
Letter to the Editor

Childhood Cross-Gender Behavior and Adult Homosexuality

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In recent articles in *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Harry (1983, 1985) and Whitam and Zent (1984) make the following unwarranted and misleading generalizations concerning the relationship between childhood cross-gender behavior and adult homosexuality:

Whitam (1977), Saghir and Robins (1973, pp. 18-21), Thompson and Bentler (1973), and Bell *et al.* (1981) have found that a large majority of adult gay men report having exhibited during childhood a variety of interests and preferences characteristic of girls. These include having been considered sissies, preferring to play with dolls, avoidance of rough games and sports, having wanted to be girls, and cross-dressing. (Harry, 1983, pp. 1-2)

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, 2/3 to 4/5 of gay men were cross-gendered during childhood in that they engaged in and preferred activities more characteristic of the opposite sex. (Harry, 1985, p. 1)

The findings of this study are quite consistent with earlier research and suggest that findings on early cross-gender behavior are generalizable beyond American society. Early cross-gender behavior appears to be an intrinsic feature of male homosexuality, wherever it may be found. (Whitam and Zent, 1984, p. 435)

In summary, then, the present study finds strong evidence that early cross-gender behavior may appear in all societies and is consistently associated with later adult sexual orientation. (Whitam and Zent, 1984, p. 437)

From Harry's statements, it is clear that he believes that the available research data support the conclusion that a *large majority* of "adult male homosexuals" were "cross-gendered during childhood." Whitam and Zent's statements are more ambiguously worded, but they clearly suggest, by saying that early cross-gender behavior is "consistently associated with later adult

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sexual orientation" and "an intrinsic feature of male homosexuality," that they would support a similar conclusion.

Setting aside problems connected with the skewed research samples used in the studies cited by the authors, which cannot be universally generalized, and differences in childhood indicators used, let us look first at the research findings in the studies cited. Of those cited by Harry (1983) in the first generalization quoted above, Saghir and Robins found that a majority (67%) of only a part of their sample of homosexual males (72 of 89) described "themselves as having been girl-like during childhood" (p. 18); data are therefore not available on close to one-fifth (17 of 89) of their homosexual sample. Of Whitam's (1977) homosexual male sample ($n = 206$), a majority only responded positively to two of his six "childhood indicators of male homosexuality." Bell *et al.* (1981) conclude that their data suggests "there is a powerful link between gender nonconformity and the development of homosexuality" (p. 188). They go on to note, however, that "This is not to say that all the homosexual respondents displayed atypical gender traits or interests while they were growing up. About half the homosexual men appear to have been typically 'masculine,' both in personal identity and in interests and activities (and nearly a quarter of the heterosexual men were not conforming in these respects)" (pp. 188-189). The Thompson and Bentler (1973) article does not present any findings on the relationship between childhood indicators and adult sexual orientation, so its citation is obviously an error.

Two of the citations given by Harry (1985) in the second generalization quoted above have already been discussed. Only a minority of Harry's (1983) sample of homosexual males ($n = 1588$) responded positively to the six "cross-gendering childhood items" used in his study (see Harry, 1983, Table I, p. 7). Judging from his Table I, which shows the percentages of his homosexual sample group responding positively to each of his six childhood items ranging from 22 to 47%, one wonders what the justification is for the following statement made on p. 17: "The above data replicated the findings of Whitam (1977, 1980) and of Saghir and Robins (1973) in that a large majority of gay men have a feminine gender role preference during childhood."

Whitam and Zent's (1984) two generalizations are based on Saghir and Robins (1973) and Whitam (1977) and on four samples of homosexual respondents described only as "nonclinical groups of male homosexuals . . . of generally comparable social backgrounds in the United States ($n = 36$), Guatemala ($n = 62$), Brazil ($n = 23$), and the Philippines ($n = 30$)."

No further information is given about the sample (age range; education; sex role preference: insertee, insertor, or none; etc.). And, unfortunately, no percentage breakdown is given of the homosexual interviewee responses to the five items used to measure early cross-gender behavior. We thus have no way of knowing whether we are dealing with a majority or a minority of

Table I. Comparison of Findings on Childhood Cross-Gender Measures

Childhood measures	Saghir and Robins (1973) (n = 89)		Whitam (1977) (n = 206)		Harry (1983) (n = 1588)		Bell <i>et al.</i> (1981) (n = 575)	
	Homosexuals	Heterosexuals	Homosexuals	Heterosexuals	Homosexuals	Heterosexuals	Homosexuals	Heterosexuals
Regarded as feminine (or sissy)	67% ^a	3%	27% ^b	1%	43%	11%	— ^c	— ^c
Played more with girls (and/or girls' games)	53% ^a	— ^d	37% ^e	3% ^e	47%	12%	46% ^f	11% ^f
Cross-dressed (other than Halloween/school plays)	16%	3%	41%	3%	36%	5%	37%	10%

^aFinding confounded by the fact that information on childhood behavior not available for 19% of homosexual sample (17 of 89); the 67% finding refers to 48 of 72 homosexual respondents for whom information was available.

^bAuthor includes an additional category: "Not sissy exactly but different from other boys" (45% of homosexual sample and 10% of heterosexual); no explanation is given, however, of what is meant by different and how it was measured.

^cPercentages of respondents in this category not available, but "Few homosexual respondents said they were 'feminine' while they were growing up; most described themselves as neither especially masculine nor feminine. Most of the heterosexual men, however, said that they had been 'very' masculine, while only a fourth as many homosexual men said so (White homosexual males: 18%, White heterosexual males: 67%)" (p. 80).

^dPercentage of heterosexual males in this category not available.

^eAuthor included category "Liked both equally well"; homosexual, 46% (95 of 206); heterosexual, 54% (42 of 78).

^fPercentage of respondents who "said that they had enjoyed stereotypical girls' activities 'somewhat' or 'very much' (e.g., playing house, hopscotch, jacks)."

respondents remembering themselves as involved in early cross-gender behavior. In any event, the general projection of their limited data on the populations of "all societies" in the world, or even on the populations of the societies studied, is clearly unwarranted.

Table I presents a comparison of the only comparable childhood cross-gender measures used by the studies cited above. The comparison shows that the only clear generalization that can be made from the studies is that a link appears to exist between a variety of childhood cross-gender behaviors and adult homosexuality in some populations. One cannot conclude from these studies that a large majority of homosexual adults in the general population of any given society were substantively involved in cross-gender behavior as children. As Murray (1984) points out,

A relationship between two variables which occurs in roughly half the cases is generally regarded as chance rather than as causation, but whether the sample is drawn on the basis of the alleged cause (those labeled "sissy," "queer," etc.) or the expected effect (adult homosexuality), the relationship is observed no more than would be expected by chance. (p. 17)

Given the available data, one might at best make the conjecture that a segment of the adult homosexual population, of unknown size but perhaps a large minority, may have been involved in a variety of cross-gender behaviors as children.

Some major problems in interpreting the findings are differences among the measures used for the childhood behavior and the lack of generally accepted criteria for childhood cross-gender behavior. The incompatibility of the measures used by the different studies make all generalizing statements based on more than one study problematic. Grellert *et al.* (1982) have established the most significant link between childhood play activities and adult sexual orientations to date with two detailed checklists of childhood play, one for ages 5-8 and the other for ages 9-13. It would be valuable to have their study replicated in other segments of the population and in different societies. As Ross (1983) points out, however, remembrance of cross-gender play may be no more than "a function of retrospective distortion in line with societal expectation of the homosexual role" (p. 4). Because of the societal association of feminine behavior and homosexuality, heterosexual male respondents may also find it difficult as adults to *admit* their cross-gender behavior as children.

Finally, the generalizability of the research findings to larger populations in the societies studied is limited by samples which are skewed in the direction of an educated (usually at least a year or two in college), relatively financially secure segment of their populations. Even if the generalizations were valid, one would then still have to account for the large *number* of heterosexual adults who remember themselves as being involved in cross-

gender behavior. For example, close to one million Anglo U.S. males in the age range of 20 to 39 would have to be explained if even only 5% of the heterosexual males revealed themselves as cross-gendered children; and they made up 90% of the population in that age group. One would also have to explain the *lack* of childhood cross-gender behavior in an as yet undetermined but apparently sizable percentage of adult homosexuals.

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