

Does Finger Size Reveal Sexual Orientation?

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Do you think you can tell a person's sexual orientation just by looking at them? A 2007 *New York* magazine article by David France suggests that there are physical characteristics that indicate one's sexual orientation as straight, gay, or lesbian. Lately, research has focused on such markers as a person's finger length and fingerprint density, the direction that hair swirls on one's head, and left- or righthandedness.

According to the researchers France cites, finger length, or more specifically the ratio of the second digit (index or pointer finger) to the fourth digit (ring finger), can indicate sexual orientation for both men and women, although in opposite patterns. Men with a smaller ratio (index fingers are shorter than their ring fingers) would indicate a heterosexual orientation while men with a larger ratio (index fingers longer than their ring fingers) would indicate a homosexual orientation. Alternatively, women with a larger ratio, those deemed heterosexual, would have longer index fingers and women with a smaller ratio (index finger shorter than ring finger) would be lesbian.

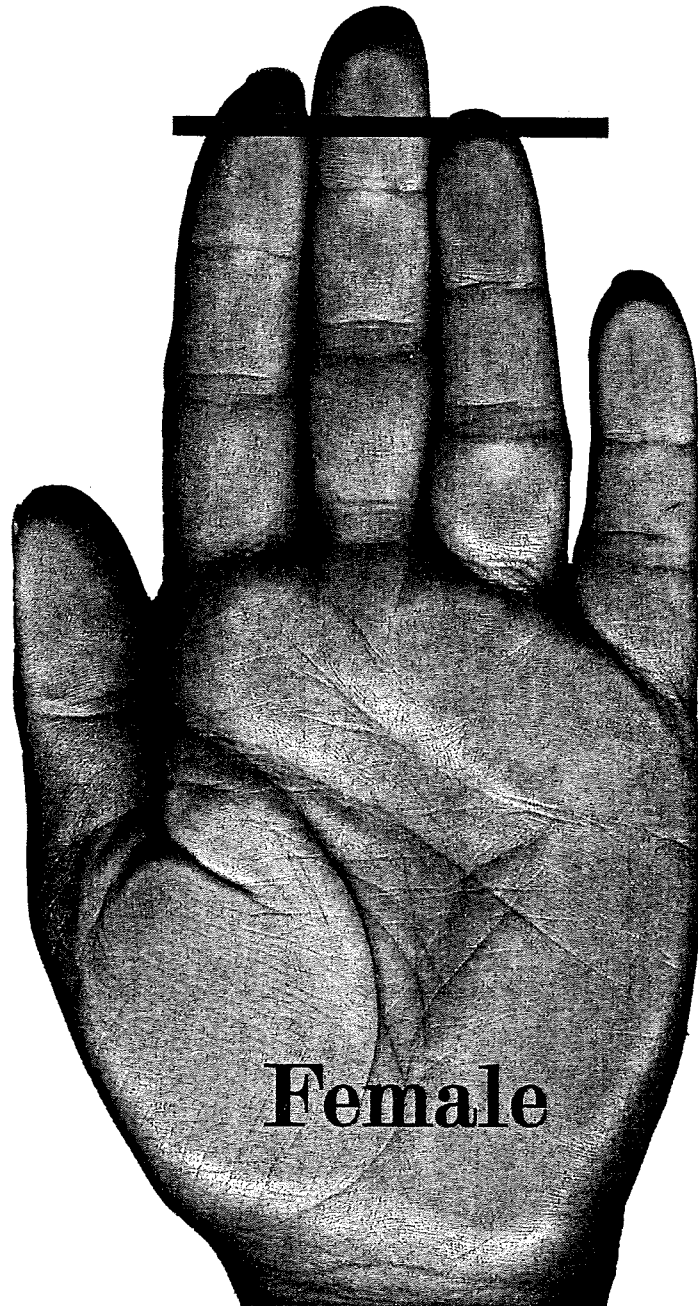
Did you stop reading here to look at your fingers or your hair? I did when I first heard the story on NPR's *Talk of the Nation*.

The article has received a lot of media attention (including from *The Colbert Report*), which seemed to assume that these patterns are real and reliable. Thus the public who hears about this research might assume that one can identify people's sexual orientation by their relative finger lengths and hair swirls.

As a sociologist, this news story has me wondering what the researchers actually said and, if indeed these are valid and reliable findings, how strong these supposed patterns are.

Looking up related peer-reviewed research on my campus library's webpage, I found many articles relating to these issues. Many of them do find statistically significant differences in these characteristics between those who identify as heterosexual, gay, or lesbian; but it took me a while to find the details on the strength of these patterns. But depending on the characteristic in question, the significance of these patterns is not overwhelming.

Let's start with handedness. A study published in 2003 by Richard Lippa found that homosexual men have an 82% greater chance than heterosexual men



Female Hand: index finger longer than ring finger.

of being non-righthanded (lefthanded or ambidextrous).¹ This is a statistically significant difference based on his research finding that 11.4% of heterosexual men and 19% of homosexual men are non-righthanded. His findings for women were not significant.

Regarding the finger length issue, studies have found differences depending on gender, ethnicity, and which hand one is looking at. A comprehensive analysis of this research published in 2005 highlights that in the five studies they analyzed,

1. Richard Lippa. (2003). "Handedness, Sexual Orientation, and Gender-Related Personality Traits in Men and Women." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 32, 103-114.



Female Hand: index and ring fingers same length.

there is more variation in the finger length ratio among heterosexual people than there is among homosexual people.²

Many of these studies are done to assess whether genetics or in-utero conditions have a greater effect on human development. Another study of finger length

2. Dennis McFadden, et al. (2005). "A Reanalysis of Five Studies on Sexual Orientation and the Relative Length of the Second and Fourth Fingers (the 20:40 Ratio)." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 34, 341-56.



Male Hand: index finger longer than ring finger.

used a sample of identical twins (who of course have identical genes) to assess the role of genetics versus the “prenatal environment.” The researchers tested seven twin pairs who were “discordant” for sexual orientation (one twin was heterosexual and the other homosexual in orientation), and five twin pairs who have “concordant” (the same) sexual orientation. Their findings did indicate a statistically significant difference in ratios for both the left and right hands, with the heterosexual twins having greater ratios between their second and fourth fingers than their homosexual twins.

If you look closely at the twin data, however, you’ll see that the differences in ratios are not overwhelming. In the analysis of data from five previous studies,

the ratios for each gender group were also not overwhelmingly different across sexual orientation groups.

All in all, my journey into the actual research did show that there are some interesting physical differences across groups. However, those patterns can easily be misinterpreted and applied in inappropriate ways. Just because the researchers found statistically significant differences does not mean that having a particular finger ratio indicates homosexuality. For example, in the handedness study, while gay men may have a higher chance of being non-righthanded compared to straight men, it does not follow that lefthanded men are gay—keep in mind that less than 20% of men in *either* group are non-righthanded!

Studies on finger length ratios and the other characteristics alleged to be associated with sexual orientation are vulnerable to the same kind of interpretation error. If you look at your index and ring fingers and assess which is longer, does this indicate your sexual orientation? Some people might question their sexual orientation once they hear of this research and identify their own finger ratio. However, this is a misuse of this research and a misinterpretation of the data. While many straight men and lesbian women may have shorter index fingers relative to ring fingers, there will be plenty of straight men and lesbian women who have comparatively longer index fingers. Likewise, there are many gay men and straight women with same length or longer index fingers, there are also gay men and straight women with shorter index fingers.

When I see news items that mention relationships like these, I know that it's a good idea to see what the researchers actually said and if the public hears the same story. The media's job of translating the scientific world for the public is a difficult task and is sometimes impossible considering the lack of scientific expertise of most reporters, restrictions on time, the need to avoid scientific language, and the wish to have the simplest explanation of very complex phenomena. Since the media are often more concerned with generating the most sensational headline than it is with relaying information accurately, it is imperative that we educate ourselves to assess research studies ourselves and to identify the most accurate information in them.

Having established that there are statistically significant patterns in finger length, does this mean that homosexuality creates different finger lengths? Or that finger length ratios create homosexuality? Remember, these studies cannot support a strong causal relationship between these characteristics and homosexual orientation because of the high levels of variation within groups. This brings to mind an important phrase you may have heard in sociology or other classes: correlation is not causation.

Related Links

New York magazine article: nymag.com/news/features/33520/

David France's article with pictures: www.davidfrance.com/gayness.pdf

National Public Radio story:

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11422189

■ TALK ABOUT IT

1. Discuss some ways you have observed people “doing gender.”
2. Have you ever observed men in traditionally female settings or women in traditionally male settings? How did they navigate in “foreign” territory?
3. How do fears about being perceived as being gay encourage people to adhere to gender norms?
4. Women are frequently called “girls” in everyday conversations. Why does this happens more often than referring to men as “boys”?
5. Discuss examples of how girls and women who are sexually active are more readily stigmatized than men. How does our use of language further exemplify this tendency?

■ WRITE ABOUT IT

1. Following Raskoff’s “Language, Gender, and Power,” identify five words that are rooted in gender. How do these words reflect gender and power? How do they enable us to “do gender” as West and Zimmerman describe?
2. Barber’s study examines how men clarify their sense of masculinity when approaching a “boundary” of femininity. Can you think of other gender boundaries? Under what circumstances do men and women confront what might seem cross-gendered behavior?
3. How does homophobia shape our perception of gender? How might Barber’s respondents have been influenced by homophobia, even if none of them held any prejudice toward gay individuals?
4. What were your perceptions of teen pregnancy before reading Prince Inniss’s essay? Were you surprised by the downward trend in teen pregnancy? Why do many people believe that teens are more likely to get pregnant now than in the 1950s, even though the reverse is true?
5. Discuss the double standard that exists between males and females who are sexually active. Tie your ideas to any two readings from this section.

■ DO IT

1. Observe friends, family, or other people in a public place such as a mall or a park. Notice how they “do gender” in their everyday behavior.
2. Interview five people on their perception and use of gendered language. Choose a few specific words and ask them to describe what the words mean to them. Do any of your respondents note the gendered nature of these words?

3. Choose a television show that contains openly gay or lesbian characters. Do the characters behave in a stereotypical way or challenge gender boundaries? Why are these characters portrayed as they are? How do their representations shape perceptions about gays and lesbians?
4. Find one journal article containing details of a study that Raskoff describes in her essay on sexual orientation. What method does it use? What findings does it claim? Are the findings plausible given the data they present? Why or why not?
5. Compare statistics on teen pregnancy with discussions of teen pregnancy in news articles. Does the word choice, focus, and imagery in the articles contradict or support the actual long-term trends? Describe your impression of the coverage of teen pregnancy.