has morphed into a once-every-five-year event. By 2010, it was apparent that even sexual orientation itself is more complex than I used to think, let alone its causes. So it is entirely appropriate that this fourth meeting be focused on better understanding the very nature of sexual orientation before reconsidering its multiple causes.”

The workshop took place May 31–June 2, 2010 on the University of Lethbridge campus. Twenty-five speakers gave podium presentations and 11 undergraduate and graduate students gave poster presentations. In keeping with the spirit of the previous “Minot meetings,” participants were housed together in student dorms and everyone enjoyed meals together. Many of the attendees joined us for an afternoon social excursion to Waterton National Park where a grizzly bear mother and her cub appeared, as if on cue. Sundry coyotes, mule deer, big-horn sheep, and elk also put in appearances making for a quintessential Canadian wilderness experience!

Various units at the University of Lethbridge, including the Offices of the President, the Vice-President Academic, the Vice-President Research, the School of Graduate Studies, and the Department of Psychology, generously contributed financial support for the workshop. In particular, we would like to thank Drs. Bill Cade, Andrew Hakin, Daniel Weeks, and Jo-Anne Fiske for financial contributions that helped to make the workshop a success. We are extremely grateful for the support and encouragement that sex research enjoys at the University of Lethbridge. In addition, we were awarded an Aid-to-Research Workshop Grant by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada, which, among other things, allowed us to

significantly offset travel costs. Federal support for this workshop in tough economic times leaves us hopeful that sex research has a bright future in Canada.

By readily pledging to publish the workshop proceedings in a special section of the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, the Editor, Ken Zucker, gave us important leverage in our pursuit of funding. Bill Cade, Alice Dreger, Evelyn Field, Simon LeVay, Sergio Pellis, and Anne Perkins chaired round-table discussions and were always ready with insightful questions and comments. Simon LeVay also provided insightful concluding remarks and gleeful personal anecdotes during the closing banquet. Fred Green, Lucie Linhart, and Dan Wong from the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery helped us to locate and secure permissions for the artwork (“Sleep Touch” by Torrie Groening) that we used on the cover of the workshop program booklet. Leanne Wehlage in the Department of Psychology provided key administrative support. Our graduate students, Annabree Fairweather, Deanna Forrester, Lesley Terry, and Doug VanderLaan, all pitched into help ensure that the visiting participants’ experience of southern Alberta was a memorable one. Lesley Terry also created some of the artwork that appeared in the workshop program booklet. We would like to make special mention of the fact that one of our doctoral students, Kelly Suschinsky, was instrumental in helping to organize our successful SSRHC application and the workshop in general. Kelly truly went above and beyond in making the workshop a success and it would not have been possible without her help.

We wanted the Lethbridge *Puzzle of Sexual Orientation* workshop to provide an atmosphere in which participants felt comfortable thinking out loud, tossing around “crazy” ideas, and brainstorming together. If the contents of this special section are any indication, the meeting was a resounding success.¹ It was a great pleasure to be able to host so many esteemed colleagues and we thank all the participants for making the trip. We look forward to the next workshop in 2015.

Reference

- VanderLaan, D. P., Gothreau, L. M., Bartlett, N. H., & Vasey, P. L. (2011). Recalled separation anxiety and gender-atypicality in childhood: A study of Canadian heterosexual and homosexual men and women. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40, 1233–1240.

¹ Editor’s note: One article scheduled for this special section was, due to a production error, inadvertently published in the December 2011 issue (VanderLaan, Gothreau, Bartlett, & Vasey, 2011). The publisher regrets this error.