

## Defeminization and Social Class

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*The hypothesis that there might occur selective defeminization by social class between childhood and adulthood among homosexual men was explored. Interview data on 686 homosexual men were employed. It was found that there is a greater tendency for cross-gender propensities to persist into adulthood among respondents from blue-collar backgrounds. Effeminate respondents from such backgrounds were found to be disproportionately involved in same-sex sexual activities during adolescence. They were also sexually responsive to same-sex persons earlier. The interpretation is offered that early homosexual experiences reinforce cross-gender propensities among blue-collar respondents because of the greater gender role dichotomization found in blue-collar culture. Such reinforcement may explain the tendency for there to be greater persistence of cross-gendering among blue-collar men.*

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**KEY WORDS:** homosexuality; gender role; effeminacy; adolescence.

### INTRODUCTION

A defeminization process occurring in gay men between childhood and adulthood has been documented repeatedly (Harry, 1983; Saghir and Robins, 1973, p. 25; Whitam, 1977). In this process,  $\frac{2}{3}$  to  $\frac{4}{5}$  of gay men were cross-gendered during childhood in that they engaged in and preferred activities more characteristic of the opposite sex. By adulthood, the majority of the childhood cross-gendered men were defeminized and came to be reasonably gender-conventional in both their behavior and their deportment, although a number persisted in their cross-gendering; virtually all

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those who were cross-gendered as adults had been cross-gendered as children (Harry, 1983). Also, several authors (Farrell and Morrione, 1974; Leznoff and Westley, 1956; Weinberg and Williams, 1974, p. 224) have reported negative associations between measures of social class and effeminate or stereotypically homosexual behaviors. This raises the possibility that the defeminization process is selective by social class such that there is greater defeminization among children from middle-class backgrounds than among those from working-class origins. The present work explores this and related possibilities.

Two alternative hypotheses can be entertained as to why there might occur selective defeminization among gay men by social class. First, there appears to be greater disapproval of behaviors considered gender-deviant among working-class persons. Duncan and Duncan (1978, pp. 272-275) found in a national survey that it was more important to working-class fathers that "a boy should act like a boy" than it was to higher status fathers. Similarly, disproportionate disapproval of other behaviors considered cross-gendered, e.g., homosexuality, has been found among working-class compared to middle-class persons (Levitt and Klassen, 1974). Because of the greater disapproval of behaviors considered cross-gendered among the working class, one might then anticipate a greater degree of defeminization among pre-adult gays growing up in such gender-conservative environments.

The tendency of blue-collar culture to define sex roles as *sexual roles* can be used to explain why there might be greater persistence in cross-gendering among boys from blue-collar backgrounds. Various authors (Gagnon and Simon, 1973, pp. 56-66; Komarovskiy, 1964, pp. 144-145; Diamond, 1977) have reported class-differing definitions and enactments of those aspects of gender roles dealing with cross-sex interaction. In particular, males, and particularly working-class males, seem to define the erotic as the principal or most meaningful part of gender roles, while females and middle-class persons define gender roles with a less restricted symbolic content. Such differences by both class and gender are supported by Komarovskiy's (1964, pp. 142-144) finding that more educated heterosexual couples spend much more time in disclosing themselves to each other than do less educated couples. They are also supported by Diamond's (1977) findings that, when participating in experimental games of charades and asked to depict the word *love*, women consistently use facial expressions of emotion while men provide more pelvic interpretations. These sex differences in the degree of nonerotic content of gender roles seem to be paralleled by similar class differences, especially during early adulthood when the cross-sex aspects of gender roles are beginning to be learned or activated (Gagnon and Simon, 1973, p. 56).

If blue-collar adolescent males are more likely than middle-class adolescent males to define sex roles as sexual roles, then sexual activities, which seem to possess an almost intrinsic reward value, can serve to reinforce the definitions or internalizations of those roles. Hence, sexual activity such as masturbation or homosexual sex can reward and stabilize the cross-gendered boy's gender-role preferences. This can result in the persistence of cross-gendering either because some boys engage in considerable sexual activity during adolescence, which rewards their gender-role definitions, or because, while not necessarily engaging in as much sexual activity, their definitions of sex roles are largely sexual. In the case of the blue-collar boy, the present hypothesis is that the tendency to define sex roles as sexual roles renders the combination of cross-gendering and sexual activity an almost self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating phenomenon.

A related question is why defeminization is not virtually total. It appears that a very large majority of effeminate boys receive considerable negative feedback from their peers and parents for their behaviors during childhood (Green, 1974; Saghir and Robins, 1973, pp. 18-20). However, perhaps a quarter of adult gay men remain somewhat effeminate during adulthood (Harry, 1983; Bell *et al.*, 1981, p. 173). For those who persist in effeminacy, it may be that there are some rewards that assist the persistence. It has been suggested that the timing of the advent of sexuality in relation to the defeminization process may affect the denouement of that process (Harry, 1982, p. 24). If the boy experiences sexual rewards or arousals while still cross-gendered, such experiences might retard defeminization, since they can provide rewards to cross-gendering in an environment that otherwise provides little or no positive feedback for such behaviors. It should be noted that such sexual experiences need not be extensive or particularly overt. Simple masturbation or sexual arousal accompanied by cross-gender psychological imagery could be sufficiently rewarding to effect persistence in cross-gendering, just as they may also serve to reinforce more conventional gender-symbolic imagery (Gagnon and Simon, 1973, pp. 63-67). The associations among childhood cross-gendering, adult effeminacy, parental class, and the timing of preadult homosexual experiences are explored below.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The data for the present work were provided by the Kinsey Institute of Indiana University and consist of 686 male homosexuals interviewed in their 1969/1970 San Francisco study. The data are based on 2-5 hour interviews conducted in the fall of 1969. A more detailed description of the sam-

pling methods has been presented elsewhere by others (Bell and Weinberg, 1978, pp. 30-44). A large pool of several thousand homosexual volunteers for interviewing was acquired from a wide variety of sources in the Bay Area. These volunteers were then stratified by age, sex, race, and education. Sampling was then done within each of these strata so as to create heterogeneity on these demographic variables. The volunteers thus sampled were then interviewed. Defeminization is not explored here among the male heterosexuals of the sample since only two of the 337 heterosexual males could be classified as cross-gendered during adulthood.

The measure of adult cross-gendering consists of the interviewer's rating of respondents on their apparent masculinity/femininity, with the following response categories for rating: very effeminate, somewhat effeminate, neither especially effeminate nor masculine, somewhat masculine, very masculine. Those respondents rated either very effeminate or somewhat effeminate are classified here as being cross-gendered as adults. While one might question the validity of such ratings, the association reported in Table I between these ratings and the measure of childhood cross-gendering is both a substantive finding and a validation of the ratings. Parental social class is defined in terms of the principal occupation of the head of the household during the period the respondent was growing up—prior to age 17. Occupations have been grouped in the analysis below into blue-collar and white-collar ones. Such a division seems more consistent with the conception of varying class cultures used here than would treating social class as a continuous variable, as is typically done in many studies of status attainment.

Early homosexual experience is measured by responses to the question "How old were you when you first felt sexually aroused by a male?" No homosexual respondent answered "never," and the median age for the homosexual male respondents was 12 years. Respondents were also asked "How old were you when you first began to think of yourself as sexually different?" and "How old were you when you labeled the difference you felt *homosexual*?" Answers to the second of these questions are also analyzed below. The median age of responses to this question was 17 years.

Childhood cross-gendering is measured by responses to the following three items: "During grade school, to what extent did you enjoy specifically boys' activities (e.g., baseball, football)?"; "To what extent did you enjoy specifically girls' activities (e.g., hopscotch, playing house, jacks)?"; and a self-rating by the respondent of "masculine versus feminine" as descriptive of "the kind of person you were during the time you were growing up." The alpha-reliability of this scale is 0.69 among the homosexual males. This scale taps the same cross-gender phenomenon reported in recall studies of homosexual males (Whitam, 1977; Saghir and Robins, 1973, pp. 18-20;

Freund, 1974) and directly observed in studies of effeminate boys during early childhood (Green, 1974, 1976; Zuger, 1966).

Log-linear analyses are employed below. In the tables, variables are referred to by letters, and associations between variables are referred to by pairs of letters. Interaction terms are represented by combinations of three or more letters. Partial associations are referred to by expressions such as EC.O or EC.AO. In short, the notation for partial correlation has been adopted. The left-most likelihood ratio chi-squares presented refer to the partial associations, while the right-most ones refer to the zero-order associations. The statistical analyses employed the BMDP log-linear analysis program (Dixon, 1981). A readable introduction to log-linear analysis can be found in Knoke and Burke (1980).

## RESULTS

Table I presents adult effeminacy by childhood cross-gendering by parental occupation to test for the possibility of selective defeminization by social class. The data show an expected positive association between childhood cross-gendering and adult cross-gendering. This replicates the findings of Green (1974), Saghir and Robins (1973), and Harry (1983). The data also show that those who are effeminate as adults are significantly more likely to have come from blue-collar households, while childhood cross-gendering

**Table I.** Adult Effeminacy by Childhood Cross-Gendering by Parental Occupation (%)

Parental occupation (O)	Childhood cross-gendering (C)	Percent effeminate (E)	N (100%) <sup>a</sup>
White-collar	Low	22	105
	Moderate	20	153
	High	36	99
Blue-collar	Low	18	88
	Moderate	35	138
	High	46	94

  

Partial associations				Marginal associations	
Effect	df	LR chi-square	<i>p</i>	LR chi-square	<i>p</i>
EC.O	2	20.41	.001	20.72	.001
EO.C	1	5.58	.018	5.89	.015
OC.E	2	0.07	.967	0.38	.829
OEC	2	5.03	.081		

<sup>a</sup>Three individuals did not provide complete information on childhood cross-gendering, and six could not provide parental occupation.

has no significant association with parental occupation. It would appear that cross-gendered boys are equally likely to come from blue-collar and white-collar households.

The data also show a nearly significant interaction ( $p = 0.08$ ) of adult effeminacy having a stronger association with childhood cross-gendering among those from blue-collar backgrounds. This interaction does attain statistical significance if the childhood cross-gendering measure is dichotomized at low versus moderate and high combined (LR  $\chi^2 = 4.06$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.044$ ). The data support the hypothesis that there is greater persistence of cross-gendering among those cross-gendered gays raised in blue-collar households.

Turning to the hypothesis that early sexual experience may also influence the denouement of the defeminization process, Table II presents adult effeminacy by age of first homosexual arousal by childhood cross-gendering by parental occupation. The data show a weak, positive zero-order association between adult effeminacy and early homosexual arousal. Apparently, early homosexual arousal might somewhat reinforce continuing effeminacy. However, an inspection of the first-order partials revealed that controlling for childhood cross-gendering reduces the effeminacy/arousal association to nonsignificance. Early cross-gendering is apparently required for arousal to have any association with adult effeminacy. It is also evident in Table II that childhood cross-gendering is moderately associated with early homosexual arousal. Those who were not cross-gendered during childhood seem to experience their first arousals during adolescence, whereas those who were cross-gendered experience their first arousals during childhood. While the direction of causation between cross-gendering and arousal is unclear in these data, the findings of others (Green, 1974, 1976) to the effect that cross-gendering often has its onset in early (preschool) childhood suggest that cross-gendering may precede much of the childhood sexuality reported by the cross-gendered. Possibly, childhood cross-gendering sensitizes children to the sexual potential of a variety of situations.

Table II also shows a significant interaction involving early arousal, parental occupation, and effeminacy. (The associations among these measures have been presented in the lower panel of percentages of Table II for greater readability.) It is apparent that the association between early arousal and adult effeminacy is completely limited to the respondents from blue-collar backgrounds, hence, the earlier noted weakness of the zero-order association between arousal and effeminacy. These data again suggest that the cultural context within which early arousal occurs influences the meaningfulness and effects of that arousal. The greater tendency in blue-collar culture to define sex roles as sexual roles may render early arousal a reinforcer

**Table II.** Adult Effeminacy by Age of First Homosexual Arousal by Childhood Cross-Gendering by Parental Occupation (%)

Parental occupation (O)	Childhood cross-gendering (C)	Age of arousal (A)	Percent effeminate (E)	N (100%)	
White-collar	Low	- 12 yrs	23	43	
		13 yrs +	21	62	
	Moderate	- 12 yrs	18	88	
		13 yrs +	22	65	
	High	- 12 yrs	34	68	
		13 yrs +	42	31	
Blue-collar	Low	- 12 yrs	20	30	
		13 yrs +	17	58	
	Moderate	- 12 yrs	42	78	
		13 yrs +	25	60	
	High	- 12 yrs	56	52	
		13yrs +	33	42	
Parental occupation (O)	Age of arousal (A)	Percent effeminate (E)	N (100%)		
White-collar	- 12 yrs	25	199		
	13 yrs +	25	158		
Blue-collar	- 12 yrs	42	160		
	13 yrs +	24	160		
Effect	Partial associations			Marginal associations	
	df	LR chi-square	p	LR chi-square	p
EA.CO	1	2.76	.096	4.77	.029
EC.AO	2	17.48	.001	20.47	.001
EO.AC	1	6.04	.014	5.84	.016
AC.O	2 <sup>a</sup>	26.64	.001	26.17	.001
AO.C	1	2.68	.102	2.22	.136
CO.A	2	0.84	.658	0.38	.829
AEC.O	2	0.02	.992		
AEO.C	1	5.76	.016		
ECO.A	2	3.37	.186		
ACO	2	1.93	.381		
EACO	2	1.66	.436		

<sup>a</sup>For the relationships among the measures A, C, and O, only the first-order partial associations are presented, since adult effeminacy is an outcome variable with respect to the former three measures.

of the link between gender-role behavior and sexual behavior. In such a context, some individuals may come to feel that homosexual behaviors have their principal meaning when accompanied by cross-gender behaviors.

Since early homosexual arousal was found to be associated with adult effeminacy among respondents from blue-collar backgrounds, the hypothesis was entertained that the effeminate might also be more sexually active during adolescence. To answer this question, Table III presents adult ef-

**Table III.** Adult Effeminacy by Number of High School Homosexual Experiences by Parental Occupation (%)

Parental occupation (O)	Number of experiences (X)	Percent effeminate (E)		N (100%)
White-collar	0-1	27		108
	2+	24		249
Blue-collar	0-1	22		78
	2+	37		242

  

Effect	df	Partial associations		Marginal associations	
		LR chi-square	<i>p</i>	LR chi-square	<i>p</i>
EX.O	1	1.72	.190	2.13	.144
EO.X	1	5.49	.019	5.90	.015
XO.E	1	2.48	.115	2.90	.089
EXO	1	5.01	.025		

feminacy for white- and blue-collar respondents by answers to the question "When you were of high school age, how often did you have homosexual relations?" The data show a significant interaction involving parental occupation, adult effeminacy, and number of homosexual experiences. Number of experiences is positively associated with adult effeminacy, but only among the blue-collar respondents; there is no association among the white-collar subjects. These data are consistent with those of Table II and underscore the idea that sexual experience appears to attain its significance for the self from the social context within which it occurs. In the present case, it might reinforce cross-gender propensities among preadult gays from blue-collar backgrounds.

Since age of first homosexual arousal and parental occupation have been found in combination to be significant factors relating to subsequent development, the possibility was entertained that these factors might influence the age at which the respondent labeled himself homosexual. Presumably, early erotic experiences with homosexuality are consistent with such a self-definition and should contribute to that definition. To explore this possibility Table IV presents age of first labeling self as homosexual by age of first arousal by childhood cross-gendering by parental occupation. The data show that age of arousal has a moderate positive association with age of self-definition as homosexual. It should be noted that the measure of self-definition employed here should probably not be taken as a direct measure of the more social and behavioral phenomenon of "coming out." Since others (Dank, 1971; Harry and DeVall, 1978, p. 64) have found coming out to occur at about age 19, and since the median age of self-labeling in the present data is 17, that labeling seems to be an immediate precursor of coming out. Also, the question here employed referred to labeling of



**Table IV.** Age Labeled Self Homosexual by Age of First Homosexual Arousal by Childhood Cross-Gendering by Parental Occupation (%)<sup>a</sup>

Parental occupation (O)	Childhood cross-gendering (C)	Age of arousal (A)	Labeled self at 18 years + (H)	N (100%)	
White-collar	Low	- 12 yrs	70	43	
		13 yrs +	63	60	
	Moderate	- 12 yrs	44	86	
		13 yrs +	57	65	
	High	- 12 yrs	35	68	
		13 yrs +	52	31	
Blue-collar	Low	- 12 yrs	33	30	
		13 yrs +	71	56	
	Moderate	- 12 yrs	42	78	
		13 yrs +	58	60	
	High	- 12 yrs	33	52	
		13 yrs +	74	42	
Parental occupation (O)	Age of arousal (A)	Labeled self at 18 years + (H)	N (100%)		
White-collar	- 12 yrs	47	197		
	13 yrs +	58	156		
Blue-collar	- 12 yrs	38	160		
	13 yrs +	67	158		
Partial associations				Marginal associations	
Effect	df	LR chi-square	<i>p</i>	LR chi-square	<i>p</i>
HA.CO	1	21.63	.001	26.91	.001
HC.OA	2	6.71	.035	11.99	.002
HO.CA	1	0.01	.918	0.01	.927
AC.O	2	24.16	.001	23.71	.001
AO.C	1	2.45	.117	2.01	.156
CO.A	2	0.86	.652	0.41	.813
HAC.O	2	2.67	.263		
HAO.C	1	6.78	.009		
HCO.A	2	3.83	.147		
ACO	2	2.10	.349		
HACO	2	4.86	.088		

<sup>a</sup>Six individuals did not label themselves homosexual but used some other term, such as bisexual.

homosexual sexual feelings rather than to a broader labeling of the self as a homosexual.

Table IV also reveals that childhood cross-gendering is positively associated with an earlier age of self-labeling as homosexual. Other analyses were run which revealed that both childhood cross-gendering and adult effeminacy had significant positive associations with early self-definition, with the association of childhood cross-gendering being the stronger. However, both effeminacy and childhood cross-gendering had significant

associations with early self-definition while controlling for the other. It would seem that cross-gendering, either early or late, may facilitate an early self-labeling as homosexual, since the former phenomenon may be perceived to be more consistent with such a label.

Table IV also shows a significant interaction involving parental occupation, age of homosexual arousal, and age of self-labeling as homosexual. (The pertinent percentages are presented in the lower percentage panel of Table IV.) While age of arousal is associated with age of self-labeling among respondents from both white-collar and blue-collar backgrounds, it is evident that the association is considerably stronger among the latter. The data suggest that early homosexual arousal occurring in the context of a gender-conservative blue-collar culture within which one is a man, a woman, or a "fag," may lead sooner to a self-labeling as homosexual than in a white-collar context. In contrast, among those respondents from white-collar backgrounds, early arousal may be more ambiguously interpreted by respondents so that it need not lead as clearly to a self-labeling as homosexual. The data of Tables I-IV were reanalyzed with a control for age, and the results reported here were not altered.

## DISCUSSION

In the present analysis, sexual activity has been interpreted as a reinforcer of cross-gender propensities and hence as causally contributory to such propensities. However, the possibility of sexual activity as an effect of cross-gender propensities should also be entertained. It might be that cross-gendered individuals define gender in terms of sexuality or its potential for sexuality and seek out situations for the validation of their cross-gender propensities. This would be consistent with the reported positive association between age of sexual arousal and childhood cross-gendering. However, childhood cross-gendering has no significant association with number of adolescent sexual experiences at zero-order, partial, or interactional levels. Whatever causal contribution cross-gendering might make to early sexual experiences, it seems clear that those experiences also could be causal of persistent cross-gendering due to their virtually intrinsic reward value. However, the particular sets of psychic gender-related symbolisms they might reinforce will vary between persons depending on their varying commitments to one gender role or another.

The hypothesis offered here concerning the greater persistence of a cross-gendering that occurs in more gender-conservative environments provides an explanation of the occasional observation that there is more effeminacy among adult gay men in rural areas and the American South

(Altman, 1982, p. 154). The gay men in such areas seem less stereotypically masculine than those in urban areas. They also find more appeal in female impersonator shows, although some of this association may be due to cultural changes in the gay world in the last decade. If such areas are more gender-conservative than urban areas, persistence in cross-gendering would occur more than in urban areas, paralleling the differences reported here between defeminization occurring in the blue-collar and white-collar groups.

Since the present data were collected in the fall of 1969, the question might be raised as to whether they are reflective of current conditions. The answer to this would clearly depend on what aspects of homosexuality one might be interested in. If one were concerned with topics such as gay social or political involvement, gay self-esteem, or adult sexuality, serious questions could be raised as to the applicability of 1969 data to the present. The growth of the gay movement and of gay communities in large cities has probably had large-scale effects on such phenomena (Harry and DeVall, 1978, pp. 134-146). However, the topics explored here are ones occurring during the childhood and adolescence of the respondents, before they come out at approximately 19 or 20 years of age (Dank, 1971; Troiden, 1977, p. 186; Harry and DeVall, 1978, p. 64). Prior to this age, they are still very largely immersed in the culture of heterosexual parents and peers. Hence, changes in the gay movement or world could be expected to have little effect on the phenomena reported here.

## CONCLUSIONS

The data show that adult gay men who are effeminate tend to come from blue-collar backgrounds. Their effeminacy is partly a result of a greater persistence of childhood cross-gendering among gay youths from blue-collar households. Cross-gendered youths, and particularly those who remain cross-gendered as adults, are disproportionately involved in preadult sexuality, as consistently shown in the data. They are involved both earlier and to a greater degree. The argument has been made that such sexual experiences provide rewards to their gender-role preferences and reinforce those preferences. Such reinforcements may lead to persistent effeminacy. This is not meant to deny the existence of other types of reinforcements to cross-gendering.

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