Back to Nurture
Neckties narrow and then widen again as the years go by; today's hot hairstyle will soon be painfully passé. Chances are such phases do not faze you. Everything is a biological condition. So what?

Just because a behavior or emotion corresponds to a change in a neurotransmitter (the chemical messengers in the brain) doesn't mean the neurotransmitter caused the behavior, says Kamin. That assumption — which is widely made — is much like "finding mucus in the nose of someone with a cold and saying, 'Ah! Mucus causes colds.'"

"These days people are ready to accept quite uncritically almost any claim that fits in with a framework of biological determinism," Kamin continues. "As soon as claims are made" about a neurobiological basis of some behavior, "they're on the front page everywhere."

Why the biological bias? For starters, we might reflect on a comment once made by the psychologist Abraham Maslow: "It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." Translation: Train researchers primarily to do biological research and they'll approach every behavioral problem as if were biological in origin. Eventually these researchers will rise to positions of power and support more research that matches their own orientation.

Under such circumstances, few people are even looking at psychological problems from another point of view, such as a family-environment perspective. Researchers who might do such work "are discouraged about being able to get funding," says Wyne. "They feel the cards are stacked against them, so they give up."

For the rest of us, biological explanations have caught on for several reasons. First, they're easy to understand. If a father and son both have a mental disorder, it makes sense that the younger one has inherited a gene from the parent. Second, genetic explanations are reassuring since they allow some people to feel less responsible for how they behave. Organizations composed of people suffering from mental disorders — or their parents — are especially fond of the theory that these problems are due to "faulty" genes, which simply "happen" to people.

Finally, genetic theories are widely accepted simply because we've heard so much about them. The popular press seems particularly inclined to publicize research with a biological bent, perhaps because reporters feel they can satisfy the general public's biases or because hard science claims make for better stories. Millions of readers open their newspapers and magazines to find articles based on the unproven assumption that our emotions can be explained by our brain chemistry.

In the days when biological factors were ignored by psychologists, when skewed parenting was thought to be enough to make people schizophrenic, some scientists stood up and said, "Hold on. It's not that simple." Today it's biological determinists whose work has taken over the field. It may be time once again to take a stand against the current fashion.