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Personality and Individual Differences 40 (2006) 475–486

PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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Aggression, empathy and sexual orientation in males

Mark J.T. Sergeant ^{a,*}, Thomas E. Dickins ^b,
Mark N.O. Davies ^a, Mark D. Griffiths ^a

^a *Division of Psychology, Nottingham Trent University, Burton Street, Nottingham NG1 4BU, United Kingdom*

^b *School of Psychology, University of East London, London E15 4LZ, United Kingdom and Centre for Philosophy of Natural and Social Science, London School of Economics, London WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom*

Received 7 March 2005; received in revised form 22 June 2005; accepted 19 July 2005

Abstract

Homosexual males are reported to be less physically aggressive than heterosexual males (Ellis, Hoffman, & Burke, 1990; Gladue & Bailey, 1995). Previous aggression studies have not, however, compared all forms of direct aggression, indirect aggression and empathy among these populations. Empathy is a significant factor to consider since it both mitigates the expression of aggression (Kaukiainen et al., 1998) and differs between heterosexual and homosexual males (Salais & Fischer, 1995). This study therefore evaluated levels of direct and indirect aggression and empathy among homosexual ($n = 91$) and heterosexual ($n = 91$) males. Data was collected from an Internet-based sample of the two groups using self-report psychometric measures in order to reduce social desirability effects. Homosexual males reported significantly lower levels of physical aggression and higher levels of empathy but report similar levels of indirect aggression, and other forms of direct aggression, to heterosexual males.

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Keywords: Direct aggression; Indirect aggression; Empathy; Sexual orientation; Internet-based research

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 115 848 5631; fax: +44 115 848 6826.
E-mail address: mark.sergeant@ntu.ac.uk (M.J.T. Sergeant).

1. Introduction

Human males are reported to be more aggressive than females. During both adolescence and adulthood, males are more likely to initiate aggressive acts (Mesquida & Weiner, 1996), score higher on questionnaire measures of aggression (Buss & Perry, 1992; Harris, 1996) and are more likely to commit homicides (Daly & Wilson, 1988).

Björkqvist and Niemlä (1992), however, point out that many previous studies have conceptualised aggression from a masculine perspective, focusing purely on acts of physical (direct) aggression alone. This focus is misleading. Females are reported to share the same levels of aggression as males but use alternative, or indirect, methods of expression (Campbell, 1995). Indirect aggression reflects a strategy in which an individual attempts to inflict pain on another, using social manipulation in such a manner that they cannot be identified and therefore limiting possible counter-aggression (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992). Additionally, both direct and indirect aggression are not unidimensional domains but should instead be conceptualised as numerous aggression subtraits (Buss & Perry, 1992; Forrest, Eatough, & Shevlin, 2005). Thus, it is crucial to consider how aggression is operationalised and to select appropriate psychometric tools for its evaluation.

There is considerable within-sex variation in male aggression, in particular that attributed to male sexual orientation. Homosexual males are reported to express significantly lower levels of physical aggression during their childhood and early adolescence, based on both retrospective (Blanchard, McConkey, Roper, & Steiner, 1983; Friedman & Stern, 1980) and prospective (Zucker & Bradley, 1995) studies. These findings may be linked to prenatal androgen theory, which proposes that differences in brain and behaviour between the sexes are under the control of prenatal androgens. Homosexual males are considered to follow sex-atypical lines of differentiation in both brain and behaviour in line with their sex 'atypical' sexual preference (Ellis & Ames, 1987; Rahman & Wilson, 2003). While between-sex differences in physical aggression have not been linked to prenatal androgens, physical aggression in males does vary as a consequence of prenatal androgen exposure (Bailey & Hurd, 2005).

Support for this lack of physical aggression among homosexual males is indirectly supported by research into childhood gender nonconformity (CGN). This refers to a child's interest in sex typical games and activities, and their sense of gender identity. These interests are reported to be moderately heritable (Bailey, Dunne, & Martin, 2000) and also vary with prenatal androgen exposure (Berenbaum & Snyder, 1995). Adult homosexual males are reported as having been "feminine" (sex atypical) in these respects, displaying less interest in physically active pursuits such as rough-and-tumble play (Zucker & Bradley, 1995). While high levels of CGN do not directly reflect childhood aggression (aggression involves a desire to cause pain/harm while activities like rough-and-tumble play do not), they suggest a lack of male-typical physicality among homosexual males during development.

Three studies have examined how adult aggression varies as a result of sexual orientation. Ellis et al. (1990) report that homosexual males are significantly less likely than heterosexual males to fight to the point of injury and considered themselves to be less violent (based on a sample of 129 heterosexual males and 29 homosexual males). Ellis et al. (1990) also report homosexual males recalled significantly lower levels of childhood aggression. Gladue (1991), however, reported no differences in adult aggression based on sexual orientation. While both groups were carefully matched on a number of important demographic variables, these findings were based on a comparatively limited sample (21 heterosexual males and 19 homosexual males) and may have lacked

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