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Biological Psychology 59 (2002) 135–145

BIOLOGICAL
PSYCHOLOGY

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Sexual orientation and height, weight, and age of puberty: new tests from a British national probability sample

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Received 21 June 2001; accepted 18 October 2001

Abstract

Research using nonrepresentative samples indicates that certain sex-dimorphic physical, developmental and behavioral variables predict sexual orientation. In this study, three sex-dimorphic physical development variables—height, weight, and age of puberty/sexual maturation—and sexual orientation were examined in a British national probability sample ($N = 18\,876$). Women with same-sex inclinations (particularly bisexuals) had an earlier first sexual experience (approx. 1.4 years) and were taller (approx. 1 cm) than heterosexual women, but the height/sexual orientation relationship was complex. Lesbian/bisexual women did not differ from heterosexual women in age at menarche or in weight. Men with same-sex inclinations (particularly bisexuals) had an earlier first sexual experience relative to heterosexual men (approx. 3 months). Homosexual men did not significantly differ from heterosexual men in height or in weight, although there was some evidence that bisexual men were taller than heterosexual men (approx. 1 cm). The results challenge some prior research on sexual orientation and physical development using nonrepresentative samples. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Sexual orientation; Homosexual; Puberty; Height; Weight; Probability sample

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1. Introduction

Biologically oriented researchers have identified sex-dimorphic somatic, cognitive and behavioral correlates of sexual orientation (for a review, see Zucker, 2001). These sex-dimorphic characteristics are known (or purported) to be influenced by biological factors (e.g. prenatal hormones), and, thus, this research may provide support for a biological origin to sexual orientation. Large gender differences occur for basic physical development variables, such as height, weight, and onset of puberty, with women, on average, being shorter, lighter (even for their height), and younger at the onset of puberty than men (Underwood and Van Wyk, 1992). Thus, evidence that gays and lesbians score in the direction typical of the opposite sex on height, weight, and onset of puberty—i.e. gay men shorter, lighter and an earlier puberty and lesbians taller, heavier, and a later puberty—may provide additional support for a biological contribution to sexual orientation development.

Researchers have found that homosexual men exhibit various physiological (e.g. growth spurt, pubic hair) and behavioral signs of puberty (e.g. first sexual experience) earlier than heterosexual men, but, to date, there is no evidence that lesbians have a different timing of puberty (e.g. menarche) relative to heterosexual women (for a review, see Bogaert et al., 2002). In addition, the majority of studies indicate that homosexual men are lighter, or lighter in proportion to their height, than heterosexual men and that lesbians are heavier in proportion to their height than heterosexual women (for reviews, see Bogaert and Blanchard, 1996; Bogaert, 1998). Finally, the data are mixed with regard to height and sexual orientation development (for a review, see Bogaert and Blanchard, 1996; Bogaert, 1998).

The relations between sexual orientation and three physical development variables—age of puberty, weight, and height—were also investigated in the current study. It employed a large British national probability sample (Wellings et al., 1994). As such, this study contains the largest sample ($N = 18\,876$) ever to investigate these issues. It is also the only study to employ a national probability sample, broadly representative of the population of Britain. Previous researchers investigating these issues have used clinical or convenience samples (cf. Bogaert et al., 2002), which are unlikely to be representative of the general population. Thus, the present study should be considered unique in providing relatively definitive tests of these relationships.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The Wellings et al. (1994) study used a probability sample of British households (England, Wales, and Scotland). In households where an eligible respon-

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