

Letters

Positing flaws in homosexual study

"Genetic clue to male homosexuality emerges" (SN: 7/17/93, p.37) should alert us to some troubling questions about this kind of research.

To begin with, the data for Dean Hamer's study were collected by having participants rate their relatives' sexual orientation. Only self-proclaimed, openly gay people can be studied in this manner. Unfortunately, given our society's attitudes about homosexuality, few will feel safe enough to reveal a gay orientation under any circumstances. Others, internalizing society's homophobia, will continue to deny it, even to themselves. In any case, families are often completely unaware of the orientation of their gay or lesbian members.

Society's hostility has also caused many gay Americans to migrate to certain large cities and to particular areas within those cities. No study I've seen has fully taken into account this important geographical consideration.

There is also the problem of defining what is gay. In many American subcultures, men have sex with men without defining themselves as gay or even bisexual. Kinsey's studies from the 1950s showed a spectrum of same-sex activity as well as varying self-definitions based on that activity.

Finally, and most alarmingly, the fact that causes are being sought for homosexuality — rather than for sexual orientation per se — indicates that society's biases have influenced research as well. Elliot S. Gershon's comparison of Hamer's study with the search for genes linked to schizophrenia and manic depression

implies (however unintentionally) that homosexuality is also pathological.

If being gay continues to be defined as a problem or an undesirable aberration, humanity may never appreciate the value of its diversity.

Philip Bockman
Gay and Lesbian Alliance
Hunter College School of Social Work
New York, N.Y.

A slip of the hip

In reviewing research on female attractiveness ("The shape of evolution," SN: 8/21/93, p.120), the author describes a measure, the waist-to-hip ratio, and the finding that a woman with a low such ratio is highly attractive to men. However, in describing experiments on which the conclusion is based, the author states that "men most often chose . . . figures with *narrow hips* [italics mine] as most attractive." Is that a slip?

Marvin Levine
Northport, N.Y.

Yes. The sentence should have read "narrow waists," not "narrow hips." — B. Bower

Singh claims that men prefer women with a low waist-to-hip ratio, as "this aspect of female shape serves as a cue to fertility and health." The only "evidence" that this assertion is valid is the statement that "women whose waists are significantly narrower than their hips . . . get pregnant more easily and tend to give birth to their first child at a younger age than women whose waists are closer in size to their hips. . . ."

Couldn't this effect just be the result of these women being selected more readily because they are considered to be more attractive? There is no mention of any physiological reasons for attaining pregnancy more easily.

Leon L. North
Bryn Mawr, Pa.

Refer to Singh's cited article for a description of additional physiological research related to this issue. — B. Bower

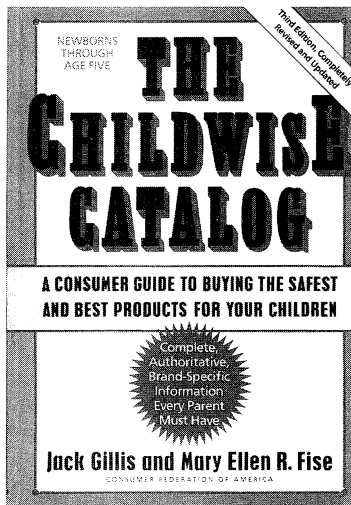
College-age men evaluated the attractiveness of 5'5" women who were either "thin" (90 pounds), "normal" (120 pounds), or "overweight" (150 pounds). Most women who are 5'5" would be grossly underweight, not "thin," at 90 pounds. In addition, an average (not "normal") weight for a 5'5" woman is more like 130 to 140 pounds, not 120 pounds.

Women in modern American society have plenty of trouble dealing with body image and expectations placed on them from peers, the media, models, and so on. They do not need the additional stress of a psychologist defining 5'5" women as normal *only* if they weigh 120 pounds.

Cheryl Hummon
Corvallis, Ore.

I wish to point out an inaccuracy in the story: You have changed my sexual identity from male to female. I am now getting many letters wishing to know more about my work but addressed to Ms., Mrs., or Miss Singh.

Devendra Singh
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Austin, Texas



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