

Free Online Sample

**This article appears in
Issue 02 of Cosmos Magazine**

Getting around the pdf:

- **Use your left and right arrow keys to move whole pages at a time**
- **Use the magnifying glass on the tool bar above to zoom in and out**
- **Use command + L (Mac) or control + L to view the document full-screen. Use the ESC key to return to a normal view.**

www.CosmosMagazine.com

A MAGAZINE OF IDEAS, SCIENCE, SOCIETY AND THE FUTURE

COSMOS

ISSUE 2 • AUGUST 2005 • £5.50 UK, \$9.00 US, \$10.50 CANADA

THE SCIENCE OF EVERYTHING

**Evolution's
big bang**

**Cloning in
California**

**Margaret
Wertheim at
the South Pole**

**Steven Pinker
has no soul**

**Last stand
of the kakapo**

**Rovers
on Mars**

**Fiction by
Gregory Benford**

THE CSI EFFECT

Is DNA profiling foolproof
... or full of holes?

THE MAN FROM THE 11th DIMENSION

The strange worlds of Michio Kaku





STORY *Richard Cooke and Dominic Knight*

NURTURE, NATURE, NAIL POLISH

ILLUSTRATION: JULIE KNOWLOCK



Is survival of the human species endangered by the mass use of cleansing gels and haircare products?

REMEMBER THE 'GAY GENE'? It's a phrase full of the optimism of the early 1990s, like 'dotcom' or 'MC Hammer'. Then, we naively thought complex human actions could be changed by a single gene.

Nowadays we know better: homosexuality is, of course, not caused by a genetic sequence called Xq28, but by prenatal hormone exposure, or environmental or social factors, or maternal mDNA, or all of the above (about 14 per cent of the time).

One recent study at the University of Padua concluded "our findings, if confirmed, are only one piece in a much larger puzzle on the nature of human sexuality." That sounds suspiciously like "it's all too hard", which - while it can't be disproved - fails to explain what happened to the grant money.

Some religious groups argue that there should be no research into the causes of homosexuality, because the findings may interfere with their bigotry. They insist that it's simply an immoral lifestyle choice, like adultery or enjoying *Big Brother Uncut*. But while enormous resources have been poured into this as yet inconclusive research, there has been little inquiry into a social development that threatens the natural order of things: metrosexuality.

Troublingly, the increased incidence of male grooming, and in particular use of aftershave, may inhibit the ability to reproduce. A recent study by Shanna Swan, a professor of reproductive epidemiology at the University of Rochester, in the United States suggests that the male children of mothers who are exposed to dibutyl phthalates, a common class of household chemicals, are more likely to have been born with 'feminised' reproductive organs and reduced genital development.

Though it has not been sufficiently investigated, the chemical may also cause feminine behaviours, such as sarong use, waxing and talking about feelings. Dibutyl phthalates are commonly found in grooming products, so that metrosexuality may result from a mother's overexposure to her partner's aftershave. This would also support the anecdotal link between metrosexuality and small genitals.

Other research has also indicated a biological cause for metrosexuality. By distressing a gene nicknamed tsubi, researchers increased a male fruit fly's incidence of day spa attendance by 35 per cent. Unfortunately the result could not be repeated, due to the high cost of the fly's Reiki detox sessions.

Any genetic link to metrosexuality seems to have survived against extreme odds. For our ancestors, resources were scarce and hairstyling wax practically non-existent. An extensive personal grooming regimen would have left little time to gather food, even if they skipped the deep-pore cleanser and just used toner. So if a 'metrosexual gene' created evolutionary disadvantage, how has it survived to be expressed in Ian Thorpe?

The most widely supported explanation is that metrosexuality survived because it was a successful sexual selection strategy. At a time when most men smelt like *eau de yak*, anyone with an odour of sandalwood and distinct citrus notes had an increased likelihood of reproduction. This compensated for primitive metrosexuals not being able to fix things around the cave, and having the rest of the guys make fun of them. Another theory contends that hunting ability evolved incidentally to metrosexuality. A skilled hunter could kill two large

animals per day, or one if he was a public servant. But that would only be enough to eat - establishing a diverse wardrobe would require the ability to kill many more animals, especially if gazelle-skin pants were particularly 'hot' that season.

Metrosexuals might also have been prized for their inventions - their trendsetting may have led them to develop simple polished stone mirrors and sports utility vehicles for the tribe. This could be the origin of the expression 'fashioning' crude tools.

The most radical theory is that metrosexual traits are the genetic remainder of an entirely different species, *Homo beckhamensis*, which interbred 200,000 years ago with *Homo sapiens*, and sometimes their personal assistants.

The species had high, whiny voices and distinctive tattoo-like markings and roamed the Serengeti in small bands, relying on Vodafone endorsements for occasional sustenance. Eventually they exhausted their supply of dietitians and died out.

Further study is needed. If grooming products really lead to 'feminised' genitals, humanity's capacity to reproduce may be threatened. The arrival earlier this year of the latest Beckham - Cruz - gives some evidence of metrosexual fertility, if not their taste in names. The group may yet prove adaptable to changing environments and, particularly, changing fashions. There is only one thing of which biologists can be certain: whatever evolutionary challenges lie ahead, metrosexual man will evolve the hairstyle to face them.

RICHARD COOKE and DOMINIC KNIGHT are writers for The Chaser Annual books and www.chaser.com.au.