



PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN WOMEN: HEIGHT, WEIGHT, AND AGE OF PUBERTY COMPARISONS

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Summary—This research examined the relations between sexual orientation and certain physical development variables, i.e. weight, height, and age of puberty, in women. Subjects were 5476 nondelinquent women who were interviewed by the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction from 1938 to 1963. Subjects were dichotomously classified as either lesbian ($n = 275$) or heterosexual ($n = 5201$). Results indicated that lesbians reported being taller and heavier than heterosexual women. No difference in age of puberty (e.g. age at menarche) was found. The results add to a small body of literature indicating that homosexual women score in the male-typical direction on certain sex-dimorphic characteristics.
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INTRODUCTION

If biological factors, such as prenatal hormonal conditions (e.g. testosterone or estrogen levels), are important in the development of men and women's sexual orientation (e.g. Ellis & Ames, 1987; Meyer-Bahlburg, Ehrhardt, Rosen, Gruen, Veridiano, Vann & Neuwaldler, 1995), it is plausible that these factors should be relatively *nonspecific* in their effects on brain/body organization. Thus, certain sex-dimorphic cognitive and somatic 'correlates' may be observable in lesbians and gay men. A degree of support has been marshalled in favour of such sex-dimorphic correlates in gay men (e.g. Allen & Gorski, 1992; Dörner, Rohde, Stahl, Krell & Masius, 1975; Gladue, Beatty, Larson & Staton, 1990; Gladue, Green & Hellman, 1984; Hall & Kimura, 1994; LeVay, 1991; McCormick & Witelson, 1991; Sanders & Ross-Field, 1986a, 1986b; Willmott & Brierley, 1984). Similar sex-dimorphic correlates have been observed in lesbians (e.g. Gartrell, Loriaux & Chase, 1977; Hall & Kimura, 1995; McCormick, Witelson & Kingstone, 1990; Holtzen, 1994), although the studies have been fewer in number and results less consistent (e.g. Gladue & Bailey, 1995; Gladue *et al.*, 1990). This general line of research is also consistent with findings that cross-gender behaviour patterns in children are predictive of later homosexuality (e.g. Bailey & Zucker, 1995).

In men and women in the general population, some of the largest somatic sex differences occur for certain basic physical development variables, such as height, weight, and onset of puberty, with men, on average, being taller, heavier (even for their height), and older at the onset of puberty than women (Underwood & Van Wyk, 1992). Thus, evidence that gay men and lesbians score in the direction shifted toward the pattern of the opposite sex on height, weight, and onset of puberty may provide additional support for the biological approach to sexual orientation development. Research has supported such patterns in gay men (e.g. Blanchard & Bogaert, 1996; Bogaert & Blanchard, 1996), but less research exists on these variables in lesbians. This is the focus of the present paper. Prior evidence that lesbians and heterosexual women do differ on these physical development variables, and possible theories to explain these differences, including biological ones, are introduced below.

WEIGHT

A number of studies suggest that lesbians are heavier than comparable groups of heterosexual women (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley & Grillo, 1996; Brand, Rothblum & Solomon, 1992; Kenyon, 1968;

Gettelman & Thompson, 1993; Herzog, Newman, Yeh & Warshaw, 1992; Siever, 1994). For example, Gettelman & Thompson (1993) found that lesbians were, on average, nearly 12 pounds heavier than a comparison group of heterosexual women. However, researchers in two studies did not find a weight difference between lesbians and heterosexual comparisons or population norms (French, Story, Remafedi, Resnick & Blum, 1996; Perkins, 1981). Overall, the results indicate that a weight difference may exist, but they are not completely consistent. Moreover, a number of the studies finding a significant had relatively small sample sizes and did not control for potentially confounding variables such as age or height. Thus, more data on a large sample with adequate controls would establish the reliability and generalizability of a weight difference between heterosexual and homosexual women.

A number of nonbiological factors may account for a possible weight difference between the two groups (e.g. heterosexual women's greater preoccupation with slimness), but biological factors should also be considered. Thus, consistent with other sex-dimorphic traits, lesbians, like heterosexual men, may have a heavier frame and/or more muscular bulk than heterosexual women (see, for example, Perkins, 1981). If so, this may suggest that certain sex-dimorphic brain mechanisms regulating the growth of bone mass, fat content, and musculature (e.g. the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal axis) are, in homosexual women, partially shifted toward the organization typical for men.

HEIGHT

To my knowledge, only one study to date indicates that lesbians are taller than heterosexual women (Griffiths, Merry, Browning, Eisenger, Huntsman, Lord, Polani, Tanner & Whitehouse, 1974). The only other studies addressing this issue in nonclinical samples were conducted by Perkins (1981), who reported that her sample of 241 lesbians did not differ from general population norms, and Kenyon (1968), who reported no significant difference between lesbians and a comparison sample of heterosexual women, although there was a trend for lesbians to be shorter. Thus, the height data are inconsistent. More data on a large sample with a concurrent comparison sample of heterosexual women would help to establish the reliability of a height difference between lesbians and heterosexual women.

An actual height difference between heterosexual and homosexual women is of particular interest for the biological perspective on sexual orientation development because final adult height is relatively stable after the cessation of pubertal growth and therefore not subject to most medical, psychological, or environmental influences. This difference then, perhaps even more than differences on other cognitive and somatic variables, would raise the possibility that homosexual women have a degree of somatic masculinization and that certain sex-dimorphic mechanisms regulating growth (e.g. the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal axis) differ between heterosexual and homosexual women.

AGE OF PUBERTY

Researchers in two studies report that lesbians recall earlier ages of first arousal and sexual experiences (e.g. masturbation) than do heterosexual women (Goode & Haber, 1977; Saghir & Robins, 1973; but see Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953, p. 462). Thus, based on some behavioural indices, some evidence suggests that lesbians may be early maturers. This result, if reliable, would not support the biological perspective outlined above, i.e., that lesbians are shifted toward the pattern most typical for men: a later onset of puberty. However, the present 'behavioural' data should be viewed with some caution because onset of sex drive behaviours (e.g. first masturbation) may not be reasonable markers of puberty onset in females. Relative to young males, fewer overt signs of sex drive onset occur in young females at puberty, and they tend to display these at later ages (e.g. Kinsey *et al.*, 1953; Storms, 1981). Thus, perhaps clear biological milestones, such as age at menarche, should be used to compare lesbians and heterosexual women on age of puberty onset. Results from two large-scale studies (Bell, Weinberg & Hammersmith, 1981; Kinsey *et al.*, 1953) suggest no difference between lesbians and heterosexual women on such measures, although the latter study did not include statistical tests. Further research might help to clarify whether a relationship does in fact exist between sexual orientation and puberty onset in women.

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