

Left hands

If you're alive and well and left handed you may bristle at the occasional medical report claiming that left handed people do not live as long as their right handed counterparts. Memories well up of past indignities when parents and teachers would insist on converting children from the left or sinister to the right or proper way of doing things. In the past left handed people were often looked upon as clumsy or not quite right in the head—perhaps unmasculine, for did not the man always walk on the right and the woman on the left? Headmasters of former days, long turned to clay and forgotten, would walk down the aisles mumbling that they did not like to see all these left handed children; and the children in question “half scrooched down in their desks trying to peek out of sight.”

In a voluminous literature on left handedness, theories about its nature abound. Associations include stuttering (? from the psychological trauma of the attempted conversion), excessive smoking (?? from being a disadvantaged minority), autoimmune disease of the thyroid and gut,

having twins, and perceiving music differently. A subgroup have clearly had prenatal or perinatal brain disease or injury. They are more likely to suffer from seizures, dyslexia, learning disabilities, mental retardation, increased sensitivity to psychotropic drugs, and tardive dyskinesia. The others are normal but perhaps a little different. “They seem to be wired differently,” a neurologist friend told me recently. Starting in life somewhat disadvantaged, they may have to work harder to catch up, which may be why so many of them become good sportsmen and artists. Because lateralisation is variable they may recover more fully after a stroke; such was the case with the left handed Michelangelo, who then began to draw with the right hand.

Studies on left handedness are often contradictory, because the degree of preference varies, so that some people are more left handed than others, and because methods for studying brain function are imperfect. Of some interest are the left handed people who write in the hooked position, their hand lying above the line of writing and the pen pointing

towards the bottom of the page. In them the centres for both language and manual control are believed to be located on the right side of the brain. Left handed people who write in the regular way seem to have the centre for language on the left and that for manual control on the right.

Left handed people are at a disadvantage when they have to use right handed tools. At dinner parties they may find themselves constantly rubbing elbows with their neighbour. But there are also benefits—those holding their fork in the American way should be able to eat their salad without reaching across the plate and dipping their sleeve in the gravy.—GEORGE DUNEA, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, USA

