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# Urbanization and the Gay Life

JOSEPH HARRY

## Abstract

Data are presented on a national sample of gay bars in the United States. Analysis reveals a diversification of type of gay bars with increasing urbanization. This diversification seems to reflect an increasing heterogeneity of gay life-styles in the larger cities. The reasons for such diversification are the same economic and cultural ones that produce diversification among heterosexual institutions. Such diversity of gay life-styles appears to induce a substantial volume of migration by gays to the larger cities, much as the bright lights of the big city seem to appeal to single heterosexuals. It is suggested that gay and single heterosexual life-styles are similar in many ways and will become increasingly so in the future.

Only within the last fifteen years has there begun to appear within the sociological literature a number of articles on the topic of male homosexuality which are not largely impressionistic. The recent major empirical contributions to this topic have been those of Hooker (1965; 1962), Weinberg (1970), Leznoff and Westley (1956), Simon and Gagnon (1967), Saghir, et al (1969) and Achilles (1967). Their studies have served to document the culture of the gay (male homosexual) world and to describe some of the demographic and age-related characteristics of gays. Given the great methodological difficulties of doing research on gays, all of the studies done to date have been based upon specialized samples, either of individuals located in a few large cities (San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago), or of members of gay organizations (Mattachine Society, Society for Individual Rights, One). The present study reports data on a total sample of 1,980 gay bars in the United States and attempts to relate types of gay bars to urbanization. Thus, the subjects of our study are bars, rather than individuals as such; the present study is more structural analysis than ethnographic documentation. Also, these data constitute the only national data on gay institutions to date.

As several authors have noted (Achilles, 1967; Hooker, 1965), the gay bar is one of the central institutions of the gay world, serving both as a sexual marketplace and as a meeting place for friends.

However, there is considerable doubt about the degree of centrality of the system of bars. Hooker (1965) believes that the patrons of such establishments constitute a "very small part of the whole" set of gay persons, the non-bar going gays preferring to find their primary satisfactions in non-commercial situations. However, more recent data by Weinberg (1970) suggest that bar-going gays may not be a small proportion of all gays and possibly constitute a substantial majority of them. Thus, he found that over half of his sample of members of homosexual organizations attended gay bars and clubs at least once a month and that the frequency of such attendance did not decline much until a man was in his mid-forties. Since the distributions of members of such gay organizations were found to be heavily skewed towards the upper-middle class and towards the old, and since both the upper-middle class and the old are less likely to be bar patrons, it would seem that frequent bar attendance is quite common even among those who are least likely to be bar patrons. Also, among Weinberg's separate sample of Chicago bar patrons, 70 percent were found to attend bars at least once a month. Accordingly, it is suggested that the gay bar is a more central institution among male homosexuals than was originally reported by Hooker and that bar patrons among gays constitute something from a large minority to a substantial majority.

The degree of institutional centrality of the gay bar among male homosexuals, however, probably varies with the degree of urbanization of a community. In small towns of less than (say) 50,000, there is likely to be only a single and notoriously known gay bar, which local gays may be reluctant to visit due to the lack of anonymity characteristic of such towns. Further, the gay bars in such towns (to be shown below) are likely to be not exclusively gay in their clienteles, thus further reducing anonymity. Given these deterrents to participation in bar life in smaller communities, it seems reasonable that gay bars so located are probably less institutionally central in the lives of gays. Consequently, we might expect that gay life in such communities would be manifested more in private parties, friendship cliques, or, perhaps, in simple lonely isolation from other gays, interspersed by occasional visits to nearby larger cities. In contrast, the gay communities of large cities can be expected to be more bar-oriented in their social life.

The smaller cities may also be expected to differ in the nature of the relationships among its gay bar-going clienteles. Because of the

relatively small numbers involved among those who attend gay bars in smaller cities, it is likely that such bar-going gays will know each other to a greater extent than the bar patronizing gays of the larger cities. Additionally, the smaller absolute numbers of gays involved in bar-going in smaller cities probably reduces the size of the sexual market place and the extent of promiscuity. Accordingly, although Simon and Gagnon (1967) have reported great promiscuity among substantial proportions of homosexuals, such promiscuity is probably more characteristic of those living in larger cities. Thus, "a depersonalized character, a driven or compulsive quality of the sexual activity of many homosexuals," as found by Simon and Gagnon, may be relatively lacking among the more personalized relationships between gays in smaller cities.

A further reason why the gay bar may be a more central institution for gays in the larger cities derives from the much greater heterogeneity among gay bars to be found in such cities. As has been well documented (Keyes, 1958), institutional differentiation is strongly associated with city size among normal heterosexual institutions, i.e., large cities possess a wider range of establishments and institutions. A similar process of differentiation (see data below) seems to operate among gay bars, hence the bars of large cities are more heterogeneous in their clienteles and peculiar activities. As a result of this differentiation, it seems likely that most gays in the big city can find among the wide range of bars available a clientele and associated life-style to their liking. Accordingly, within such an institutional structure which offers something for everyone, a high level of bar-going would be a likely result. However, we would expect many gays in the big city to concentrate their bar-going within certain types of bars, rather than scattering their patronage across the full range of gay bar types. Below we present data on how the numbers, types, and patternings of gay bars relate to city size.

### Research Methods

The data to be presented come from the *Guild Guide* (1972) and from the 1970 Census of Population. The former is a directory of all gay bars in the United States plus selected other meeting places of homosexuals. It appears to be a virtually complete listing of gay bars, by state and city. The bars listed are coded by the publisher as to the

types of clientele which frequent them and by the activities common there. These codes distinguish the following ten types of bars: young clienteles, older clienteles, lesbians, blacks, same-sex dancing permitted, clienteles containing significant numbers of hustlers (male prostitutes), leather bars where the customers dress in motor cyclist costume and occasionally indulge in sadomasochistic activities, bars where tie and jacket are customary, and private gay clubs. There are several such guides published and sold to gay persons who are travelling. Obviously, they greatly facilitate the social life of a newcomer to a strange city.

The several guides which are published appear to differ substantially in their accuracy both as to numbers and to types of gay bars in a given city. In order to select that most accurate guide, four different ones were purchased and then compared against the knowledge of two bartenders of gay bars in Detroit, Michigan and Portland, Oregon. Bartenders serve as excellent informants in the gay community because of their communicational centrality. The Guild Guide was determined to be substantially more accurate than the others. Of the 27 bars listed for Detroit, one had been closed approximately a year prior to publication of the Guild Guide and one additional bar had opened recently and was not yet listed. Of the 19 bars listed for Portland, two had already gone out of business. For both Portland and Detroit, the Guild coding of bars as to type seemed to be quite accurate, although some bars were lacking in codes. Four hundred and twenty-six cities were listed in the Guide as possessing at least one gay bar, including bars with mixed gay and heterosexual clienteles. These cities were coded as to both the number of gay and mixed bars and as to whether they contained at least one of each of the ten types of gay bars listed above. City populations were obtained from the 1970 Census. These 13 variables, plus several scales built out of the 13, constitute the basic data which were analyzed.

### Results

Table 1 presents the percentages of cities with at least one gay bar by city size. As can be seen, it is necessary for a city to have at least 50,000 in population before it becomes likely to possess at least one such bar. An examination of the names of the cities below 50,000

TABLE 1  
Percent of Cities with At Least One Gay Bar by City Size

	City size (in thousands)						
	—9	10—49	50—99	100—249	250—499	500—999	1000+
%	3	7	39	74	100	100	100
N	18,310	1,890	236	98	29	20	6

population which possess a gay bar reveals that many such cities tend to be either resort areas or close to a quite large city. In the former category of resort areas fall such places as: Aspen, Colorado; Saugatuck, Michigan; Provincetown, Massachusetts; Orcas Island, Washington; Jackson, Wyoming. In the latter category are such places as Sausalito, California and Fire Island, New York. Thus, the two conditions of resort status and proximity to a very large city help to explain many of the deviant cases of small towns with gay bars.

The first row of Table 2 gives, by city size, the percent of cities which have only gay bars patronized by mixed, as opposed to purely gay, clientele. As was suggested earlier, the phenomenon of all gay bars being mixed is most common among the smaller cities. However, there also appears to be a tendency for small cities possessing only mixed gay bars to *not* be either resort cities or be close to a very large city. Thus, those small cities which have only mixed gay bars will tend to be unspecialized and autonomous communities within which the gay population has not yet reached a sufficient number to support its own separate institutions. After the appearance of the gay bar as an institution at approximately 50,000 population, the number of such bars increases steadily with city size. The correlation between population and number of bars is 0.78, among those cities which possess at least one such bar.

As can be seen from Table 2, the types of gay bars differ in their commonness among those cities which possess at least one gay bar. Those bars which are rarest, such as Black or Leather gay bars are almost exclusively limited to cities of over 500,000 population. Those bars which are most common—bars with young clientele or those with same-sex dancing—tend to be somewhat more evenly distributed among cities of varying sizes. In general, larger cities usually have a great diversity of types of gay bars, the correlation between city

population and the number of types of gay bars a city contains being 0.53. Although the community of gay bars becomes more diverse as city size increases large cities seem to retain the mixed gay and heterosexual type of bar, the correlation between population and the ratio of mixed to all gay bars is a barely significant  $-0.10$  ( $N = 426$ ; two-tailed  $p = 0.04$ ).

Since the data of Table 2 seemed to show a measure of cumulativeness, Guttman scaling was attempted. The bar types of Table 2 form an acceptable scale if only the following types are included: Young, Dancing, Hustlers, Older, Dressy, Leather, and Black. The types occur in the scale in the order here listed. The scale has a coefficient of reproducibility of 0.95, a minimum marginal reproducibility of 0.81 and a coefficient of scalability of 0.72. A somewhat less adequate scale is obtained if the type Impersonators is included, appearing between Dancing and Hustlers. In this case, reproducibility is 0.93, marginal reproducibility is 0.81, and scal-

TABLE 2  
Percent of Cities with a Given Type of Gay Bar by City Size  
Among Those with At Least One Gay Bar\*

Bar-Type	City size (in thousands)							Total percentage
	-9	10-49	50-99	100-249	250-499	500-999	1,000+	
All Mixed	42	38	31	11	0	0	0	27
Young	34	33	47	67	90	95	100	50
Dancing	24	18	34	58	81	95	100	38
Lesbian	7	3	19	25	58	85	100	20
Impersonators	16	8	12	16	32	75	100	18
Hustlers	0	5	9	16	39	65	86	14
Private Club	4	6	9	12	29	50	86	12
Older	6	4	4	10	29	50	100	11
Dressy	6	4	5	10	29	50	86	11
Leather	2	3	1	0	13	45	57	6
Black	0	1	0	3	3	35	86	4
N (100%)	55	147	93	73	31	120	7	426

\* The 1970 census lists only six cities over a million, although seven are indicated above. The difference arises because the Guide listed all Los Angeles non-central city bars as in the metropolitan area. This area was here coded as a separate city with over a million population. The difference between the 31 cities listed above as being 250-499 thousand population and the 29 listed by the census is due to rounding error.

ability is 0.64. The correlations of population with these two Guttman scales are 0.48 and 0.50, respectively.

### Discussion

Three considerations would seem to be the major determinants of where in the course of urbanization a particular type of gay bar will appear: the size of the available gay clientele type; the bar-going propensities of each type; and the propensities of each clientele type to attempt to segregate itself into separate bars. We take up these considerations in the order here listed. The size of the available gay market is a fairly obvious variable explaining the appearance of several of the bar types at different stages of urbanization. Earlier it was observed that a city must be of roughly 50,000 population in order to support a gay bar of any type. Similarly, a city must be very large in order to support a Black gay bar, since Black gays are a minority of a minority. Additionally, since leather costumery and the associated practices of sado-masochism do not appeal to many homosexuals, a city must be of substantial size to support such a bar. It would seem that a large part of the cumulateness of the scales described above derives from the association of these scales with city size in that the numbers of the available clientele types determines the cumulateness. Similarly, the lack of complete cumulateness of these scales is to be explained by the non-proportionate distributions of the various types among cities of different sizes, e.g., Blacks and Impersonators.

While the numbers of gays of a given type in a city is a limiting factor determining whether a bar of that type can make an economic go of it, the bar-going propensities of the type will serve as a variable intervening between numbers of gays and the existence of a bar. Thus, bars catering to the younger gay are much more common than those catering to older gays. Presumably, the reasons for this are due to the older gay's reduced frequency of bar attendance, as reported by Weinberg (1970). The greater rarity of Older than Younger gay bars may be also partly due to a tendency of the older gay to more widely distribute his bar attendance among a variety of bar types, including Young gay bars. Thus, as the gay ages, he may diversify his life-style activities. The strong bar-going propensities of the younger gay also determines the early appearance of same-sex dancing in the

above Guttman scales. Since dancing is mainly an activity of the young, most gay bars having same-sex dancing are also Young bars.

The tendency of certain types of gay bar clients to segregate themselves from other gays will normally serve to hasten the appearance of that type of bar in the course of urbanization. Such segregation is exemplified in the Dressy gay bar. The clientele of this type of bar is typically older (30 to 60 years old). As such, the Dressy bar is a sub-type of the Older bar. Also, the clientele of the Dressy bar tends to be heavily middle or upper-middle class and occupationally relatively successful. Given their social status and age, they voluntarily segregate themselves from other gays so as to avoid the frenzy of the Young bar, possible exploitation by persons of substantially lower status, and to find companions with similar cultural interests. Unlike the clients of the Dressy bar; hustlers who operate from bars must necessarily be characterized by a fairly low degree of self-segregative tendencies, since if hustlers kept to themselves, the market would soon consist of many sellers but few buyers. Given the low degree of self-segregativeness of hustlers, they tend to distribute themselves among those types of lower status bars where they are tolerated, such as the Impersonator bar or the Older but not Dressy bar.

The above described tendencies toward segregativeness among certain types of gays suggests that Simon and Gagnon (1967) partially overdrew their portrait of gay culture as an impoverished culture. They argued that the gay community is primarily organized to facilitate access to persons with similar sexual tastes, "but the similarity of their sexual interests does not eliminate larger social and cultural barriers. The important fact is that the homosexual community is in itself an impoverished cultural unit." However, to the extent that the set of gay bars of a large city possesses a variety of types of bars for the gay to choose from, individuals of similar age, social status, and culture will be able to meet socially for purposes of sharing interests other than purely sexual ones. Thus, although the clientele of the Dressy bar may visit lower status bars for purposes of impersonal sex, it will also be able to share common cultural interests beyond the purely sexual with gay persons met at more selective bars.

The differentiation of gay bars which occurs with increases in city size probably provides a more satisfying life for gays in the larger

cities. The variety of available gay life-styles permits a closer fit between the sexual, social, and cultural tastes of the individual gay and the opportunities for expression of those tastes. Not only does the large city offer opportunities for finding friends with similar tastes, the size of the sexual market makes sexual contacts more readily available. However, since gay sexual relationships tend to be impersonal, non-friendship relationships, the institutional differentiation of gay life in the big city tends to segregate friendship situations from sexual ones. The evident cultural and sexual attractions of gay life in the bigger city seem to induce a substantial migration of gays from smaller to larger cities. Thus, Schofield (1965:130) found that 31 of his 50 non-institutional, non-patient English homosexuals had moved to places bigger than their places of birth compared to 18 out of 50 heterosexuals. By such migration the relatively isolated gay may be able to replace the impersonality of small town life (for him) with the interpersonal warmth and cultural affinity of gay life in the big city.

### Conclusion

The above data and interpretations show that homosexuals are subject to much the same economic and cultural influences and processes as heterosexuals. Gay institutions diversify with urbanization in the same ways that heterosexual ones do. Consequently, the prediction of much of the behavior of gays can be best accomplished by employing the same variables as used in the prediction of heterosexual behavior. Since gays are only "being gay," i.e., engaged in uniquely homosexual behavior, a fairly small proportion of the time, their similarities to heterosexuals would seem to far outweigh their differences.

Only in the behavior sphere of primary relations do gays seem to differ moderately from heterosexuals. For various reasons of personality, social exclusion, or labelling, gays create a segregated set of institutions. As shown above, these institutions achieve their greatest elaboration in the large cities to which gays tend to migrate. However, in respect of flocking to large cities and there developing an array of social institutions, gays seem fairly similar to single heterosexuals. In view of the fact that a substantial, if unknown, proportion of gays remain in a permanently "single" state, i.e., unattached

to another gay on a relatively permanent and intimate basis (Saghir, et al., 1969), gays may be more like single than married heterosexuals in terms of degree of promiscuity, home ownership, occupational and geographical mobility, etc. Indeed, to the extent that a permanent or extended single state is becoming more normatively acceptable among heterosexuals of both sexes, single heterosexual culture may in the future acquire more similarities to gay culture than to heterosexual married life-styles.

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