

## **Sexual Orientation and Professional Dance**

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*The stereotypical professional male dancer is a gay man. However, little if any systematic research has investigated the validity of this stereotype, much less the reasons why male sexual orientation would be associated with interest in dance. We interviewed 136 professional dancers about the prevalence of homosexuality among dancers, the dancers' own sexual development, and relationships between dancers of different sexual orientations. Dancers estimated that over half of male dancers are gay, but that only a small minority of female dancers are lesbian. Gay men recalled more intense early interest in dance compared to heterosexual men and women, and were more feminine as boys than were heterosexual men. Gay men's homosexual feelings typically preceded their dance experience, and only one gay man felt that his dance experiences may have influenced his sexual orientation. Heterosexual men voiced some mild complaints about gay male dancers, but these were balanced by positive sentiments.*

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**KEY WORDS:** sexual orientation; dance; careers; gender identity.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Stereotypes of gay men and lesbians include occupational components. Gay men are thought to be disproportionately represented among the arts (especially dance), fashion careers (hairdressing and design), and decorating (interior decorating and florists). Lesbians are widely believed to frequent the military and women's professional athletics. Occupations and professions stereotypically associated with gay men are considered feminine and have a high proportion of women; analogously, "lesbian" occupations are masculine and (with the exception of women's athletics) con-

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tain a high proportion of men. Despite the pervasiveness of these stereotypes, empirical research on their validity and related questions has been scanty.

At least three general questions might be asked concerning an occupation hypothesized to have a high proportion of gay men or lesbians. First, is there, in fact, a relation between sexual orientation and membership in the occupation in question? Second, if there is such an association, why does it occur? Third, what are the implications of a high percentage of gay or lesbian coworkers for heterosexual members of the occupation?

It would seem a fairly straightforward matter to determine if a given occupation has a disproportionate number of gay men or lesbians, but there are in fact serious barriers. For example, it is often difficult to get a random sample of the members of an occupation. A more serious difficulty concerns the logistics of surveying members of an occupation about their sexual behavior, especially often stigmatized sexual behavior, such as homosexuality. People are likely to be generally cautious about answering such questions, perhaps especially so in the context of an occupational survey. For example, at the time of this writing homosexual people are still expelled from the military if they engage in homosexual acts. Thus, gay men and lesbians in the military have a disincentive to cooperating in such research. However, most employers are less concerned than the military about their employees' private lives, and thus, it is often more feasible to conduct such research than it would be in the military.

One alternative to asking people directly about their own sexual orientation is to ask more general questions about the sexual orientation of others in the occupation. For example, one might ask "What percentage of your male coworkers are gay," or "What percentage of men in your occupation are gay?" How accurately respondents could estimate these values would depend on factors such as how open coworkers are with each other about their sexuality and how aware they are of such trends outside their immediate place of employment. If people in a given profession could accurately answer such questions, it might partly circumvent the need to obtain random or representative samples, and respondents may feel more open answering questions about unspecified others than about themselves.

If an occupation or profession has a disproportionate number of gay men or lesbians, one must then ask "why?" Researchers have offered at least two general explanations of the congregation of homosexual people in certain occupations. We distinguish these general explanations as "psychological" and "sociological." Whitam (in press; Whitam and Dizon, 1979; Whitam and Mathy, 1986) has been the primary proponent of the former position, that important psychological differences between homosexual and

heterosexual people, especially regarding the preference for typical versus atypical gender roles, predispose homosexual people to prefer occupations typically preferred by opposite-sex heterosexual people. Both prospective (Green, 1987) and retrospective (Bailey and Zucker, 1995) studies have demonstrated an association between homosexuality and sex-atypical behavior during childhood. Whitam argues that the adult occupational differences are developmental consequences of the early differences. Supporting the psychological position, Chung and Harmon (1994) found moderate differences in the career interests and aspirations of gay and heterosexual men, with gay men's interests less realistic and investigative, but more artistic and social. In contrast, the sociological position (see Murray, 1991) argues that occupations more or less arbitrarily become identified as friendly to gay or lesbian employees because there is less antihomosexual discrimination in them. Homosexual people transmit information to each other about job opportunities, and eventually these occupations become disproportionately homosexual. The sociological position denies that the aforementioned differences in childhood sex-typicality play an important role in occupational differences.

Those occupations that have a highly disproportionate number of gay men or lesbians allow investigation of a number of interesting questions. For example, much of the debate over whether openly homosexual people should serve in the military was necessarily speculative, but could have been informed by research on relationships between homosexual and heterosexual people in disproportionately homosexual occupations. Some theories concerning origins of sexual orientation can also be examined in the context of research on "homosexual" occupations. For example, one common belief is that environments tolerant of homosexuality will spawn more homosexuals compared to less tolerant environments (e.g., Patullo, 1992). Another is that homosexuality is often the result of early seduction by older same-sex adults (Newton, 1978). If these hypotheses are true, then gay men and lesbians from "homosexual" occupations should often claim to have become homosexual due to their occupational experiences, especially seduction by coworkers. Heterosexual coworkers in occupations tolerant of homosexual behavior should be more likely to have had homosexual experiences and to have struggled with their own sexual orientation.

In this paper, we report the results of a study concerning sexual orientation in professional dance, including ballet, modern, and jazz/musical theater. We chose to study professional dance for several reasons. First, professional male dancers are widely assumed to be disproportionately gay. Supporting the stereotype, one of the most famous male dancers of this century, Rudolph Nureyev, was gay, and several prominent figures in the dance world are openly gay. However, no one has at-

tempted a systematic survey of this question. Second, many dancers begin dancing quite young, and so may provide some insight into the role of psychological versus sociological factors in their career choice. Third, members of a dance company often socialize with each other, and thus might be expected to know more about each other's sexuality. Fourth, we believed that although a substantial proportion of professional male dancers are gay, an appreciable proportion are heterosexual. Thus, professional dance should provide an opportunity to study the resulting social dynamics. Finally, one of us (M.O.) was a professional ballet dancer for several years, and thus had some useful knowledge and helpful contacts.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants included present and past professional dancers. Participants were recruited unsystematically, via personal contacts, a solicitation in a Chicago dance magazine and "snowball sampling." We attempted to interview approximately equal numbers of gay men, heterosexual men, heterosexual women, and lesbians, but it was not possible to interview a comparable number of lesbian dancers, due to their apparent rarity.

### Procedure

We interviewed dancers either in person or over the telephone. Interviews lasted approximately 90 min, on average. Participants were guaranteed anonymity. Interviews included questions concerning dancers' professional experiences including the development of their interests, sexual histories, experiences with dancers of other sexual orientations and attitudes about those experiences, and dancers' estimates about the prevalence of homosexuality among dancers generally, and in their own companies. Participants also completed a short questionnaire assessing sexual orientation via Kinsey scores, and, for men, (retrospective) childhood gender typicality. The latter included items regarding participants' memories of sex-typed feelings and behavior (e.g., "I was called a sissy."). Scales containing similar items generally yield large differences between heterosexual and homosexual men (Bailey and Zucker, 1995).

## RESULTS

### Participants

We interviewed 48 gay men, 42 heterosexual men, 45 heterosexual women, and 1 lesbian. Sexual orientation was determined on the basis of self-identification. Unfortunately, we subsequently lost (through theft) interview tapes of 9 gay men, 1 heterosexual man, and 6 heterosexual women, and those data are unavailable. Questionnaires were obtained from 39 gay men, 38 heterosexual men, 36 heterosexual women, and 1 lesbian; for 9 gay men and 1 heterosexual men these were the only available data. (In the analyses that follow, variation in the degrees of freedom reflect missing data.) Dancers' ages ranged from 17 to 50, with a mean of 28.9 ( $SD = 6.9$ ). The sample's ethnic composition was 80% white, 6.2% African American, 8.0% Hispanic, and 5.8% other or unspecified ethnicity.

Most of the dancers (84%) were employed in dance companies at the time of the interviews. Eleven percent were dancing independently, and 6% were retired. Dancers represented 36 companies, based in several large U.S. cities. The companies varied considerably in their size, prestige, and regional appeal. We interviewed multiple members from 16 companies; the number interviewed in these companies ranged from 2 to 13.

### Estimates of Homosexuality Among Dancers

We asked all participants several questions concerning the prevalence of homosexuality in the dance world. On average, dancers estimated that 57.8% of male dancers are gay, though individual estimates ranged from 25–98%. Estimates differed slightly but significantly between gay men, heterosexual men, and heterosexual women, with mean estimates of 58.0, 52.4, and 64.3%, respectively,  $F(2, 108) = 4.9, p < 0.01$ . (Because there was only one lesbian, group comparisons must ignore her.) In contrast, the estimated prevalence of homosexuality among female dancers averaged 3.1%, and did not significantly differ between groups. Several of the dancers believed that the prevalence of lesbianism among modern dancers was considerably higher than among other kinds of professional dancers.

Participants also provided estimates of the percentages of gay men and lesbians in their present companies. These figures were important for two reasons. First, to the extent that dancers know about the sexual orientations of others in their companies, then dancers in the same company should provide similar estimates. If they did not, one could have little confidence in their estimates regarding the prevalence of homosexuality among

dancers in general. Second, estimates of homosexuality in companies should be consistent with estimates concerning dancers overall.

Dancers reported that, on average, 53% of the men in their companies were gay. (This percentage changed little, to 54%, even if the mean was not weighted by company.) The intraclass correlation between dancers' estimates across companies was .82, indicating a high degree of similarity for the estimates of dancers from the same company. Dancers reported that to their knowledge, no female dancer in their companies was lesbian, with the exception of the single lesbian participant.

### Early Interests

On average, women began dancing earlier than the men, ages 7.3 (SD = 3.4) and 12.2 (SD = 4.6), respectively,  $t(111) = 5.5, p < 0.001$ . Gay men began dancing slightly later than heterosexual men, 13.1 (SD = 4.5) versus 11.3 (SD = 4.5), respectively,  $t(78) = 1.9, p = 0.07$ . When asked who first inspired their interests in dance, gay men gave markedly different answers from the other groups. Sixty percent of the heterosexual dancers said "Parents," compared to only 13% of the gay male dancers. In contrast, 50% of the gay men said they became interested by themselves, compared to only 19% of the heterosexual dancers. (Heterosexual men and women gave similar responses. The final category, "Friends or Other," did not distinguish the three groups.) The overall pattern of responses differed significantly between gay male and heterosexual dancers,  $\chi^2(2) = 23.1, p < 0.001$ . Furthermore, and consistent with these differences, heterosexual dancers recalled their parents as more supportive of their dancing compared to gay men's parental recollections,  $t(91) = 3.5, p < 0.001$ , though even gay men recalled their parents as somewhat supportive. Gay men recalled being different from heterosexual men in other respects as well. On a scale of childhood gender typicality, gay men reported significantly more feminine behavior than heterosexual men,  $t(62) = 7.4, p < 0.001$ .

### Development of Male Sexual Orientation

Because of the high rate of homosexuality among male dancers, we investigated developmental aspects of male sexual orientation, including the degree to which male dancers thought their sexuality had been influenced by their dance experiences. On average, gay men recalled that their first attractions to men occurred at the age of 10.4 years (SD = 3.7). They first considered the possibility that they were gay at 11.5 years (SD = 4.4). On average, their first homosexual encounter occurred at age 16.4 years (SD

= 4.8). Seventy-one percent of the gay male dancers also reported past sexual attraction to women, at an average age of 13.2 (SD = 5.1). The same percentage had had at least one heterosexual encounter, occurring at age 18.3 (SD = 3.7).

Heterosexual men reported that on average, they were aware of their first heterosexual feelings at age 8.9 (SD = 3.6). They first had heterosexual relations at age 16.5 (SD = 2.0). Only 15% of the heterosexual male dancers said they had ever been attracted to a male, and only 7% had ever had sex with a male, with first occurrence at 20.5 years (SD = 4.9).

We asked dancers several questions concerning their opinions about origins of their sexual orientation. Only one gay male dancer believed that his experiences in dance influenced his sexual orientation. He was the only gay male dancer who believed that he was not gay before beginning his dance career or who believed that sometimes dancers become gay due to the high prevalence of homosexuality within dance. However, all gay male dancers, including this one, believed that they would have eventually become homosexual even if they had never danced. Twenty-three percent of the heterosexual dancers agreed that "heterosexual male dancers struggle with their sexuality more than heterosexual men in other professions," and an additional 23% believed that this might be true. A high proportion of heterosexual male dancers, 71%, had sometimes felt that gay men had tried to influence their sexual orientation or "recruit" them into homosexuality. However, only 5% of the heterosexual male dancers believed that some male dancers become gay because of the prevalence of homosexuality in the dance world.

### Sexual Orientation and Social Relations Between Dancers

We investigated the consequences of the high prevalence of gay male dancers for social relations between dancers. Not surprisingly, all gay male dancers agreed that the dance culture is especially accepting of homosexuality. When asked how their sexuality affected their relationships with heterosexual male dancers, 74% of the gay men said it had a positive or no effect, and 27% said it had a negative effect. Only 6% of gay men believed that their relationships with women suffered, a significantly lower percentage,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.9, p < 0.05$ . Eighty percent of gay men believed that it is not uncommon for gay male dancers to have sexual relationships with other dancers.

Only 21% of the heterosexual male dancers and 26% of the heterosexual female dancers agreed that the high percentage of gay male dancers created special problems for them. Although we did not code this response,

our impression is that women who mentioned special problems most often meant the tragedy of having many of their gay male friends die of AIDS. In contrast, heterosexual men's problems were less sympathetic. Eighty percent of heterosexual male dancers said that others often assumed that they were gay due to their profession, but only 26% of these said that it bothered them. Ninety percent of heterosexual male dancers reported that they had been sexually propositioned by a gay male dancer. Of these, 19% felt "upset," 47% felt "neutral," and 34% felt "flattered." When asked if they liked anything about the high prevalence of gay male dancers, 58% of the heterosexual men and 61% of the heterosexual women said "yes." Many of the heterosexual men, for example, mentioned that they liked gay men's sense of humor. Seventy-six percent of heterosexual women said that their friendships with gay male dancers were closer than their friendships with heterosexual male dancers. (Unfortunately, we did not ask this question of heterosexual men.) Seventy-nine percent of the heterosexual men believed that the high prevalence of homosexual male dancers made them more sought after (by women) as romantic partners; most (81%) heterosexual women agreed. Seventy-seven percent and 84% of heterosexual men and women, respectively, said that they had become more tolerant of homosexuality due to their dance experiences.

## DISCUSSION

### Limitations

Before discussing the implications of our results, we address two major limitations of our data. The first limitation concerns sampling. As already noted, we cannot claim to have either a random or representative sample of dancers. We recruited most of our participants because they were acquaintances of one of us (M. O.) or of other participants. Nevertheless, we doubt that our sample is biased in a way that seriously compromises our results. Most of our participants had danced in companies other than their current ones. Furthermore, it is our impression that substantial socializing and related exchange of information occurs between dancers in different companies. Thus, dancers' knowledge of homosexuality in the dance world was typically based on a fairly extensive database.

A second potential concern is that much of our data are retrospective. It is possible, for example, that either gay men or heterosexual men, or both, systematically distort their childhood memories in ways that magnify real differences, or even create apparent differences when none exist. Elsewhere (see Bailey and Zucker, 1995), we have reviewed evidence concerning the



validity of memories of childhood sex-typed behavior and their association with sexual orientation, and concluded that available evidence largely supported their validity. Furthermore, our unsystematic impression is that the gay men in our study were not especially eager to support the stereotype that gay men are feminine. Although for these reasons we doubt that childhood recollections differed between gay and heterosexual male dancers solely due to retrospective biases, we cannot exclude that possibility.

A related concern is that we asked dancers' opinions of why they or others became homosexual. People are not always aware of the major causes of their behavior, and thus, for example, a dancer's belief that he would have been gay regardless of his dance experiences cannot be conclusive. On the other hand, it is unlikely to be irrelevant either. Dancers may reasonably accurately recall, for example, whether their first homosexual feelings preceded their first awareness of homosexuality in dance.

#### Prevalence of Gay Men in Dance

Dancers estimated that well over 50% of professional male dancers are gay. Because of our study's methodological limitations, and because dancers' estimates varied widely, our average figure should not be taken seriously as a precise estimate. On the other hand, it does not seem plausible to argue with the basic conclusion that gay men are massively over-represented among professional male dancers. Results of careful population surveys (e.g., Billy *et al.*, 1993; Gebhard, 1972) suggest that perhaps 1–4% of American men have a homosexual orientation. Even the lowest estimate of gay men in dance provided by one of our participants, 25%, is much higher than even the relatively generous rate of approximately 10% applicable to men from Western urban areas (e.g., Johnson *et al.*, 1992).

Our results support the psychological rather than the sociological explanation of the increased prevalence of homosexuality among professional male dancers. (Of course, sociological and psychological factors could both contribute.) Although, consistent with a sociological explanation, participants believed that the dance world is especially tolerant of homosexuality, this has not led to any evident excess in the prevalence of homosexuality among female dancers. Gay men appear to be especially motivated to seek dance careers. Even as children, gay male dancers appear to have differed from heterosexual male dancers in important respects. First, they recalled more feminine behavior and interests. Indeed, the effect size associated with the difference between gay and heterosexual men in the present study, 1.9, was larger than the effect size in typical retrospective studies of gay and heterosexual men, 1.3 (Bailey and Zucker, 1995). Second, gay men

appear to have been more self-motivated to dance than heterosexual men and women, who were more likely to have been encouraged by their parents. Early parental intervention probably explains why heterosexual dancers began dancing slightly earlier than gay men.

Assuming momentarily that gay men's increased presence among professional dancers is better explained at a psychological than a sociological level, what are the responsible psychological factors? Why are gay men so motivated to dance? One hypothesis is that gay men dance in order to be feminine. In other words, gay men dance because women do. An alternative hypothesis is that gay men and women share a common factor in their emotional make-up that makes dancing especially enjoyable. By this hypothesis, gay men's and women's desire to dance have similar causes. A third very general hypothesis is that gay men's increased motivation to dance has nothing to do with their desire to be feminine or their feminine traits. Results of this study cannot clearly distinguish these alternatives.

There are at least two important related issues. First, to what extent is dance (more specifically, Western professional dance and its analogs) cross-culturally identified as a feminine activity? Several of our dancers suggested that in Russia and Latin America, ballet is a less stereotypically feminine pursuit and that as a result, professional male dancers from those regions are less likely to be gay. In contrast, Whitam (in press; see also Whitam and Dizon, 1971) has observed an association between male sexual orientation and dance in several diverse cultures. A complete understanding of the phenomena described herein requires systematic cross-cultural data on both heterosexual sex differences in dance and the association between dance and sexual orientation.

#### **Development of Male Sexual Orientation**

Results of our study generally support those of previous research (e.g., Bell *et al.*, 1981) that male sexual orientation is most often determined early, by adolescence, and is not susceptible to influence by later experiences. If, as some (e.g., Patullo, 1992) have suggested, tolerance of and exposure to homosexuality increases the likelihood of its occurrence, then dancers should be especially likely to adopt a gay identity after entering the dance world. In contrast to this prediction, however, we found very few lesbian dancers, and our gay male dancers appeared to have experienced homosexual feelings long (on average 4 years) before they entered the dance world. The vast majority of the gay men believed that their experiences in dance had no effect on their sexual orientation. Nor did heterosexual male dancers believe that gay men successfully recruited

heterosexual men into homosexuality. As we have acknowledged, memories are not always accurate, and people are often unaware of causes that shape them. There was little indication from our study, however, that the high visibility and tolerance of male homosexuality in dance causes dancers who would otherwise be heterosexual to become gay.

### **Social Relations Among Dancers**

Professional dance is a useful laboratory to study interactions between gay and heterosexual dancers, as well as how dancers cope with any resulting conflict and tension. Our study suggests that few problems occur between gay male and heterosexual female dancers. Heterosexual men did occasionally complain that it was bothersome to them that others assumed that they were gay because of their profession. Furthermore, an appreciable minority minded the sexual advances they had received from gay dancers. Generally, however, heterosexual men appeared to be relatively unconcerned about such problems, and a majority believed there were benefits to the strong gay presence in dance. Thus, our results suggest that conflict between gay and heterosexual male dancers is neither serious nor intractable. It is conceivable, however, that heterosexual men most aggravated by such conflicts tend to abandon their careers and hence may be underrepresented.

### **Conclusions**

Results of this study strongly suggest that gay men are overrepresented among professional dancers. The most likely explanation for this is that gay men are especially interested in dance by the early age when future professionals often begin dancing, and are sufficiently interested to make the strenuous commitments necessary to succeed. Professional experiences did not appear to have influenced dancers' sexual orientations. Our participants did not report that the high percentage of gay male dancers caused them serious harm.

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