



## Sissies

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*Sissy* as a term for an effeminate male developed from its use as an affectionate variant of "sister"; it then came to be used as a disparaging term for boys who behaved like girls. The American Heritage Dictionary defines *sissy* as "a boy or man regarded as effeminate."

The term is pejorative, and its use as such has powerful effects on male behavior generally. It serves as a kind of social control to enforce "gender appropriate" behavior.

Indeed, so strong is its power that, in order to avoid being labeled a *sissy*, many boys--both those who grow up to be homosexual and those who grow up to be heterosexual--consciously attempt to redirect their interests and inclinations from suspect areas such as, for example, hair styling or the arts toward stereotypically masculine interests such as sports or engineering. In addition, they frequently repress--sometimes at great cost--aspects of their personalities that might be associated with the feminine.

At the root of the stigma attached to *sissies* is the fear and hatred of homosexuality and, to a lesser extent, of women. Certainly, much of the anxiety aroused by boys who are perceived as *sissies* is the fear (and expectation) that they will grow up to be homosexuals.

The stigmatizing power of the term has had particularly strong repercussions on gay male behavior, as well as on the way that gay men are perceived, both by heterosexuals and by each other. Some gay men respond to this stigma by self-consciously adopting stereotypically masculine attributes; others, however, defiantly identify as *sissies* (or their adult cousins, "queens") and exaggerate their feminine traits, at least while they are in the company of other gay men.

### **Sissies and Gay Male Childhood**

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) voted to remove homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. In 1980, however, when the APA published a new Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (DSM III), in place of homosexuality was a new diagnosis, "Gender Identity Disorder in Childhood," also known as "Sissy Boy Syndrome." To be diagnosed with the disorder a child must strongly identify with the opposite sex, and he or she must also behave in ways associated with the opposite gender. Many researchers and activists have taken issue with "Sissy Boy Syndrome" as merely a replacement for homosexuality in the APA's manual and as yet another attempt to pathologize gender variant behavior.

Many gay male autobiographies recount childhood incidents in which the author is singled out as a *sissy* by other children or adults because of perceived effeminate behavior or characteristics. In his memoir, *Young Man from the Provinces* (1995), Alan Helms writes, "I began to realize that I was the worst thing any American boy can be--I was (I can hardly bring myself to write the word) a *sissy*."

Although effeminate behavior in childhood is by no means exclusive to men who grow up to become homosexual, and not all gay men were regarded as *sissies* as children, being perceived as a *sissy* is

nevertheless a common experience among gay males. This suggests some connection between what is typically regarded as "inappropriate" gender expression in childhood and a later expression of homosexuality. Recognizing oneself as a sissy is sometimes the first step in recognizing oneself as a potential or actual homosexual.

Being regarded as a sissy by peers or by family members is most often a painful experience. The insistence on gender-specific behavior is pervasive and overwhelming in most societies, and young men and boys who are effeminate are often severely stigmatized and, sometimes, physically and mentally abused.

### **Sissies and Identity**

The negative attitudes toward sissies in mainstream culture is also carried over to some extent into gay male culture. In a widely broadcast 1996 episode of Public Radio International's *This American Life*, syndicated sex columnist Dan Savage noted the prevalence in gay male personal ads of self-descriptions and descriptions of desired sexual partners that reject effeminacy in favor of "straight-acting/straight-appearing" or "masculine" men.

These terms that explicitly deny the effeminate not only suggest that in the gay male world masculine or butch men are considered more sexually desirable than sissies (at least by gay men who place personal ads), but they also indicate a distaste for effeminacy itself. This distaste may reflect mainstream attitudes, but it is often rooted in internalized homophobia.

Indeed, in the gay male world, behavior and identity based on gender is nearly as polarized as in heterosexual culture. Gay men classify themselves using terms such as "butch" or "flamer," "top" or "bottom," "macho" or "queen." These designations of personal identity are sometimes not only expressions of personal style and preferences, but also a kind of political statement, indicating an individual's place on a spectrum of gender nonconformity.

Within the contemporary gay male community, then, a masculine persona is often more highly valued than an effeminate one. At the same time, however, there is also a powerful counter tradition within the gay male community that privileges effeminacy and celebrates sissies. Moreover, there are many men who find sissies very desirable sexually.

Often the effeminate male is the most obvious homosexual, one who is unable to "pass" as straight in a homophobic society. This inability to hide frequently inculcates admirable characteristics of disarming honesty, hard-won pride, and conspicuous bravery. Although the sissy is sometimes depicted as weak and cowardly, he actually evinces enormous courage simply by defying society's pervasive demands for gender conformity and by enduring the hostility of others. As Savage points out, sissies are often braver and more confident than those who are butch or struggle to appear so.

In addition, the vulnerability of sissies, who are far more exposed to social ostracism than closeted gay men who appear conventionally masculine, often evokes empathy among other homosexuals and creates a bond that transcends different styles and erotic preferences. Indeed, there is a venerable tradition of campy identification with sissies, as epitomized in a kind of gay "sisterhood," especially among those who identify as "queens," whether or not they are themselves effeminate.

### **Sissies and Gay Male Culture**

Heterosexual concepts of masculinity and femininity are often present in gay male culture, leading to anxiety about sissies and their relation to gender and behavior. Not only are they sometimes viewed as unattractive by some gay men, but sissies are also often perceived as presenting unflattering images of the

gay community by other gay males, especially those who have developed a conspicuously masculine persona.

Overtly effeminate gay men are also sometimes perceived as flaunting their sexual orientation, and sissies on television or in film are ridiculed as being stereotypical depictions of gay males. Anxiety about gender can lead some gay men to disparage or avoid sissies.

The gay male adoption of the mainstream prejudice against sissies may be seen most clearly in the deliberate creation of self-consciously "masculine" styles of public presentation by gay men in the post-Stonewall era. In the 1970s, a blue-collar style of dress incorporating jeans and facial hair announced gay men as "masculine." Similarly, the prevalent gay style of the late 1990s co-opted the "all-American" athlete look of Abercrombie & Fitch. Both constructed styles conspicuously avoided the stereotypically feminine or sissy.

Gay male body culture is also a realm in which gay men, through bodybuilding, attempt to remove traces of effeminate or sissy appearance as they present themselves publicly. Similarly, participants in leather culture and the bear movement sometimes create exaggeratedly masculine personas. Often such attempts to achieve "masculinity" are reactions against having been sissies in childhood.

In his essay, "The Myth of Gay Macho," Richard Goldstein takes issue with negative attitudes toward sissies in gay male culture. He argues that there is no such thing as a gay behavioral norm, but since masculine men are more socially acceptable in mainstream culture than sissies, "straight-acting" or masculine behavior is what many gay men choose to present to heterosexual society and each other, in effect forcing themselves to conform to mainstream expectations.

But these negative attitudes toward the sissy risk erasing and distorting gay history. The sissy, after all, has played a significant role in the development of gay male culture, contributing especially to the creation of camp, a theatrical, exaggerated, and knowing critique of mainstream culture, especially its rigid gender roles. Camp is a form of humor that helped a persecuted minority cope with oppression and stigma.

Moreover, many of the stereotypes associated with the sissy, from an interest in fashion and old movies to an obsession with opera and show tunes, are important aspects of what it means to be gay to many homosexuals regardless of whether they identify or are perceived as sissies. The homosexual sissy has in many ways created and defined gay male culture.

Although frequently the butt of jokes, the sissy himself functions as a kind of living critique of masculine norms and expectations, his effeminate affectations affirming that gender is a social construction rather than a biological determinant.

Despite a concerted effort to present a masculine image of gay men in order to further political goals and acceptance by mainstream society, some gay men have worried that conformity may be bought at a heavy price and entail the loss of many distinctive aspects of gay culture. In response, some groups and movements, such as the Radical Faeries, have emerged to resist assimilationism and to embrace the sissy, who is seen as a version of the gender variant sacred outsider.

Historically, glbtq communities have been very tolerant of gender transgressions of all kinds, perhaps recognizing a relationship between sexual and gender nonconformity.

### **Sissies and Behavior**

While there may be some correlation between gender nonconformity in childhood and eventual homosexuality, there is little evidence to substantiate the contention that adult male homosexuals are, in any absolute way, more effeminate than male heterosexuals. Effeminate behavior among homosexuals is

almost certainly a subcultural expression rather than a biological one.

Indeed, many gay men adopt effeminate mannerisms when they come out as a means of identifying and belonging to a particular subculture, and as a way of signaling their homosexuality to others. Young gay men may emulate the "queenly" manners of their elders as a means of creating a particular role for themselves within the subculture.

Determining the degree of effeminate behavior needed to define a gay male as a sissy is subjective because expectations of gender roles shift according to culture, nation, region, and even population density. Behavior deemed acceptable for a straight adult male in an urban center such as New York or Chicago may be considered effeminate elsewhere. What might be regarded as the commonplace attributes of a "metrosexual" (i. e., a heterosexual man interested in fashion and grooming and other stereotypically homosexual pursuits) in a large city could well be seen as evidence of homosexual effeminacy in a rural area.

Gender is performative. Hence, an individual's instances of overtly sissy behavior tends to vary depending on setting and social group. Even the most effeminate individual is usually able to "butch it up" for specific occasions or in particular circumstances. Some gay men present a conventionally masculine appearance in professional situations or in family gatherings, but assume a sissy persona when socializing in gay bars or other places where gender nonconformity is welcomed or at least tolerated.

The fluidity of social behavior makes it difficult to determine if a man is or can be, by definition, a sissy. Moreover, whether a man is defined as a sissy is often decided less by any objective measure than by comparison of his mannerisms with the behavior of others.

## **Conclusion**

The sissy is an important constituent of the gay male community. Although sometimes reviled by both heterosexuals and other homosexuals, the sissy has historically helped define gay culture, and has often used his own sexual and gender nonconformity as a means of questioning the dominant constructions of sex and gender.

Most homosexuals are not sissies (and not all sissies are homosexuals), and many "masculine" gay men resent being thought of as effeminate simply by virtue of their homosexuality. Nevertheless, the sissy has in the popular imagination been seen as the quintessential homosexual. This perception may reflect a kind of imposition of heterosexual binaries on homosexuality (i. e., homosexuals are like women), but it may also reflect the fact that effeminate homosexuals were for many years almost the only visible gay men. They remain the most easily identifiable.

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