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Scope of 'born gay' claim debated

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As the issue of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender civil rights gains momentum and attention in political and legal circles, the biological argument that one is “born gay” has come into question.

Kenyon Farrow, a policy institute fellow at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said when he spoke at UT as part of the Campus Progress’ Queer Tour on Wednesday that the biological argument is problematic.

“Sexuality can feel inherent to you without it being biological and genetic,” Farrow said. “No queer benefits from the biological argument, even if political campaigns are won.”

The “born gay” argument for equality bases the gay community’s claims for equal rights on the authority of biology — one is born that way and therefore should be recognized as a minority and protected from discrimination.

Farrow, however, said this argument is problematic because it precludes the possibility that homosexuality can be a choice and that it excludes bisexuals and transgender individuals from the conversation.

“By staying away from the issues of bisexuals and queers, the biological argument only leads us in one direction,” Farrow said. “The issue gets reduced to the idea that gay men have more genetic traits like women, and gay women have more genetic traits like men.”

Ryan Yezak — a radio-television-film senior and co-founder and vice president of UT’s first gay fraternity, Delta Lambda Phi — defended the biological argument. He said he didn’t know he was gay until he came to college. Yezak believes he came out so late because of a lack of understanding.

“It wasn’t that I didn’t know I was gay all my life, it’s just that I didn’t know it was an option,” he said. “I think the way we work right now in our country is that being gay isn’t spoken about enough and people don’t know what being gay is. It’s hard to know what you are if you don’t know what it is.”

Ixchel Rosal, director of UT’s Gender and Sexuality Center, said she is not dismissive of the biological argument but that she believes arguing over the cause of homosexuality is reductive.

“Focusing on the root causes of homophobia is much more important than focusing on the roots of homosexuality,” Rosal said. “In terms of liberation and civil rights and creating change, we have to improve education and awareness of the issues.”

Rosal said sexuality should be understood in the same way as religion.

“People are not born Christian or Jewish, but we don’t stand for discrimination between the two,” she said.

Farrow reiterated this idea, concluding his address by asserting that there are different ways to think of sexuality beyond the biological argument.

“It is a deeply personal choice worthy of political protection,” he said.



Karina Jacques/The Daily Texan

Kenyon Farrow, a policy institute fellow at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, addresses the biological argument for homosexuality on Wednesday in the Main Building. He said the argument is exclusionary and slows progress in the gay rights movement.

