## Episode 122: Born This Way? It’s More Complicated Than That

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** Welcome to the Sex and Psychology Podcast. I am your host, Dr. Justin Lehmiller. I am a social psychologist and research fellow at the Kinsey Institute and author of the book *Tell Me What You Want*, the science of sexual desire and how it can help you improve your sex life.

When it comes to both sexual identity and gender identity, it's not uncommon for people to say, I was born this way. In other words, being gay, being transgender, or being any other part of the LGBTQ plus community is often discussed as being innate, that it's in your DNA. Several decades of scientific research have provided some support for this idea, with both same sex attraction and gender non-conformity being linked to various biomarkers. However, the way we come to adopt a specific identity is about much more than our biological makeup. These are socially and culturally constructed.

As a result, sexual and gender identities may vary considerably across time and across culture. But many people have a tendency to overlook this, and to assume that their own understanding of sexual and gender identity is universal, that it transcends culture. However, when we start imposing our own ways of thinking about sexuality and gender onto other cultures, we miss out on a very important learning opportunity, and a chance to recognize that our way of thinking isn't the only way.

So that's what we're going to be talking about today. We're going to explore sexuality and gender in cross-cultural perspective. This episode is going to challenge the way that you think. The guest that I've invited has been very influential in challenging my own thinking, which is why I wanted to share his work with you. I am joined by Dr. Paul Vasey, a professor and research chair in the Department of Psychology at the University of Lethbridge. Paul conducts cross-species and cross-cultural research on sexuality and gender. This is going to be a fascinating conversation. So stick around and we're going to jump in right after the break.

Applications are now open for a new Continuing Medical Education course from the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University. The course is titled Gender, Sexuality and Medicine, an introduction to LGBTQ+, competent care, and it will be held this fall. Both online and in-person attendance options are available. This course is intended for health professionals and it offers continuing education credits. Please visit KinseyInstitute.org for more information and to register.

Take self-pleasure to the next level with The Handy. Designed by Norwegian company Sweet Tech, The Handy is a motorized stroker that is compatible with a wide range of sleeves that mimic the sensations of different sexual activities. Try it with solo play or allow a partner to control it remotely via Wi-Fi from anywhere in the world. The Handy allows you to stay intimately connected with the partner even when you can't physically be together. The Handy offers up the 10 strokes per second at top speed. It can be synced with video and the device is customizable to your body and needs. To get your hands on the Handy, find the link in the show notes or visit TheHandy.com and be sure to use my exclusive discount code, SEX and SIKE to get 10% off your purchase. Again, that's TheHandy.com.

Thank you so much for joining me. It's always a pleasure to speak with you because I find your research to be so important and so fascinating. Now I want to start by talking about some of your cross-cultural research and how it can inform our understanding of gender and sexuality. So a big portion of your research program is based on years of field work that you've conducted in Samoa, which has led to a number of publications on a non-binary gender category that exists there called Fafafine. So as a starting point, can you tell us what the term Fafafine means and also how you got interested in studying Samoan culture in the first place?

**Dr. Paul Vasey:** Well, Fafafine in the Samoan language, it means in the manner of a woman. So Fafa means in the manner of and Fafine means woman. I got interested initially in working in Samoa because I had worked on a large sort of review article with a colleague, Dr. Nancy Bartlett. The article was called Is Gender Identity Disorder in Children a Mental Disorder? It was basically a huge critical review of the literature on this topic.

Once we'd finished that, and it took about two years to write that because the background research was so onerous, once we finished that we thought, well, I think the next step really is rather than criticize, is to do something constructive. It's relatively easy to tear things down. It's more difficult to build things up. So we thought, wouldn't it be fascinating to go to a culture where you have individuals who are gender nonconforming or one might say sex-atypical in terms of their behavior and see whether they're showing traits of dysphoria in relation to their behavior and psychology, but choose a culture in which these gender variant individuals are not really socially problematic.

And so after reviewing the cross-cultural possibilities, Nancy and I landed on Samoa, so basically off we went to do that sort of research. We conducted that kind of research looking at issues related to distress and dysfunction in relation to one's gendered behavior and in relation to one's body. About the first two years of that work, and then after that, Nancy moved on to other things, and I continued and really shifted in terms of my research focus, and the research became much more about testing evolutionary models for why male same-sex sexual attraction would exist given that it doesn't promote reproduction.

There was also a lot of research that I did related to what you might call biological or psychological correlates of male same-sex sexual attraction, and particularly those that appear to be cross-culturally universal. So it doesn't matter which culture a same-sex attracted male or we would use the word androphilic male, it doesn't matter what culture they grow up in, they'll always exhibit certain biological or psychological characteristics. So the research really sort of was overtaken by those biopsychological evolutionary questions after a couple years.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** Thank you for sharing that, and as you've discussed Fafafine and what the term means, you said, in the manner of women. So when we're talking about somebody who is part of this category, we're talking about someone who has the biological or reproductive sex of male who dresses and acts in the manner of a woman. Tell us a little bit more about Fafafine persons and sort of how they express their gender, and then also in terms of their sexuality. So are they primarily attracted to people of the same sex? Tell us a little bit more about that.

**Dr. Paul Vasey:** Right. So Fafafine, you could call them natal males or biological males. They realize that they are male-bodied, that they have bodies just like men. They wouldn't contest that. They wouldn't suggest that they were born in the wrong body. They wouldn't say that they were female. And everybody around them, just cisgender men and women, also think of them as being male-bodied. But the thing is in Samoa, although they recognize two sexes, male and female, they recognize more than two genders.

So unlike in the West, where traditionally at least we've recognized males and females and boy-man, girl-woman, in some of these cultures such as Samoa where I've worked, they recognize what we in the West might call a non-binary gender or a third gender or an alternative gender. So if you're male-bodied, but you're feminine in terms of your gender-rule presentation, then in a Samoan cultural context, that is conceptualized. What that means is that you're not a man, you're Fafafine. So a Fafafine, they conceptualize themselves and everyone in their society conceptualizes them as being not a man, but they're not a woman either.

So unlike in the West, where such individuals might be, they might identify or they might be identified as by others as being a trans woman, or perhaps more recently as a non-binary gender in Samoa, the Fafafine, they think of themselves as not being men and not being women, but being this other thing, Fafafine, who have male bodies, but they're not men. So in terms of their sexuality, that was the other part of the question you asked about. They're overwhelmingly same-sex attracted.

So when I say that, I mean, they're like what we would call a Kinsey Six, they're exclusively attracted to other males, but like all Andrew Philic or same-sex attracted males, like all Kinsey Sixes across the globe, they tend overwhelmingly. Of course, there's exceptions to everything when you're dealing with human behavior and psychology, but overwhelmingly, they're attracted to masculine males. They're not attracted to feminine males. And so Fafafine, as a rule, they do not have sex with other Fafafine.

If you asked them about that, they would probably laugh and they would find it absurd. They would find it funny, the idea that such a thing would occur. The individuals that they pursue for sex and have sex with would be masculine men, males, who are masculine in terms of their gender representation and who self-identifies men. And the research that we've done in Samoa, looking at these guys, using viewing time experiments to try and get some objective measure of where their sexual attention is when they're presented with images of men or women, for example. These guys are Kinsey ones, so they're what we would call mostly heterosexual. If you ask them, if I gave you a choice between a woman or a Fafafine or a man, who would you choose for sexual activity, overwhelmingly, they say the woman. But they're Kinsey ones, which means they're not exclusively heterosexual, they're mostly heterosexual. And it's these guys that are the ones that are having sexual activity with Fafafine.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** Thank you for sharing all of that. I'm glad you brought up the term transgender and the term non-binary. And I think that's important to discuss in the context of all of this, because many people in the West will describe Fafine as being transgender or as being trans women. But as you just mentioned, they tend to reject the label of women. And also, as you mentioned earlier, they rarely experience what we in the West call gender dysphoria, which is that term that is usually defined as experiencing diffusion.

And so, I think that's the question of, how do we think about all of this? So are Fafafine and transgender, are they two distinct phenomena, or are they perhaps just different cultural expressions of the same underlying phenomenon? What are your thoughts on this? What's the connection between the social category of Fafafine and the social category of transgender?

**Dr. Paul Vasey:** Well, I think it's reasonable to describe Fafafine as being transgender. If by that we mean that they don't identify as the gender that they were assigned at birth, because no one is assigned a Fafafine at birth or assigned as a boy. Being a Fafafine kind of reveals itself as the child develops and exhibits sexotypical behavior. Of course, we're using Western words that they might not necessarily use themselves. But it seems to me, and I think it would seem to most Fafafine, reasonable to use that transgender label. What seems inappropriate is when Fafafine are labeled by Westerners as trans women, because they actively reject the label of women.

They know they're not women. They know they're not female. They know they're male, and they self-identify as this other gender. So it seems problematic, I would say, to take this Western concept of trans women and then impose it onto this non-Western system, which conceptualizes gender in a different way. And that when you do engage in that kind of imposition, it erases the reality of that local cultural context. And I find the local cultural context more interesting. Presumably, that's why we're doing this kind of work and interested in other cultures is to understand differences. Of course, there are similarities, but the unique cultural differences are fascinating as well and need to be recognized, I think, in order to understand properly what's going on.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** And that's why I think your work is so important, because the vast majority of sex research, gender research that's published in academic journals is based on work conducted in Western cultures with Western samples. And so we tend to have this idea of what sexuality and gender are, but there's very little of this cross-cultural research where we can check some of these assumptions. And so I think it's so important and so valuable to understand how sexuality and gender are expressed around the world and in different cultures, and for us to be sensitive to those local cultural understandings, because they might be very different from our own.

And I think that's really important in the context of, you know, for example, in the United States, you hear a lot about the idea of we're born this way. And we talk about LGBTQ identities as something that you are born with, essentially. But when you start looking cross-culturally, you see this vast diversity and variability. And this ties in with my next question, which is, you know, in some of the previous conversations you and I have had, you've mentioned how gay men, as we know them in the West, don't really seem to exist in Samoa, and that until recently, you had never really met anyone who identified there as a gay man. But that seems to be changing, in part due to the rise of hookup apps like Grindr and overseas travel, where people from Samoa have been exposed to Western gay culture. So can you tell us a little bit more about this? And are the people who are starting to identify as gay men in Samoa, are they coming from that Fafina category, or are they coming from the cisgender male category?

**Dr. Paul Vasey:** I mean, I've worked in Samoa now for about 20 years, I guess. And it is true for probably the first 15 years, I didn't meet anyone who self-identified as gay. And it was exceptionally rare, exceptionally rare, to meet a cisgender androphilic male, a cisgender same-sex-attracted male. I mean, when I did meet one, my job almost dropped to the floor because there was rare as hen's teeth. And then I think it was around 2014, this guy who was cisgender looked like, you know, a Samoan rugby guy. And he was exclusively same-sex-attracted. So very interesting in this cultural context where everyone who's an androphilic male is Fafafina, you're like, what's going on?

I remember in around 2014 he told me, you know, I'm like a gay. That's how he described himself to me. And the next year when I went back in 2015, he said to me, you know what? I am a gay. So that's when I knew, okay, well, things are sort of changing because this identity gay is sort of filtering into the culture. And we're starting to see here the very beginning of androphilic males adopting it as a possible identity category, whereas these cisgender androphilic males previously would have just identified as men. And so, and clearly they're not Fafafina.

And since sexual orientation wasn't a construct that people used to construct some sense of who they were, these guys would have just been men. So now I would say that it's still very rare. But every once in a while, there will be someone who identifies as gay. And mostly they've traveled overseas and they spent a lot of time overseas. So I think there's a lot of this Western influence in terms of that. The existence of that gay identity is being a possible way that you can construct some sense of who you are. I did go on to do a little study where I tried to find some of these cisgender male androphiles who, as far as they were concerned, they're just men like any other man. I think I ended up finding maybe 15, something like that. So they're really not common. It's much, much easier to find Fafafina, but they are kind of out there. You just thought they're really, really look for them. And they don't describe themselves as being gay. They're just guys. They're just men.

In terms of the apps, I did kind of suspect that once these gay apps like Grinder started to make an appearance that we would see perhaps some Fafafina botching it up. And I thought that maybe that might happen because the primary users of those apps are cisgender androphile males. And what are they interested in? They're interested in masculine males. They had interested in feminine males. I do know of one case at least where there was this one Fafafina who was remarkably feminine. I was quite struck by this. And a year or two later went back and this individual was dressing like a cisgender male. And I asked a Fafafina friend, what's up with that? What's going on there? This was not typical at all by any stretch of the imagination. And my Fafafina friend just sort of shrugged like that and said, well, you know Grinder by which I took to mean if you want to be successful in the Grinder mating market, then presenting yourself in a masculine manner is going to up your chances of getting what you want, which is masculine guys.

And as far as who's filling that nascent space of gay identity in Samoa, yeah, it's a combination of people that have spent a lot of time overseas. And so they're cognizant of that being a possible identity that they can adopt. I'm not sure that the Fafafina who are masculinizing or botching it up to get sexual partners from Grinder. I'm not sure if you actually spoke to them if they would say that they were gay guys. I think they might continue to say, I'm a Fafafina. And they might say something like, you know, once a Fafafina, always a Fafafina, that's not something you can change. You can make superficial changes to how you present. But the core of your being is Fafafina. I think that's the answer you might get.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** So fascinating. And related to this, I guess I also want to ask the question. So it seems like there have been some Western influences in terms of how people might identify sexually with some people maybe saying that they are like a gay person or maybe identifying as gay. Have you seen any trend toward the term transgender being something that people in Samoa might identify with? Or do people still primarily identify as Fafafina? Is anyone identifying as trans now as you see more of that influence of Western culture?

**Dr. Paul Vasey:** Certainly not independent of the identity category Fafafina. No one would say, I'm trans not Fafafina. No, you wouldn't get that. Fafafina is the primary identity category for those individuals who are male, feminine, and same sex attracted. In speaking to a Westerner, they might use the word transgender on rare occasions if they were struggling to try and explain to you their cultural perspective. But it's not a common word that's used. People would just say Fafafina. Someone they might be looking at something on their cell phone, pertaining to transgender people in the West. Or they might be looking on their cell phone at something pertaining to Hidra in India. And I might say, what are you looking at? And they might turn to me and say, show me. And I'd say, who are those people? And they might say something like, oh, they're like Fafafina. That's how that sort of conversation might go.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** So in some of your research, you've talked about how it's common in Samoa for cisgender men to have sexual partners who are both women and Fafafina. And as you mentioned a little bit earlier, these would primarily be the men who we'd consider to be Kinsey ones, right? Where they're not exclusively attracted to women. There's some degree of bisexual attraction that is present there.

And you've also talked about in some of your research how Fafafina and cis women are often competing for the same male partners, which I would presume to mean that they're competing for the same Kinsey ones sometimes. So there's intersectional mating competition that's going on as well. And I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about that, because I think that's particularly interesting.

**Dr. Paul Vasey**: Sure. Well, that whole line of research really came out of my Japanese monkey work. And the reason for that is that, you know, I have an entirely separate line of cross-species research where I've been looking at sexual behavior in Japanese monkeys for, I think it's like 30 years now. I don't have to go back and count, but a long time, even longer than the cross-cultural work, which is already long enough. And when I started to do that work with the Japanese monkeys, the monkeys will form these concert ships where they're like temporary, but exclusive sexual relationships. And there's high levels, at least in the populations I work with, with females engaging in homosexual behavior. And they form these homosexual parabolas that we call concert ships. So, you know, that was going to be the topic of my doctoral dissertation, which it turned out to be. And in collecting data, the first mating season, I was blown away because I saw a male intrude, a male Japanese macaque, intrude on one of these female homosexual parabolas. And attempt to solicit one female while he was attempting to drive the other one away.

That was probably the only Eureka moment I've ever had in my entire career. But I do feel like it was a Eureka moment because I realized, oh my gosh, that male is engaging in sexual competition with that female for access to this other female. It's not intra sexual make competition as predicted by Darwinian sexual selection, but it's inter sexual make competition, which had never been described in the literature, but there it was playing out in front of me. And it was funny because I remember the research assistant who was sort of dedicated to watching the monkeys. She wasn't someone who had a lot of graduate education, but she was just one of these people who really knew the animals well. And I was just dumbfounded when I saw this interaction, and I turned to her and I said, did you just see what I saw? And she just shrugged her shoulders and said, yeah, they do that sometimes. So then I remember saying to her, but they're not supposed to. No one's ever talked about this before. Then I thought, well, I'm going to try and get as much data on this as possible. And I ended up publishing a paper on male female inter sexual competition for female sexual partners in Japanese monkeys. And then from there, I thought, well, I wonder if this happens in humans.

And I thought if it does happen in humans, one would think that it would happen in a cultural context where you have males who prefer to have sex with other males. And those males who they prefer to have sex with behave in a bisexual manner. And so I thought, well, Samoa is an ideal place to see if this happens. And I have another cross cultural field site in a place called the Isma region of Oaxaca, Mexico, where the indigenous Zapotec people there, they also recognize a non binary or third or alternative gender called Mushe. So I collected data at both of those sites. And what we found is that intersectional make competition between these gender non binary males, if that's the term you prefer, and women. It was not uncommon. Let's put it that way. It was not uncommon for those individuals to compete for a masculine man.

And sometimes even the gender non binary male, the Fafafina or the Mushe would actually succeed. And often it was poaching a masculine male partner away from a woman who was either his wife or his girlfriend. And the poaching, usually it was just temporary for like a brief kind of affair or one night standard, that sort of thing. But there were a certain percentage of instances where the individual and gender non binary male that was poaching a mate succeeded. Not the majority of time, but a substantial minority of the time.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** Fascinating. And again, another reason why I love this cross cultural research. Now, a question that often comes up in talking about Fafafina is whether there is a female equivalent. So are there other what we might call non binary gender categories that exist in Samoa besides Fafafina?

**Dr. Paul Vasey**: There is a local term for masculine women, and it's Fatama. So, Fata again means in the manner of and Tama, or if you're speaking informally you said, comma, it means man. So you do see these individuals occasionally, but you see them much, much less than Fafafina. And there could be a variety of reasons for that. One could be that just demographically the best data we have as sex researchers indicates that female gynophilia, female same sexual attraction, is just less common than male same sexual attraction. It could be multiple reasons that are intersecting for why we see these individuals less.

Another reason could be that in Samoa, Fafafina are relatively well accepted. I mean, not perfectly, not universally, but overall, they're well accepted. And they're also very publicly visible, and that could have to do with certain personality characteristics, such as openness, which seem to characterize and or filic males. At least that's what the psychological literature suggests. So you put all these things together, you just end up seeing Fafafina in public a lot more than you see Fatama. They're there, but they're not going to be as common, and you'd have to really go looking. You'd have to really make an effort to find them. Whereas if you were in Apea, the capital of Samoa, and you were just walking around downtown, chances are you're going to see Fafafina.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** I appreciate you bringing up the point about social acceptance, because I was going to ask you a question about that, because in Western discourse on Fafafina and non-binary genders around the world, they often romanticize the way that Samoa and other cultures approach gender diversity and talk about how Fafafina are a socially revered category.

But as you discussed, it's not necessarily the case that they're all universally accepted, or that they're totally free of discrimination, and then you also have the category of Fatama, where it does seem to be the case that they have less social acceptance than Fafafina. So can you just talk for a little bit about the problem with Westerners romanticizing the way that other cultures approach gender diversity? Because I think we have this tendency to think the grass is always greener, and when you have these other cultures where there is this greater level of acceptance seemingly of certain third genders or non-binary genders, we tend to put that on a pedestal and say that's what we should aspire to. So what are your thoughts on that?

**Dr. Paul Vasey**:Well, I agree with you. There is a tendency to romanticize the situation in these other cultures, and I think part of that is it's got absolutely nothing to do with what's going on in the other culture, and it's got everything to do with the individual who's doing the romanticizing, and their calling, it's in pieces of information, even if it's information that they've constructed about other cultures and other species and maybe other historical time periods to construct some sense of who they are that makes them feel good as a person. And we all do it. We call bits and pieces of information from other cultures and other time periods and other species to make us feel good about who we are.

But yeah, I guess the other lesson is, look, just because there's tolerance for one color of the rainbow doesn't mean it extends to all shades of the rainbow. And I mean, to give another example from Samoa, I think that if I was to pursue this line of questioning with one of these cisgender guys who is same sex attracted, one of these rare guys that I've met, they would probably say that they're much more cautious about what they say and do than Fafafine. And I think that there's a situation where transgender, if you want to use that term, transgender male androphylls are probably more accepted and integrated into the community than cisgender male androphylls. And so, I think that the way that we think about transgender is for sort of one aspect of the sexual and gender minority population doesn't necessarily extend to all. And I think we really need to remember, I mean, in the West, we think about transgender as being this monolithic thing. And I think that we do, plus, I've probably left out some letters as being this thing, but it is a social construct. Transgender is a social construct, which we'll just think about that will probably rock some people's worlds.

But all of these different phenomenon, we lump under this umbrella category transgender. It's not necessarily useful, but it doesn't necessarily reflect objective reality, because there are very different phenomenon that are being lumped into that category together that, you know, a lot of the people that we might call transgender or part of some bigger transgender community, the little subgroups might have nothing to do with each other whatsoever.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** Yeah, and I think that that's, again, another reason why your work and other cross-cultural research is so important. And as you were talking about this, I was also reminded of something I talk about in my textbook, the Psychology of Human Sexuality, where I try and talk about cultural diversity as much as I can in terms of gender and sexuality. And this has me thinking about how in Iran, male same-sex behavior is something that is criminalized. I believe the leader of Iran previously a few years ago came out and said that gay people don't even exist here, right? Because it's this very heavily stigmatized status, but at the same time in Iran, it is acceptable for, say, a male to undergo gender affirmation surgery, right? To have top and bottom surgery, right? And to live their life as a woman is a way of expressing their same-sex attractions, right? Because that is socially accepted, but being a gay man would not be socially accepted.

So it's so interesting when you start looking at all of these different cultures and how gender and sexuality is expressed, and also just the way that the local cultural environment shapes all of these things, right? So in a country like Iran, there might actually be pressure. If you're somebody who might otherwise, in say, a Western context, identify as a gay man, you might, if you grew up in Iran, then be sort of pushed down that path of transitioning your body and then living your life as a woman, because that's the only way that you can express or act on your same-sex attractions.

**Dr. Paul Vasey**: Yes, and if that's the only model you have for constructing a sense of who you are, in some cases it might not feel particularly coerced. As you're constructing your sense of who you are, you might say, well, this is normal, or this is quote-unquote natural. If that's the narrative that's out there that you can draw upon to make sense of these unusual feelings that you're having, and your unusual patterns of behavior and your unusual preferences to hang out with the girls instead of hang out with the boys, it might make perfect sense that this is the developmental route you go down, and for some people at least might not feel terribly coerced.

If you want to push that logic further, we could say, well, you know, the psychological literature indicates that on average, under-filic males are feminine in childhood compared to straight guys compared to gunnifluic males, and the fact that they demasculinize, the fact that gay guys demasculinize to the extent that they're capable of doing so, that's kind of socially coerced.

But, you know, after a while of living that way, your gay masculinity becomes natural. It feels embodied. And so you wouldn't want to present in a feminine way, which you may well have presented in if you grew up in a culture like Samoa. I mean, I'm sure you've heard me say, I suspect that if I had grown up in Samoa, I've said, you know, I make a joke. If I'd grown up in Samoa, I probably would have been a fafafini and desperate need of a wig. Because if you are a feminine male child, and you're just, and you know, the sort of cultural attitude is laissez-faire, you're just kind of left alone, then there's no need for you to demasculinize the way there is in a Western cultural context.

And so instead of demasculinizing and becoming a gay guy, you just stay on that developmental pathway of being a feminine male, and you move from being a feminine child into being a feminine adult male. What that male femininity means varies from one cultural context to the next. In Samoa, it means your fafafini. In the place in Mexico I work, it means you're a moushe. In Canada, it might mean you're, oh, you're really a trans woman. That's really what you are.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** And I think all of this speaks to a point that I think is uncomfortable for a lot of people, because as I mentioned earlier, many of us like to espouse the born this way idea because it's a neat, simple, easy narrative. And the pursuit of LGBTQ plus rights is often predicated on this idea that you're born this way. This is an immutable trait or characteristic. Lisa Diamond, who had previously on the podcast, has argued that maybe that's not the right argument or tack, that maybe we're placing too much emphasis on biology and saying there's an essentialist aspect to being LGBTQ. The reality, I think, is that like most everything else with human sexuality, we're talking about a biopsychosocial phenomenon here.

So certainly when we're talking about something like same-sex attraction, there are biological and genetic factors that play a role in that. But then there's also the socio-cultural factors. And depending on the context in which you grow up, that might express itself in these very, very different ways. And I think ultimately that's the big key take-home point from a lot of your research is that so much of this is just cross-culturally dependent. It's not to say that there is no role of biology or genetics or anything else, but it's just that there's a complex, complicated interaction and that gender and sexuality and the roots of it are much messier than we might like to admit.

**Dr. Paul Vasey**: Right. Well, I agree with what you said. I think, and I think there's really three things there that have to be excavated. One is, yes, I agree completely. We're dealing with phenomenon that have a biological component, and they also have a socio-cultural component. But I also think that I think the way you phrased it was in relation to the LGBTQ community. Well, that's a social construct, and if we want to be approaching these things in an objective scientific manner, we can't be talking about biosocial influences on the LGBTQ plus community because LGBT, they're all separate things. So that social construct has to be broken apart if you want to be thinking in a scientific manner.

Then the third layer that you have to dig down into is in terms of what's kind of more biologically influenced, some might say biologically determined versus what is more flexible or plastic and more influenced by socio-cultural factors, are we talking about sexual orientation? Are we talking about gender identity? Are we talking about gender role expression? What are we talking about here? So I find a lot of these conversations, there's a level of precision that gets glossed over, and we really need to be precise. This is exactly what I'm talking about. I am talking about biological males who present in a feminine manner and who identify in this way. It's sort of that level of precision that's necessary if we want to advance these conversations, because what I have to say to you about feminine biological males might have absolutely nothing to do with lesbians or absolutely nothing to do with trans women who are guinephilic. Absolutely nothing.

But when we lump all of these phenomenon together into this umbrella category, which we all go, yeah, yeah, yeah, we get what that means, transgender. It's not a very scientifically useful term. You follow me?

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** I totally follow you, and this is actually something that I struggle with a lot because I have a textbook on human sexuality. And I talk about all of these different categories, the different components of what in the West we call the LGBTQ plus community. And we do need to be very precise when we're talking about different segments, because the research, the data, the information, the biological factors, all these things, it's all different for each one of these subgroups. But I also hear from some people who read the book who want me to use that term LGBTQIA PP2S, adding everything in and talking about everybody all at once.

And you can't do that and be scientifically accurate at the same time, because the research and data that I might be talking about in one case is always specific to one segment or component of that particular community. And then also everybody's social experiences, experiences with discrimination and so forth is different. And that also depends further on cultural context.

So yes, I totally get what you're saying. And it's something that I think is a struggle for a lot of sexuality and gender researchers is, how do we talk about this in a way that is scientifically accurate? And that we can make people receptive to the messaging because there's all this pressure to be inclusive in every single thing that we say, but the data doesn't always speak to everybody who's a member of that broader community.

**Dr. Paul Vasey**: Right. Yeah. I think you have to ask yourself, well, what is the purpose of what I'm working on right now? If your purpose is activism, and if your purpose is political, then LGBTQ plus could be very useful. Perhaps if you're doing certain historical work about the development of certain communities starting in the 1960s, that could be very useful. But if you do the kind of work that I do related to evolutionary psychology or biopsychology, then it's not useful to lump these different categories together. It doesn't clarify it just obscures. It would be a really, really bad way of going about doing science.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** Yes. And I agree with what you're saying. And at the same time, also want to recognize that there is social and political value in having these identities in this broader LGBTQ plus community. And there can be different goals for activists versus scientists. And sometimes you have science and activism that come together and so forth. So it's a complicated messy thing to do.

**Dr. Paul Vasey**: Yeah. I agree with you. It all depends on what your priorities are and what your goals are in terms of the job or the task at hand. So, yeah, absolutely. Those categories are going to be useful for particular people with particular tasks that they want to push forward. But I'm sure you're aware that even within the supposed LGBTQ plus community, never mind, you know, the larger heterosexual majority. I'm talking about the people that would perhaps be lumped into that group. There's lots of factions that are like, no, we don't identify with this way or we don't hang out with those people. We don't even know people like that. But why are you lumping this into? So, I mean, there's all kinds of tensions that arise when reality doesn't necessarily match up with a particular social construct, which some individuals deem to be politically expedient.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** Right. And this is where I think it's going to be super fascinating going forward is to see what happens with the LGBTQ plus community because it has grown more inclusive in terms of the number of different identities and categories that are subsumed within that broader label. But these different categories, different factions have very different political interests and goals. And as you said, many people may not see themselves as having much in common with people from some of these other groups.

And so the question is, can this coalition hang on together for the future? So, you know, what will LGBTQ pride look like going forward? I think it's an open question because I see increasingly more and more disagreement, sometimes very heated disagreement that happens between different segments of this community.

**Dr. Paul Vasey**: It is paradoxical, isn't it, that the word you used is, it's more inclusive now, but there's also more tension and conflict and disagreements. I mean, I think a couple of years ago, I'm here in Alberta, Canada, down in the south of the province in Lethbridge, close to the American border. But if you drive six hours north, there's the city of Edmonton.

And I think one of their pride parades was canceled maybe two years ago because of conflict between trans individuals that were involved in planning the parade and the old guard individuals, which I assume would be one of the male gays and lesbians. So it is kind of paradoxical that there's this rallying cry for inclusivity, but the product of that in some instances has been tension and conflict and not necessarily good. I'm certainly not saying that inclusivity is a bad thing. I'm not suggesting that at all. But I guess there are tensions that are associated with different groups pushing different political agendas, which rub different individuals the wrong way.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** And I think ultimately it comes down to, as you become a bigger tent party, there are going to be growing pains that emerge with all of this. So the question is ultimately whether people can find ways to bridge their differences and see their commonalities or whether they'll end up breaking up. So, you know, that's again where my background in social psychology and having studied the formation of social movements, I think is so interesting to apply to the LGBTQ community because, you know, previously, it was really just the gay rights movement. And since then it is expanded to include so many other different movements and things are just moving in different directions for different parts of this broader community. So it'll be very interesting to watch going forward.

**Dr. Paul Vasey**: Well, I always like the saying, unity, diversity and unity. You can have both. I guess for some people, there's just tension around where do you draw the line for where the group starts and stops.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** And I think part of that unity and diversity is being willing and able to agree with people that you disagree with. And I think ultimately that's part of the problem that we have is that there's a lot of purity tests about if you disagree with me on just any one thing, then we can't get along about anything. And so being able to acknowledge, recognize our differences, still respect each other is one of the keys for being able to get along.

**Dr. Paul Vasey**: Yeah, very well said.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** So thank you so much for this amazing conversation, Paul. It was a pleasure to have you here. Can you please tell my listeners where they can go to learn more about you and your work.

**Dr. Paul Vasey**: I do have a Twitter account called at VC Lab. And that's probably the best place to keep up with my work because I post about articles that are coming out from my lab. I guess the other place would be research gate. You could look for me on a research gate and there'd be the dry scientific articles cut off you found there.

**Dr. Justin Lehmiller:** Well, thank you again for your time, Paul. I really appreciate having you here. Also, thank you to my listeners to keep up with new episodes of this podcast visit my website sex and psychology at sex and psychology.com or subscribe on your favorite platform, or hope you'll take a moment to rate and review the show. You can also follow me on social media for daily sex research updates. I'm on Twitter, Justin Lehmiller and Instagram at Justin J. Lehmiller. Also, be sure to check out my book, *Tell Me What You Want*. Thanks again for listening. Until next time. See you next time.

Transcript by ISU Captioning Services PSYC2205XU1111FS