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THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT: GAY MEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF PENIS SIZE

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Abstract

Contemporary research regarding men's body image has focused primarily on perceptions of muscularity and thinness, leaving aside other issues such as penis size. Despite pop cultural notions regarding the importance of penis size, and Western cultural notions more broadly regarding masculinity and the penis, little research has been done on men's perceptions of penis size, and no work has been done on gay men's perceptions of penis size. This article presents the results of three separate qualitative research projects conducted by the authors with openly gay men that considered body image and masculinity in the lives of gay men. Noteworthy is that all of the studies were conducted using the same methodology and data analysis procedures. This paper utilises rich descriptive text to highlight the issues surrounding gay men, penis size and constructions of masculinities. The primary aim of the paper is to provide a context within which future qualitative research can be conducted on issues relating to the penis among gay men, in addition to emphasising the importance of perceiving the penis as a legitimate body image issue which has rarely been discussed in qualitative research projects.

Introduction

Body image may be understood as one's internal representation of one's own bodily appearance (Thompson, Altabe & Tanleff-Dunn, 1999). Displeasure with one's body image, clinically termed "body image dissatisfaction", has been related to a host of biopsychosocial negatives, including poor self esteem (Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki & Cohane, 2004), extreme dieting (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), and the use of dangerous dieting/anabolic supplements (Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005). Accordingly, body image dissatisfaction should be considered a potentially critical threat to an individual's health.

While an individual can display a general dislike with one's overall appearance – termed 'appearance dissatisfaction' – one can also exhibit dissatisfaction with one's perceived

attributes in any one body part or area. For instance, one may be dissatisfied with one's degree of body hair, but be neutral or pleased with one's perceived degree of facial attractiveness. Thus, specific body parts/domains deserve separate consideration when researching body image.

Although women's body image concerns have a long history in the psychological literature (e.g., Brumberg, 2000; Gordon, 2000), men's body image has only emerged as an area of intense academic interest in the past decade (Anderson, Cohn, & Holbrook, 2000; Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000). In particular, men's body image research has focused on two specific body domains: muscularity and thinness. Past research has demonstrated that men often desire bodies considerably more muscular than they perceive their own to be (Olivardia, et al., 2004; Pope et al., 2000), perhaps due to Western culture's association of muscle with masculinity (Bordo, 1999; Connell, 2005; Dotson, 1999; Kimmel & Mahalik, 2004; McCreary, Saucier, & Courtenay, 2005). In addition to muscle, some men may desire a thinner body (Filiault, in press), though this is still an emerging area of research.

While important, research on men's perceptions of muscularity and thinness disregards other body areas that may be of significance to men, such as body hair, height, and clothing style. One area in particular that may be of consequence to men is penis size. A cursory glance at mass media would suggest a male obsession with penis size. Indeed, the presence of Web sites claiming to increase the magnitude of men's genitals is overwhelming, as any basic Web search for 'penis size' suggests. Likewise, jokes and references abound in mainstream media regarding penis size (see Bordo, 1999, for a full discussion). Additionally, web sites such as the "Large Penis Support Group" (for men with large genitals; www.lpsg.org) and "Measurement" (for those men with smaller penises; www.measurement.org) exist as a venue for men to discuss what is a seemingly important issue to many contemporary men.

Stereotypically, men's penis size is linked with Western cultural notions of masculinity. That is, a large penis is indicative of one being 'more' of a man (Bordo, 1999). As Pope and colleagues (2000) state; "genitals symbolize virility, procreative potency, and power" (p. 165), all of which are critical to accessing what is termed "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 2005). Furthermore, other analyses of Western masculinity suggest men are expected to occupy space (Drummond, 1996) or 'penetrate' space (Pronger, 1999; 2002), dictums which both lend credence to the need for a large, penetrating penis. Accordingly, and based on such cultural stereotypes, a small penis draws into question a man's sexual prowess and his overall masculinity. Based on such symbolism and cultural observations, it is little wonder that a large number of men present each year for penile augmentation surgery, despite the risky nature of the procedure and the fact that many of those men are of a normal size (Dotson, 1999; Mondaini, et al., 2002; Pope et al., 2000). Seemingly, then, penis size is a major body image concern for many if not most men living in Western nations.

Despite those observations, the empirical research on men's perception of penis size is limited. While a cornucopia of research exists which attempts to determine average penis sizes for various groups of men (e.g., Bogaert & Hershberger, 1999; Ponchietti, et al., 2001; Spyropoulos, et al., 2002), surprisingly little evidence exists which ascertains how those sizes and averages impact men's sense of self. Of the limited extant literature, it appears as though penis size does hold some importance to heterosexual men's sense of self. In a large-scale (N = 25,594) Internet survey of heterosexual men, only 55% of men reported being satisfied with their penis size and 45% reported wanting a larger penis. These results were consistent across age groups. Notably, men who perceived themselves to have a large penis exhibited higher appearance satisfaction, suggesting a link between body image and penis size (Lever, Frederick & Peplau, 2006).

Penis size may be of increased importance to some gay men due to the erotic nature of the body in many gay cultures and the 'double presence' of the penis in a gay relationship or sexual encounter. However, to our knowledge, only one study has been conducted which considered gay men's perceptions of penis size (Bergling, 2007). According to that data, only 7% of gay men consider the penis to be their

'favourite' body part on another man. Data regarding the importance of size were conflicted, with some men expressing that size was important and others disagreeing. Finally, there are suggestions that men within the gay 'bear' community may prefer small penises (Wright, 1997), though there is no data to back up that assertion. However, given findings that suggest the importance of penis size to straight men, there is little reason to believe that gay men do not share similar beliefs as their straight peers. Furthermore, those beliefs may be exacerbated by the overall importance of the body in dominant gay male culture (Bergling, 2007; Drummond, 2005; Signorile, 1997), especially as a site of erotic symbolism. Indeed, penis size may serve as another level of stratification within a community that is already highly divisive based on somatic characteristics.

Considering the general paucity of information regarding men's – especially gay men's – perceptions of penis size, and the importance of body image in dominant gay culture, the present study engaged in interviews with openly gay men to determine their perceptions of penis size and its relationship to their sense of body image and masculinity.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited for three separate projects considering body image amongst gay men: one regarding young gay men's body image (Drummond, 2005), another involving older men (Drummond, 2006), and one considering body image in gay athletes (Filiault & Drummond, 2007). The latter study was an exploratory pilot study for a larger doctoral dissertation. All of the studies were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Australia.

A total of 24 men aged 18-25 years participated in the first study. They were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling, both of which are useful in recruiting from stigmatised populations such as gay men (Patton, 2002). Initial points for recruitment included online gay networks and project leaders at counseling centres for gay youth. The second project recruited participants through signage at several gay men's health establishments. Three men in the 'babyboomer' generation were interviewed for this rich descriptive analytic study. The third

project also included three men aged 28, 34, and 48 years. Men were recruited from an all-gay sports group in a major Australian city. All men in these studies were 'out' to friends, and most were out to their families.

Procedure

The first study involved two phases. The initial phase was a focus group with 10 men. The focus group served to elucidate themes for the second phase, which consisted of individual interviews with 14 men separate from those in the focus group. The second and third studies consisted of individual interviews with participants.

For the individual interview component in all of the research projects consistency was maintained in terms of data collection methods. This relative uniformity allowed for the research data to be analysed using the same analytic procedures as well as providing methodological uniformity. Ultimately this provides research rigour and improves research reliability.

The men in these three research projects contacted the researchers directly to establish a time and location for the interview. Each participant was provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the various studies, and then signed an informed consent form.

Interviews lasted 60 to 120 minutes. They were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide was semi-structured in nature. Semi-structured interviews provide the advantage of ensuring coverage of key themes, while also providing the researcher with the opportunity to follow-up on unexpected areas of interest discussed by participants (Patton, 2002). Interviews were guided by the methodological tenets of phenomenology. Phenomenology seeks the "essence of meaning" (Patton, 2002, p. 106) that individuals attach to a lived experience in order to understand "what it is like" (Seidman, 1998, p. 5). Accordingly, the present studies sought to understand the meaning gay men give to their bodies, bodily practices, and masculinity and to understand what it is like to be a gay man in contemporary Western society. Although qualitative paradigms make no claim to generalisability, it is believed that the stories and interpretations provided by these men will be reflective of the experiences of many gay men living in Western cultures.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed then analysed using inductive methods. Inductive analyses are a 'bottom-up' approach to data interpretation, by which dominant themes and issues are allowed to 'naturally' emerge out of the data, rather than major themes being decided prior to the beginning of data collection. This process of analysis provides the greatest degree of congruence between emergent themes and the data provided by participants (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998). This type of analysis requires the researcher to detect patterns and similarities in the data, based upon the researchers' understanding of the data and expert knowledge of relevant literature. Says Seidman (1998), "what is of essential interest is embedded in each research topic and will arise from each transcript. The interviewer must affirm his or her own ability to recognize it" (p. 101).

Findings

This section presents the findings to emerge from each of the three individual research projects. The data around penis size have been thematically analysed together to create a single large research project. This procedure has previously been termed a 'meta-thematic analysis' (Drummond, 2005a). Therefore the data will be discussed as one rather than in terms of individual projects. The themes are constructed according to how the men come to understand contemporary cultural issues surrounding penis size and how they conceptualise these understandings with respect to masculinities. The themes to emerge are based on a majority viewpoint. While there were only several themes to emerge they are very powerful in terms of the ways in which the participants responded. The dominant themes to emerge, and to be discussed in detail are: (i) 'Size Matters' and (ii) The Penis/Masculinity Relationship. As themes both relating to the same 'masculine' body domain, these dominant themes are, to a certain degree, overlapping. However, this overlap and complexity reflects the difficulty and ambiguity the men had in describing the role of the penis in forming a gay masculinity and body sensibility.

'Size Matters'

Contemporary Western culture is one of largess, in which bigger is often seen as better. Such exaltation of bigness impacts men's relationships

to their own bodies. Somatically, big, hard bodies are viewed as preferential, as the copious literature on men's muscularity suggests. Drummond (1996) suggested men are expected culturally to occupy space as a symbol of their masculinity; a big, muscular body was viewed by many as the 'ideal' way to take up that space.

The occupation of space theory for men is a somewhat fluid concept. When it was initially discussed (Drummond, 1996) it was based around the body size, especially muscularity, as a whole. However, this concept can also apply on a micro-level to individual body parts. Influential masculine 'parts' include a large chest, broad shoulders, visible abdominal muscles (often referred to as the 'six pack') and large biceps (Olivardia et al., 2004). Significantly, these are culturally observable features that can be easily viewed, compared, analysed and discussed. However, less culturally observable features, such as the genitals, also influence the positioning of men's perceived masculinity.

With the advent of feminist movement, heterosexual women have increasingly developed the opportunity to express their desires regarding male genitalia. This change has occurred as images of scantily clad men have become more common in the mass media, signaling a major change in the discourse surrounding men's bodies. Therefore men's once 'private parts' are no longer privately ensconced (Bordo, 1999; Dotson, 1999; Kimmel, 2006). Similarly, over the past decade, cultural evolution has led to a rapid increase in gay television programs and other forms of media, particularly print and electronic media where the male body and 'private parts' can be openly discussed, a change from earlier gay media which was more coy in its portrayal of same sex sexuality (Rosenberg, Scagliotti & Schiller, 1984). This change has arguably led to the penis being an open topic of conversation that is no longer taboo. As a consequence, the increased level of scrutiny has placed a degree of pressure on males to live up to certain archetypal ideals that were primarily associated with visible body parts: large, imposing, and space consuming.

In dominant gay culture the penis has become a body part that is seen, compared, contrasted and indeed linked to sexual attractiveness and viability. However, it appears not all gay men have the same opinion regarding penis size. There appears to be an existing tension between those who perceive large penises as a signifier

of desirability and those who perceive otherwise. In the following text one of the older gay men candidly discusses his thoughts around penis size. He clearly identifies his own biases and tensions with size, identifying not wanting to have sex with a man with a small penis, and yet despite mentioning his own size, he does not believe size is a 'defining' issue.

Um, you couldn't do it with somebody who was wearing a cashew in their underpants, and I have thrown myself in an intimate situation for instance in the bushes, and you get into their undies and its this tiny little thing and its so embarrassing that you go through with it because, you know, it's a pity thing. And I have lived in Japan for a little while and having sex with Japanese men was a nightmare because they have, well they call their penises bullets and they just 'jigger, jigger, bang, bang, bang'. They can do that for an hour and its so boring you don't actually... I don't get any satisfaction from being fucked by a small cock, but I've got a huge one and I don't see myself as very masculine. That's not a defining thing.

The participant's comment regarding Japanese men and small penises is significant in terms of racial bias. While it is not within the scope of this paper to significantly contribute to discussions on this topic, it is noteworthy that a number of authors have provided important discussions around the ways in which Asian gay men are perceived within the dominant (white) gay community (Ayres, 1999; Chuang, 1999; Drummond, 2005b; Han, 2006). Han discusses the common perceptions associated with Asian men's penis size, claiming that in terms of desirability there is a racial hierarchy and Asian gay men are positioned below Caucasian, Black and Latino men. Indeed he goes on to suggest that portrayals of Asian gay men in mainstream and pornographic media are often feminised as a consequence of the supposedly smaller penises of Asian men. This is an area of social and cultural significance that requires further exploration and debate.

While not exhibiting such issues of racial tension another older male emphasised his own internal tensions about size by attempting to highlight what others think about penis size and desirability.

Well, yeah, so as much as they say it doesn't matter, it does but for the majority of people, I know if you have a small penis then you're very wary about it and if you have a large penis then nobody asks any questions, so you know, there's a lot of that sort of happening. And you know, I

know guys that have got big cocks and are forever fiddling, but aren't deep people, you know what I mean? So, would you want to be, 'he's fabulous cos he's got a big dick' or because you are a fabulous person? I don't know, but there are size queens out there that's for sure. There are guys that'll, you know, if its under 7 inches then they're not interested. Well you know, there's a lot more to people besides that, so yeah it doesn't play in my mind but I know that it does play in others and there's a big part of that but it has a lot to do with the way a culture is marketed and all that sort of stuff too. You know, young virile lads with hard-ons and you know well everybody's saying well once you get over 45/50/60 well then the age limit affects. So you know, its fabulous when you're 17/18/25/32 but after that its harder to actually just maintain erections, and the change of stamina and doing all those sorts of things plus living life you know and maintaining relationships and all that sort of rubbish.

Interestingly this man, as a consequence of being older, is able to provide commentary on social issues that emerge within Western consumer culture as well as reflect upon his body as it goes through the ageing process. This vantage point is somewhat different to a young male's perspective on the same issues. Younger men do appear to have the capacity to identify particular cultural ideologies surrounding penis size, however the majority stated simply that 'bigger is better'. According to one man:

In a gay world, the bigger the dick usually the more people want to have sex with you.

While another claimed in reference to a sexual partner with a small penis:

I'd just be thinking "What?!" You know, "What on Earth are we going to do with that?!"

Despite this being a common discourse there was at times a little more introspection and reflection on the issue than simple one-line comments. According to all of the men the issue of penis size is something they typically did not discuss in such an analytic context. Therefore, when given the opportunity, the men attempted to embrace the challenge. One of the men claimed:

Yeah it's always like you know, size matters, I don't know. And like people say 'oh how big is your hand?' 'ooh that must mean something, big feet' and they're you know, always referring to that.

Another man suggested:

I think this is an issue that most men have, they want it to be big and the longer the better, the thicker the better and then they get satisfied. It's important to compare with other people if their penis is smaller or shorter or something like that.

The Penis/Masculinity Relationship

Each of the comments in the first theme highlight the significance of penis size to these particular gay men. Whether or not this significance is based on cultural expectations in terms of what should be said about penis size requires further exploration. What also requires further investigation is whether this significance of penis size is associated with both long-term and short-term relationships. Nevertheless the young men involved in the focus group interview provided an important perspective on the significance of penis size and in particular having a large penis, as we can see in the following extract.

Q: Okay, what about the penis? What does that have to do with masculinity?

M1: It's got to be big.

Q: It's got to be big, okay. Is that what you think?

M1: I think it's ...

M5: Well women can be masculine too as well, so I don't know if it's the most defining trait of masculinity.

M4: But I think between guys it's one way that they tell one another that they're more masculine than the other, is the size of their penis.

M3: People used to say, he's a strapping young lad. Not only in reference to his cock size but also to whether he was macho and masculine.

M4: On TV early this morning, when I turned it on there was ad...

M2: When you look at personal ads they say things like 8 inches capped, whatever. And they go on about it at great length and trying to impress the other person. More so than say fit or strong or whatever. They go straight to 8 inches uncapped.

M4: There's a very good ad in England which kind of outlines it for me anyway, and that has two guys standing on the stage. And they were naked and something was in front of their groin, which was interesting. And then people had to vote as to what kind of car they drove. And two of them were driving these macho big things like

Ferrari's and all this and then the last guy, just kind of dropped and it came back that he drove a Mini. Which is funny. What's a masculine thing? But he obviously had the biggest dick.

These young men reflect upon the fact that in contemporary Western culture there is a pervading notion that a big penis is supposedly representative of heightened masculinity. They imply that this notion is virtually forced upon them by contemporary social and cultural standards. Clearly they are also linking such ideology to the broader media, which has been identified in a number of other recent research papers as being a significant social force in the gay community where bodies, and body image in general, are concerned (Drummond, 2005a; 2005b; Duggan & McCreary, 2004). A similar type of perception is held by most of the men in these studies, indicating that penis size plays a role in defining one's masculine identity. Interestingly, all the men reflected upon 'the other', rather than themselves. Of the 30 men interviewed in these research projects none identified themselves as having a small penis. When they did reflect upon their own size it was to suggest they were well proportioned or had a large penis.

One young man did try and provide a viewpoint on all of this by implying a certain standard is required in contemporary Western culture around penis size, and more specifically gay culture where masculine identity is concerned. He reflected upon the notion that everyone is different and that size should not be an issue. The interesting aspect, from an analytic perspective, is the need to identify that his own penis is above "industry standard" size and that he is satisfied. He stated:

For me personally I can't say it has nothing to do with it but I have picked that up. But, I don't think I'm as strict as some people might be. Either that or maybe I'm just more honest. I'm not too upset about the idea of someone not having a particularly big penis. I don't recall myself being upset about it, my own personal size. So I used to view myself as industry standard so to speak. I later found out that I was even above that and still didn't recall any great excitement over that personally. I don't think guys are more masculine just cause of the size of their appendage. Really it gets to a certain point, if they're way, way small then I can understand from that person's point of view that it would affect them, it doesn't affect them to me, for me looking at them if you've got a penis you've got a penis, if it all works there you go, you know.

Finally, one of the men attempted to put the penis size/masculinity debate into some sort of perspective by attempting to address the burgeoning cultural obsession of excess.

Q: Is penis size important to you?

A: No, not really. It's fun, but not really.

Q: Can you explain to me what you mean by fun?

A: I think that there always an interesting time to find out what someone's penis size is. That's always interesting. But once you find out, it doesn't make much difference.

Q: And are there particular dimensions that you're more drawn to?

A: Um. Oh look I'm not really drawn to any, anything, really. Um it's always fascinating to see if it's big, but that's about it. But, as I said, once you see it it's pretty much boring.

Q: Do you think penis size has anything to do with being masculine?

A: Nah.

Q: Not at all?

A: Nah, nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Very few of the men, such as this participant, stated outright that penis size had nothing to do with masculinity. This is an interesting finding worth considerably more exploration. According to the majority of men size, in terms of ones body image, is important in determining one's masculinity. Indeed, the penis constitutes part of a man's overall body image. The contemporary cultural convention for the penis is large. Whether that is an individual preference is another issue.

Conclusion

This paper was never designed to be *the* definitive paper to end the debate on penis size and masculinity among gay men. As we had originally expected, the paper has opened a number of opportunities to explore this relationship further. It is arguable that by anonymously surveying large quantities of gay men across Western cultures on the topic of penis size and masculinity that this would produce stereotypical responses that do little to provide a deeper understanding of this issue. Therefore far more qualitative research is

required. However, in our recent experience an interesting dilemma has emerged where Human Research Ethics Committees are concerned. It seems in the litigious society in which we live that preconceived lines of enquiry around gay men, masculinity and penis size may be difficult to achieve. Therefore, advocating for both a phenomenological approach to the topic of penis size and its associated meaning to gay men, as well as a phenomenological approach to interviewing, is highly desirable. By taking such an approach to interviewing the issues under investigation are given the capacity to unfold on the terms set by the participant(s). Upon reflection this may be advantageous in many instances, as it will allow the participant to guide the interview, thereby enhancing the participatory process.

Clearly, the majority of men in the three research projects that provide the data for this paper claim that penis size *is* important to them in terms of how they construct masculinity. They appear able to recognise the 'bigger is better' notion that pervades Western culture and yet it still drives the way in which they view their ideal male. When given the opportunity to reflect whether this is related to masculine identity the men are comfortable in deflecting this to the 'other'. That is, they do not appear to be prepared to discuss penis size in the context of their own masculinity. This is certainly where the next level of research is required. Future research needs to focus on how men perceive themselves in regards to the size of their own penis. This poses an interesting and somewhat vexed position for the researcher. However, given the ability and the skills of the researcher, together with the appropriate participants, it is an achievable outcome.

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