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AGGRESSIVENESS, COMPETITIVENESS, AND HUMAN SEXUAL ORIENTATION

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SUMMARY

Previous research has suggested that homosexual men are less aggressive than heterosexual men, but limitations of available studies prevent them from being conclusive. The empirical evidence is even more mixed regarding the relation of aggressiveness to female sexual orientation. We examined the relation between self-reported physical and verbal aggressiveness, interpersonal competitiveness, and sexual orientation in both men and women. The aggressiveness and competitiveness scales yielded significant sex differences, with men being more aggressive and competitive. Consistent with past findings, heterosexual men were more physically aggressive than were homosexual men; no other within-sex relationship was significant. We discuss the implications of our findings for developmental theories of sexual orientation, aggressiveness, and competitiveness.

Keywords—Homosexuality; Aggression; Competition; Psychosexual development; Sex differences; Sex roles.

HUMAN MALES ARE more likely than females to be aggressive in a wide range of settings and circumstances (Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Hyde, 1984). For example, men score higher than women on questionnaire measures of aggressiveness (Buss & Perry, 1992; Olweus et al., 1980), and they are much more likely to commit violent crimes (Daly & Wilson, 1988). The causes of the sex difference remain controversial, however, with some writers favoring psychosocial explanations (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1986), and others emphasizing the likely role of innate factors as well (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974).

The predominant biological theory of sex differences in aggressiveness specifies that differences in patterns of early androgen exposure differentially sensitize male and female brains to the activational effects of circulating androgens, making males more likely to aggress (Monaghan & Glickman, 1992). There has been some qualified support for this view in mice (see Monaghan & Glickman, 1992 for a review) and rhesus monkeys (Goy et al., 1988), but direct support for this explanation of the human sex difference is scanty. The most directly relevant study found that girls exposed (via their mothers during pregnancy) to synthetic progestones, which have

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some masculinizing effects, reported more aggression on a questionnaire compared with unexposed controls (Reinisch, 1981).

This biological explanation of sex differences in aggressiveness is similar to those proposed for a variety of other differences including sex-typed toy preference (Berenbaum & Hines, 1992), spatial ability (Resnick et al., 1986), activity level (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972), nurturance (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972), and sexual orientation (Ellis & Ames, 1987; Gladue, 1994; LeVay, 1993; Meyer-Bahlburg, 1984). Sexual orientation has generated an especially large amount of research from this "neurohormonal" perspective (Gladue, 1994). Studies using developmental (Green, 1987), endocrine (Money et al., 1984), neuroanatomical (Allen & Gorski, 1992; LeVay, 1991), and cognitive-neuropsychological (McCormick & Witelson, 1991; McCormick et al., 1990) paradigms have yielded findings generally consistent with the view that development of sexual orientation depends at least partly on early patterns of hormone exposure. (This is not to deny the controversial status of the neurohormonal hypothesis of sexual orientation [see, e.g., Byne & Parsons, 1993].)

Because biological hypotheses regarding sex differences in aggressiveness and sexual orientation both emphasize the influence of early androgens, studies of within-sex covariation between those traits can provide useful information. If, for example, homosexual individuals have been subject to early androgen influences more typical of the opposite sex, and if sexual differentiation of aggressiveness also depends on such influences, then homosexual individuals may also be sex-atypical in aggressiveness. It is important to note, however, that examination of within-sex correlations between sexually dimorphic characteristics cannot provide a definitive test of neurohormonal influences. On one hand, it is possible that social influences, such as sex-role socialization, could yield within-sex covariation, with some parents more tolerant than others of atypical sexuality and aggressiveness in their children. On the other hand, it is also possible that both aggressiveness and sexual orientation could be influenced by early androgens and yet remain uncorrelated within the sexes. This could happen if, for example, the brain structures affecting the two traits were maximally sensitive to androgens at different periods. Although studies of within-sex covariation cannot, alone, ultimately establish or falsify neurohormonal hypotheses (a limitation shared by all studies to date), they do provide information that constrains developmental theories. Thus, for example, to the extent that sexual orientation is correlated with aggressiveness within the sexes, this suggests that similar factors underlie sexual differentiation of both traits. To the extent that they are independent within the sexes, this suggests that their sexual differentiation differences will ultimately require separate developmental explanations. It is also possible that the two traits could be more highly correlated within one sex than the other. This would suggest that development is not strictly symmetrical between the sexes.

Three reports of which we are aware have examined the relationship between sexual orientation and aggressiveness. Blanchard and colleagues (1985) administered a retrospective questionnaire concerning childhood aggressiveness to homosexual and heterosexual men. Although they found large differences, the possibility that retrospective distortion created, or at least inflated, the difference precludes unqualified acceptance of the findings. Gladue (1991) administered an aggression questionnaire previously demonstrated to yield moderate to large sex differences to both homosexual and heterosexual subjects of both sexes. Aggression was unrelated to sexual orientation among men. Among women, lesbians reported less physical aggressiveness than did heterosexual

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