The Relationship Between Socioeconomic Factors, Wellbeing, and Homosexuality in the Theatrical Profession

ITAI IVTZAN, PhD and SAM GOODHAND, Bsc
Department of Psychology, University College London, London, United Kingdom

This article relates to the theory suggesting that there is a prevalence of male homosexuality within the theatrical profession that can be explained through male performers becoming homosexual due to their low socioeconomic position. In a questionnaire-based study, the socioeconomic status (SES) is measured of 121 homosexual performers who considered themselves to have been heterosexual at the time of joining the profession, and results are compared with a control group of 121 heterosexual male performers. The experimental group was chosen in this way due to the suggestion of the hypothesis that the change in sexual orientation occurs after the man begins performing professionally. Results were not significant and little difference was noted in any of the parameters of SES, including annual earnings and home ownership. However, a marginal though insignificant increase in SES was noted in the experimental group of homosexual men. Consequently, existing theories for homosexuality and possible reasons for the high prevalence within the performing profession are discussed; the notions of adult performing and creativity being extensions of childhood gender atypical behavior are considered and possible links between sexual orientation and these traits. Elements of genetic heritability of homosexuality are likewise implicated.

KEYWORDS homosexuality, theatre, socioeconomic status (SES), operational sex ratio (OSR)
To be involved in theatre is—ergo—to be feminized, if not downright effeminate. In Britain today, theatre workers are still referred to in the popular press as “luvvies”—a term that almost demands that you lisp as you pronounce it.

—Bottoms (2003, p. 174)

Theories and generalizations regarding homosexuality have been, and still are, rife. For as far back as biblical times and beyond, records of homosexual encounters and behavior have existed and, until very recently, such activity was regarded as a taboo at best, and perverted at worst (Locke, 2005; Wittman, 2004). Yet, despite the last three or four decades finally ushering in more liberal views toward sexual identity and homosexuality merely being viewed as an element of personal choice and being, the root causes of sexual orientation are still poorly understood (Muscarella, Fink, Grammer, & Kirk-Smith, 2001). Advocates of environmental influences (e.g., Ashworth & Walker, 1972; Bieber et al, 1962; Connell, 1998; Stoller, 1969) have sought to uncover social and parental factors that may cause a child or adolescent to become homosexual. Geneticists (Bailey, Dunne, & Martin, 2000; Hamer, 1999; Harrub & Thompson, 2004) have attempted to pinpoint a heritable aetiology, while other factors such as the dominant mother theory (Bieber et al, 1962; Stoller, 1968) and childhood abuse suggestions (Connell, 1992) have enjoyed some acceptance in the scientific world, but far more so in common belief only (Bailey & Bell, 1993). The empirical body of evidence, largely shaped around the 1970s appears to point to gender identity and, thus, in many cases sexual orientation very firmly being formed in childhood, if not during infancy (Zuger, 1998). However, many of these studies were conducted at a time when homosexuality may have been considered a psychiatric issue that may deem some studies contentious; other small pockets of scientific and particularly sociological thought have sought environmental factors that could lead to homosexuality (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997), and it is upon these that this study will be based.

In addition to broader studies that have looked at children displaying behavior atypical to their gender (Roberts, 1987; Zuger, 1998), and the plethora of papers documenting environmental and heritable factors for sexual orientation (Bailey et al., 2000; Bem, 1996; Connell, 1998), a handful of researchers have looked into rates of homosexuality within given professions and social groups (e.g., Badgett & King, 1997); for instance, although not subjected to a great deal of empirical testing, some suggestion has been invoked that the arts and theater pose a highly favorable environment for homosexual men (Whitam & Dizon, 1979). Culturally, this presents us with interesting, but difficult, questions: Are certain vocations, particularly of a creative nature, more attractive or suitable for homosexuals? Might it be that, culturally, arts such as acting and dance are considered effeminate trades and are, thus, enjoyed by gay men who have displayed cross-gender behavior in
earlier life (as will be discussed later)? Or, more contentiously, might these professions influence a man’s sexual orientation?

In exploring the reasons for an occupation being sought more exclusively by homosexual men, or being of a more explicitly effeminate nature, it may be wise to focus on childhood effeminacy and its adult outcomes. As indicated earlier, a considerable amount of research documents the beginnings of homosexuality as gender identity conflict; this is the description of an individual demonstrating cross-gender behaviors—in this case boys playing with girls’ toys, posturing effeminately, avoiding rough-and-tumble play, and may often be reflected in the child’s choice of peer group (Cohen-Kettenis, Owen, Kaijser, Bradley, & Zucker, 2003).

In his article, “Boyhood Gender Identity,” Roberts (1987) interviews a control group of parents with children displaying gender-typical behaviors and compares the data with the results from interviews of parents with boys displaying gender conflict. Some of Roberts’ findings appear fairly conclusive; in comparison with the control group, the effeminate group generally demonstrated far less participation in sporting activity and expressed very little wish to grow up like their father (despite this, presence of a maternal role model is little greater than in the comparison group). Most notably, at follow up of the boys during their teenage years, of 30 previously feminine males on which there was sexual behavioral data, 80% are homosexual or bisexual.

The likelihood of gender identity conflict in boys at a young age manifesting in later homosexuality would suggest in many cases that any substantial postnatal environmental influences can only form a part explanation. Indeed, bar a handful of exceptions (e.g., Connell, 1992) there have been few studies that provide any conclusive suggestion for causative environmental stimuli. Consequently, a genetic link must be considered, and twin studies provide a relatively reliable method for experimental testing. Bailey and Pillard (1991) advertised in gay publications and studied three groups: identical twins, fraternal twins, and men with adopted brothers. The results proved compelling; 52% of the identical twin brothers and 22% of the fraternal twins of gay men were also homosexual. In contrast, around a tenth of the adoptive brothers were homosexual. In conclusion, Bailey and colleagues (1991) suggested that genes for homosexuality are involved also in prenatal neural development and may impact on the masculinization of the hypothalamus during sexual differentiation. In the opinion of this author, it may be irresponsible to view homosexuality as a dichotic manifestation of either a man’s environment or genes, and, thus, along with the compelling evidence documenting a genetic heritability, a genetic susceptibility may be considered that would require a sufficient environmental stimulus to activate, as is the case with a vast range of other phenotypic characteristics.

Thus, the empirical link between childhood effeminacy and adult homosexuality may lead us to suppose that, in many cases, effeminacy and
homosexuality are factors intertwined. As stated above, gay men may seek certain occupations (Badgett & King, 1997), not least within the fields of performing art such as acting and dance (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997; Senelick, 2006). Our focus above on gender identity conflict may be highly relevant to male homosexuality within the theatrical profession as a result of acting and dancing, perhaps, not being a typical exhibition of gender-typed behavior; indeed, in a 1997 paper, “Sexual Orientation and Professional Dance,” many of the gay performers reported being more feminine during childhood (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997). Bottoms (2003) is frank in his description of a common perception of the male performer: “To act, to play a part, to dress up in tights is not properly manly, entailing as it does the ‘unnatural’ construction of a presentational artifice (such ostentation being traditionally assumed to be more ‘naturally’ the preserve of women),” (p. 176). In further evidence against any maternal environmental causality, “heterosexual dancers recalled their parents as more supportive of their dancing compared to gay men’s parental recollections” (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997, p. 438).

The factors detailed above relate to suggestions that gay men may seek professions that they deem favorable to their sexual orientation, or that an occupation appeals to a more effeminate nature that may have also promoted their homosexuality. However, in contrast to these environmental influences is the possibility that, in fact, men may become homosexual as a consequence of their working environment within the performing arts. Ashworth and Walker’s (1972) put forward a thought-provoking view on the prevalence of gay males in the theater industry: The author reasons that, due to the fact that male actors, dancers etc. are generally poorly paid and lack long-term prospects and secure employment, they are not of a particularly high socioeconomic standing. However, an attractive female actress, dancer, or performer generally has better prospects due to their being an attractive partner to professional males in well-paid and respected jobs. Moreover, they will display a more gender-typical role than their male counterparts. Consequently, male performers are left in a mating position without perfect competition and within a far-reduced pool of possible partners, and, as a result, homosexuality becomes an “appropriate and functional response” (Ashworth & Walker, 1972, p. 154). Their argument has been mentioned and debated in a large number of publications (e.g., Murray, 1991; Newton, 2000), while also being criticized (Davies, 2001; Senelick, 1990) and, therefore, this article will investigate the argument and the implications it carries.

This is a controversial argument that supposes that homosexuality can be a direct result of a lack of available opposite sex partners and, thus, leads to what Ashworth and Walker (1972) termed “institutionalised homosexuality” (p. 148). This may suppose that there are parallels between instances of homosexuality found in all-male environments, such as boarding schools and prisons whereby sex boundaries are all but complete, and
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professions and institutions where there are more figurative walls. Their theory is reinforced by some Muslim cultures where men are permitted to marry several wives, and, thus, more prosperous men are able to accrue female partners as a result of their elevated social standing. In these cultures, higher rates of homosexuality have been found in poorer and, thus, less competitive (in terms of mating) men (Schofield, 1965). Ashworth and Walker (1972) state in support of their hypothesis that female strippers similarly exhibit high levels of homosexuality due to the highly unrefined nature of their work, which is likely to discourage the majority of men from seeking their courtship, and they may, thus, find themselves in a similar situation to the male performers.

Within their hypothesis, Ashworth and Walker (1972) place strong emphasis on the sought-after nature of the female performer and, thus, the degree of rigor that, in this case, female performers can apply in seeking a male companion (or in evolutionary terms, defined as “choosiness”; Geary, Vigil, & Byrd-Craven, 2004). They also refer consistently to concepts of sexual selection and animal mating dynamics, as explained below.

As sociologists and not biologists, the authors refer to the dynamics of the theatrical mating pool as the “economists’ model of perfect competition” (Ashworth & Walker, 1972, p. 147); mammalian mating systems, and, thus, the partner choices that the human species make are governed by the evolutionary system of sexual selection, as defined by Darwin (1859). The theory of sexual selection proposes that in a given population, when one sex becomes less available or limited to the other sex, an increase in competition will result between members of the less limited sex. The determinant of reproductive success is fitness, and, throughout varying species, characteristics differ according to what is considered favorable for a potential mate.

Levels and intensity of sexual selection can be affected greatly by the ability of certain groups within the population to effectively control the access of others to potential mates as indicated by Emlen and Oring (1977)—in this theatrical case, culturally successful men (generally outside of theater) control the access to the majority of female performers. Thus, a greater number of potential mates are able to be monopolized by a small number of members of the opposite sex. Emlen and Oring state that the “prerequisite for a monogamous mating system is the economic defendability of a mate. The prerequisite for a polygamous mating system is the economic monopolisability of several mates” (p. 215). The opportunity to monopolize multiple partners is unlikely to occur when resources are distributed equally throughout space as this results in a dispersion of potential mates; however, the potential to gain additional mates is present in the case of a clumping of resources, as some individuals will possess a greater ability to attain them. This applies not least to Western society at large, where there exists a class system dictated by money and status. Consequently, sexual selection is high, and according to the suggestion of Ashworth and Walker (1972), the male performers are subject to far greater competition to secure a female partner.
Highly relevant to Ashworth and Walker’s (1972) suggestion is the concept of the operational sex ratio (OSR): the proportion of sexually active males to sexually active females in a given population at a given time (Emlen, 1976; Kruger, 2009). This provides a good indicator of the degree of sexual selection that will be observed in that mating system; a mating system that displays an equal number of sexually active males and females will have an OSR of 1:1. An OSR of 2:1 will result in an increase in competition between the male members, and an increase in female choosiness, as, in this instance, there are twice as many males competing for half as many females. In the case within the theatrical circle as perceived by Ashworth and Walker (1972), the OSR will be skewed such that there are more sexually active (and available) men in comparison to women, due to the female seeking partners without. We may, therefore, consider OSR to determine the levels of aforementioned choosiness of the less abundant sex, and it appears to be governed strongly by the levels of parental investment of each sex—that is to say, how much of an organism’s time and resources are devoted to childrearing. From a modern perspective, resources of a mate refers to the amount of money they earn and more generally to a Western interpretation of cultural success—that of socioeconomic status (SES). Indeed, Ashworth and Walker state that it is a high SES that the performing female seeks.

The numerous details of mating competition, choosiness, and parental investment provide the basic framework of evolutionary fact and evidence on which Ashworth and Walker’s (1972) hypothesis is based. That said, there appears to be no evolutionary basis for a conversion to homosexuality in the case of some of these favorable traits being absent—that is to say, there appears to be little or no empirical basis for a man becoming homosexual in the event of him not being typically desirable to females. Ashworth and Walker’s hypothesis in full, that we shall test, suggests that women in the performing profession are more selective than men with regards to potential marriage or erotic partners. Consequently women are drawn to successful and affluent men (who in most cases are from outside of their profession), who in turn will seek, among other ideals, an attractive, younger woman. This provides a predicament for our non-elite male performer, who is often receiving poor pay and displaying a considerably less gender-typical role than his female counterpart within a theater company that could at times be considered a separate, insulated mating system due to its mobile nature. The mating of an abundance of sexually attractive females to culturally successful men outside of the industry contributes to an OSR skewed due to the removal of females from the mating pool, and results in an increased intensity of intrasexual selection among males. It is at this point, Ashworth and Walker suggest, that the theatrical male may resort to homosexuality. It is important to note that to date, Ashworth and Walker’s theoretical appraisal appears never to have been empirically tested. Our study shall focus on the social and financial means of men within the theatrical profession in order
to determine whether those of a lower socioeconomic status are indeed more likely to be homosexual. We shall do this by comparing the socioeconomic status of a study group of homosexual male performers, who would have declared themselves to have been heterosexual at the time of joining the profession, with a control group of heterosexual male performers. This experimental group has been selected such that if Ashworth and Walker’s hypothesis is feasible, it would have involved the heterosexual men of lower SES changing their sexual orientation after they began performing in response to their environmental circumstances, in contrast to the consistently heterosexual controls (who according to the hypothesis are of a higher SES). Therefore, it is hypothesized that the mean SES of the experimental group of homosexual men will be significantly lower than that of the heterosexual control group.

METHOD

Participants

The experimental group consisted of 121 homosexual male performers (actors and dancers) who would have considered their identity to have been heterosexual at the time of joining the performing profession (mean age = 24.0 years). Results were compared with 121 heterosexual male performers (mean age 24.7 years); all participants must have been working professionally in theater for at least two years to be included in the study, such that environmental factors would have had sufficient time to exert possible influences.

Material

The Core Social Affluence questionnaire measured parameters included in other studies that had measured SES. These were: yearly earnings, whether the participant owned his house, postcode and educational attainment via number of A levels, and possession of a university degree (Anderson, Sorlie, Backlund, Johnson, & Kaplan, 1997; Lewis et al, 1998; Wardle, Robb, & Johnson, 2002); responses were weighted according to the scale created by Wardle et al. (2002). Their scale awarded one point for certain factors such as car or home ownership. Due to our survey using incremental scales also, each parameter would be assigned a score of between 0 and 10. Consequently 10 points were awarded for home ownership and the possession of a university degree, and 0 if not; 1.25 points was awarded for each income scale increase from “£0–£10,000” (1.25 points) up to “over £50,000” (10 points), and 2 points awarded for each A level from one to five. Consequently, on analysis each participant was assigned an SES score, a greater score denoting a high socioeconomic standing (see Table 1).
Procedure
The first advertisements for the study were placed on a theatrical circular newsletter called Arts News, and on the online noticeboard of the Independent Theatre Council (ITC). The same advertisement was placed on theatrical, performers’, and casting call forums on the Internet networking Web site Facebook. A number of these groups, including Equity UK, UK Theatre Network, and Casting Calls UK, had a membership nearing or exceeding 1,000 members and, consequently, the ad’s viewership may well have been substantial, although no financial incentive was offered. Respondents who were eligible either as study subjects or controls were provided with the questionnaire. This questionnaire consisted of 12 questions confirming that the participant was eligible, asking when the man began performing professionally, and measuring his SES.

RESULTS
A comparison of the mean results of the various survey parameters, for instance, earnings, degree status, and home ownership yields remarkably similar results. The only difference in results worthy of discussion is in terms of yearly earnings, although contrary to our hypothesis, the highest earners were in the homosexual study group. The homosexual male performer on average earns £19,250 compared with a considerably reduced £16,630 for our heterosexual men. The other parameters of home ownership (control 25%, study 20%), A levels (2.93, 2.3), and degree status (0.6, 0.6) displayed minimal differences. Once each participant in each group had been assigned an SES points score, the mean SES score for the study group was 16.7 ($SD = 7.8$) compared with 18.4 ($SD = 7.8$) for the control group. $t_{(38)} = -0.686$, $p = 0.497$. The $t$ test value is, therefore, not significant.

Discussion
In a sample of 121 male, homosexual performers, little evidence was found to support any theory that their apparent transition from heterosexuality to
homosexuality was through any socioeconomic differences, compared with their heterosexual counterparts in the theatrical profession. Consequently, investigations must now focus on existing areas of the literature that may provide a viable explanation for not only the sexual orientation of the homosexual subjects, but also for the prevalence of male homosexuality within the theatrical profession (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997; Senelick, 2006).

Before looking into other experimental theories of homosexuality that may apply, it is interesting to look into some of the cultural parallels that Ashworth and Walker (1972) drew in order to support their own explanations for homosexuality, such as homosexual behavior exhibited in “unisex communities such as boarding schools, prisons and so on” (p. 149). However, the authors of this article would suggest that to compare a theatrical profession providing an abundance of females, with institutions that pose literal concrete barriers between men and the opposite sex is careless and ill conceived. It may be a result of the age of the article that instances of sex between two men are considered as a single all-encompassing entity of homosexuality, rather than looking at possible sexual encounters that are carried out by men who are not necessarily homosexual, but may be assigned the relatively modern term of “men who have sex with men (Stall, Hays, Waldo, Ekstrand, & McFarland, 2000). This same dilemma is explored by Hickson et al. (1994), who reported on male nonconsensual sex: “More recently, and drawing on feminist analyses of rape of women by men, the sexual motivation of male-on-male assault has been criticized. In this understanding, men rape other men for the same reasons they rape women: to assert power, release aggression, and control feelings of helplessness” (p. 282). This statement refers to male sex in a clearly nonconsensual context; Ashworth and Walker’s (1972) paper does not stipulate in the case of his parallel communities whether the sexual behavior is consensual or not, although one would assume it to be such. In this case, a recent study on prison sexual behavior would appear to contradict the suggestion that homosexuality develops within the prison institution: seven of the sample group of young men who had been incarcerated over a long period reported to having had consensual sex during their prison term, six of whom had taken male partners in the community before incarceration (Seal, Margolis, Morrow, Belcher, Sosman, & Askew, 2007).

Given that the vast majority of men contacted to participate in the study had been gay long before joining the theatrical profession, and that those that were not gay initially do not now appear to be due to socioeconomic factors, we were left with two different circumstances to explain. First, why are a seemingly high proportion of homosexual men drawn into the theatrical profession? Second, why have that group of previously heterosexual males become homosexual over their time spent performing? In relation to Ashworth and Walker’s (1972) theories that we set out to test, the latter is almost now a defunct point given that their hypothesis appears to implicitly
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Suppose that many, if not all, of the gay men in the performing industry were not gay to begin with.

In order, therefore, to move away from Ashworth and Walker’s (1972) suggestion of environmental factors at work, an interesting starting point in focusing on retrospective factors among gay performers is provided by Bailey and Oberschneider (1997). Bailey and Oberschneider, through interviews with 90 gay and 90 heterosexual dancers, estimated that on average 58% of professional male dancers are gay. Furthermore, in support of the notion that the profession attracts homosexual or effeminate males, gay dancers were statistically more likely to have displayed cross-gender activities during childhood, and they also reported becoming interested in dancing more independently than their heterosexual counterparts who were more likely to have been encouraged by parents, discrediting further any suggestion of maternal influences.

Although quantitative figures for actors are not available from a very recent study there does appear to be a homosexual prevalence far greater than that of the general population within the acting profession also (Senelick, 2006). We are now faced with a problem in terms of how we interpret this prevalence for actors and dancers; it would seem logical, particularly given that a large proportion of male dancers displayed cross-gender behavior as children (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997), to extrapolate this to their chosen occupation of dancing. However, can we do the same for performers of a purely theatrical nature? Although less explicitly, and as proposed also by Ashworth and Walker (1972) in their appraisal, are actors, like their dancing counterparts, involved in an occupation that is culturally not gender typical? If this is the case, and the men have generally been homosexual for a number of years before joining the profession, we would suggest that this is likely and we must, thus, consider why the theatrical profession is so popular among homosexual men.

Whitam and Dizon (1979) found correlations between dance and male sexual orientation in a number of cultures, though unfortunately there does not appear to be a fairly recent and comparable study focusing only on actors. Consequently, future research focusing on differences in childhood gender-typed behaviors between actors and dancers would be interesting, as would longitudinal studies on children with gender identity conflict and their choice of occupation. Lippa (2001) found strong correlations between sexual orientation and gender or non-gender typed occupation choice. Therefore, for the furthering of our discussion and in the absence of reliable cross-cultural data, we will assume that the acting profession is seen as a somewhat cross-gendered occupation for males, in much the same vein as dancing and other creative vocations. Indeed, Whitam and Mathy (1986) proposed in their cross-cultural book on homosexuality that homosexuals, in contrast to heterosexuals, share traits of creativity and theatrical skills, among others.
Following consideration not only of Ashworth and Walker’s (1972) hypothesis being disproven, and the fact that the majority of performers documented in the literature testifying to having enjoyed cross-gender activities, but also of the many insightful replies of gay men to the study advert suggesting that they had in many cases been homosexual for as long as they could remember, it is necessary to look at the factors that may predispose to gender identity conflict and its aetiology for later homosexuality. Increasingly, it is these differences in gender-typed behavior that have been implicated as correlates of homosexuality in recent research into sexual orientation, and their possible role as an endophenotype, being the genetically inherited part of sexual orientation.

Bem’s (1996) exotic becomes erotic theory is an interesting, if not a little long-winded, hypothesis that gender nonconformity is a biological factor spawned from possibly genetic or neurohormonal causes and, thus, the inherited part of subsequent homosexuality. Bern supposes that the gender atypical behavior ostracizes the child from his same-sex peers, thus, making them exotic, with these feelings of difference gradually becoming eroticized. Bailey et al. (2000) point to Gottesman and Gould’s (2003) recommendation to focus on endophenotypes—certain characteristics that are linked to the primary phenotype of interest, in this case, gender nonconformity in relation to sexual orientation.

Fairly recent research has suggested that a locus at the q28 region of the X chromosome may be involved in male sexual orientation, and has been reinforced by pedigree studies showing an increase in male homosexual relatives of gay men through maternal, rather than paternal, linkage (Hamer, 1999). Pillard, Poumadere, and Carretta (1981) found 36 gay men in the course of other research and interviewed their siblings. Out of a total of 45 brothers of the subjects, 10 were homosexual, a much higher incidence than that of the general population. In their review, Bailey and Pillard (1991) state that there is a persuasive conclusion to be drawn from the literature.

Consequently, when faced with explaining the prevalence of homosexuality within theater, and obviously in society in general, we are faced with a mass of information and possible contributors. In light of this study, environmental factors relating to social status leading to homosexuality would appear unlikely. Indeed, it would seem that a majority of homosexual men displayed cross-gender behaviors (including performers) as children, and vice versa. Due to the early age of onset of such behaviors, and the now increasingly substantial body of evidence against environmental influences, Gottesman and Gould’s (2003) interpretation of an endophenotype of homosexuality appears highly credible. Pair such tendencies with a profession that is creative, in many cases somewhat effeminate, and culturally considered to be open and liberal (Bottoms, 2003), and one gets far closer to understanding the various factors at work. In short, it could be highly probable that young boys become interested in more effeminate activities,
in many cases invariably become gay adults, and their interests culminate in a performing or creative vocation.

Although now the body of empirical research on homosexuality appears to have increasingly shifted its focus from environmental factors (Bailey et al., 2000), there still remain unanswered questions in this area. Notably, a cursory search of literature regarding homosexuality within the theatrical profession yields surprisingly few results. Therefore, this has allowed a wide range of opportunities for research, and given that in some instances environmental influences have been proven as an etiology of homosexuality (Connell, 1992), this research seemed important. An examination of the occupational dimension for homosexual men is an important aspect of future research in this field. As we consider the impact occupation has on any individual’s life and wellbeing it becomes apparent that academic research has to provide more data and information to expand our understanding in this matter. The negative findings of Ashworth and Walker’s (1972) hypothesis as displayed in this study have reduced further the probability of an environmental (and particularly social) causation, but have stressed the importance of further research into occupational choice of homosexual men, and more focused retrospective studies on different disciplines within the performing world.

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