

Appearance and the Body: A Study of Gender Identity Variances within the Lesbian Community

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Lesbians are often described as being more content with their bodies than heterosexual women are and less likely to engage in a rhetoric which values physical appearance as a marker of one's status within the community. Despite this, lesbians are not immune to the prevailing discourses about how a woman should look. These women reinvent what a lesbian looks like through clothing and other appearance-related markers. This study closely examined the correlation between body shape/size and gender identity as well as how lesbians view their bodies. Many themes were echoed by participants in this study concerning how each of them negotiates the tensions between their sexuality, gender identity, and heteronormativity.

Much research has been conducted concerning eating habits and body image satisfaction among heterosexual women. Most studies concerning lesbians and body image compare the body image and the eating habits of heterosexual women to that of lesbians (Lenney, 2002; Heffernan, 1996). The vast majority of this research, however, treats lesbians as a unified group (Striegel-Moore, Tucker, & Hsu, 1999), overlooking the reality that lesbians vary in their gender identity among other identifying factors. To better understand the relationship between body image and shape/size as it relates to gender identity, this study analyzed how the gendered identity of lesbians affects their body image as well as how lesbians negotiate heterosexualized norms about gender and sexual identity.

Gender identity in this study is used as a description of the participants' subscription to, or rejection of, traditional gender roles in America. While gender identity is sometimes equated with biological sex, it is important to note that these are separate concepts. A simplification would be

that gender identity is not necessarily only masculine and feminine; that is, it can be described as a continuum, with each end representing the binary and the middle serving as an endless “gray area.” In the lesbian community “butch” and “femme” are used as identifiable gender identities. Again, however, there is ample gray space on this continuum as well. This binary is generally used to describe two opposite gender identities used specifically in (although not limited to) the lesbian community to describe one’s subscription to either traditionally masculine (butch) or feminine (femme) qualities. For example, butch lesbians may be described as wearing men’s clothes, playing a dominant role in relationships, or adopting other traditionally male or masculine qualities whereas femme lesbians would embody an exaggeration of the traditional roles of women and femininity. Butch and femme identities are not simple replications of male and female heterosexual couplings although there are some similarities. Instead, they can be viewed as a challenge to the generally accepted ideas about gender identity equating biological sex. Alison Eves (2004) conducted a study in the United Kingdom concerning butch and femme gender identities and queer theory, and concluded that “Butch performances trouble the naturalization of heterosexuality in a more obvious way through their visibility, by disturbing the connection between biological sex and gender identity” (p. 489). She also noted that lesbians who identify as femme are troubling traditional heteronormative roles by performing their exaggerated feminine gender in the lesbian community.

Another way to view these roles is as a replication of an imitation; that is, all gender identities can be explained as imitations since there is no original (Butler, 1991). In Butler’s essay she explains that heterosexuality is referred to as an original pairing of which lesbians are seen as a replication, particularly when it comes to butch/femme identities. Butler argues that, in fact, neither sexuality nor gender can claim to be the original, and thus heterosexuality and heteronormative roles cannot be copied as the original model (1991).

It is important to note that in this study heteronormativity will be used to mean the set of values and gender roles associated with heterosexual couples as well as heterosexual social norms as a whole. As in any other critique of social institutions, heteronormativity must also be noted as a generally accepted set of values, norms, and roles.

Review of the Literature

Current knowledge about general body image is extensive but most often focuses on the typical anorexic. “It is commonly assumed that eating disorders and compulsive body issues are contained within a white, up-

per-class, heterosexual [framework]” (Lenney, 2002, p. 1). There is little research on the relationship between the gendered identity of lesbians and their perceived body image. When discussed at all, lesbians are usually described as being more content with their bodies and less likely to engage in rhetoric that values physical appearance as an acceptable marker of one’s status within the community (Atkins, 1998; Gordon, 2004). However, lesbians are not immune to the prevailing discourses about what is considered the ideal female body. Within the lesbian community, gender identity spans a wide range and, thus, those at each end of the continuum may have different concerns about the shape of their own bodies and the eating that contributes to its formation.

Although little research has been conducted within the lesbian population concerning body image and/or eating habits, a few studies have documented evidence of body-related issues among lesbians (Heffernan, 1996; Bergeron & Senn, 1998). Sari Dworkin (1998) argues that lesbians are just as likely as heterosexual women to experience body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating since they are exposed to the same culturally motivated ideal of female thinness. This side of the debate in lesbian body-related literature follows the line of reasoning that lesbians are subjected to a heterosexual ideal of what a woman should look like. Karen Heffernan (1996) concluded that lesbians suffer from bulimia nervosa at the same rate as their heterosexual counterparts. Heffernan claims that “gender ‘trumps’ sexual orientation” (p.134) and thus all women, regardless of sexual orientation, are equally as likely to experience some form of an eating disorder. Heffernan (1996) observed that lesbians suffer from binge eating more often than heterosexual women but that ideas about the body, including weight and dieting issues, are very similar among both heterosexual women and lesbians. Such studies support the assertion that lesbians are as vulnerable as heterosexual women to eating disorders and, presumably, societal expectations to attain a usually impossible feminine (read small, thin, compact) body.

However, other researchers question this assertion, noting that lesbians have higher body satisfaction (and thus presumably suffer from eating disorders at a lower rate) than heterosexual women due to a more flexible standard of beauty among their community (Brown, 1987; Gordon, 2004). Gordon and Striegel-Moore et al. (1999) observed that lesbians are less likely to diet due to the social unacceptability of such practices within the lesbian community. The latter study also reported that lesbians are heavier overall, have a lower desire for thinness (than their heterosexual counterparts), and have higher than average weight ideals (Herzog, Newman, Yeh, & Warshaw, 1992). Laura Brown (1987) concluded that lesbians are more satisfied with their appearance and more accepting of differing

body weight and shapes. Liahna Gordon (2004) also observed that “the lesbian community promotes a norm in which women are satisfied with their bodies, whatever their shape or size” (p. 349). In her study, Gordon interviewed a small group of college-aged lesbians about how their body image perception is affected by their individual interactions with sexual partners and whether such relationships improve overall body satisfaction. Gordon concluded that lesbians receive continual feedback and positive reinforcement about their attractiveness both from their partners and at community events such as women’s festivals. Here, Gordon believes, is where lesbians create their alternative construction of beauty, one that is more expansive and accepting than traditional ideals of femininity and a woman’s role.

Sara Auerbach and Rebekah Bradley (1998) conducted a study of ten lesbians concerning the perception of their bodies and how they do or do not identify within their sexual orientation. They found that women who identify strongly with other lesbians or bisexual women are more comfortable with their bodies and their sexuality. Unfortunately, this study does little to offer an investigation into the pressure many lesbians may feel to conform to opposite or traditional gender stereotypes and roles.

Because gender and gender roles have been linked to body shape and size (Bordo, 1993), it is important to consider gender identity when investigating body image within the lesbian community. One study considered gender identity on a scale from “highly feminine” to “highly masculine” in conjunction with body satisfaction within the lesbian and bisexual women’s community (Ludwig & Brownell, 1999). The researchers concluded that masculine or androgynous women are less likely to suffer from body image dissatisfaction due to less rigorous appearance standards but that feminine women “reported lower body satisfaction” (Ludwig & Brownell, 1999, p. 89). This study also considered the relationship between affiliations with feminist groups versus identification with women’s sports in an effort to tease out any differences, without any conclusive result.

Building primarily on the research of Ludwig and Brownell, the current study explored, with a qualitative research approach, the relationship between gendered identities and the body as well as heterosexualized and lesbian-specific gender identity norms and roles. The current research looked at how lesbians of differing gendered identities negotiate or accept their bodies and their perceptions of shape and size by focusing on two main research questions. First, how do lesbians negotiate their body shape and size with their gendered identities? Secondly, what other factors influence lesbians’ choices in gendered expressions and representations?

Method

Qualitative Research Design

In order to better understand how lesbians perceive their bodies, I chose a qualitative approach outlined in M.Q. Patton's *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (1990). Qualitative methods allowed me to use in-depth interviews with participants as a way to build rapport before entering into difficult questions about gender identity and perceptions of one's body. Findings in qualitative research develop not from volumes of questionnaires, but from observations, interview transcripts, and field notes. My research involved not only what the participants said, but also how they were dressed, their body language during the interview, and the overall picture of each participant that can emerge only through a qualitative approach.

Once data are collected, qualitative research demands many hours of analysis of transcripts, field notes, etc. Typically, the researcher will read over the transcripts one to two times before developing categories of analysis (Patton, 1990). Cross-case analysis was employed in this study. Categories were used to compare different participants on the same questions or topics by noting similarities, differences, and unique or shared views. In addition to cross-case analysis, another mode of analysis was used in this research, individual case analysis; this involves compiling field notes, correspondence, and transcripts for each individual participant in order to develop a larger portfolio of the woman's ideas about her body and gender identity.

Interview Protocol

I began constructing an interview protocol by referring to the research questions my research would attempt to answer. Next, brainstorming produced thirty to forty questions to comprise a first and second interview. I decided to use two separate interviews (see Appendix for interview protocol) to better establish rapport before delving into highly personal issues. I also used this model in order to have time to study initial responses to the first set of interview questions to better understand how to approach more difficult questions in the second meeting. After brainstorming, I reviewed many other interview protocols from qualitative research models including one dissertation study on lesbians in higher education (Ballard, 2005). Questions were then organized into "first interview" questions (e.g., Tell me about your family? or university?) and "second interview" questions (e.g., Do you play gender roles in daily life? Or relationships?). After a

process of elimination and combination, the final list was condensed to approximately twenty-five questions in order to optimize the time I had with each participant. All participants were advised to avoid providing any identifying information during taping and were told that we could skip any question at any time during the interviews.

Each participant signed and stated that she understood an Internal Review Board-approved informed consent statement. After transcription, all tapes were destroyed to help insure confidentiality, and signed informed consent statements were sealed and stored in a separate space from the transcripts. It is also important to note that while direct quotations from participants are used throughout this paper, their names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected via qualitative interviews during the summer of 2005 for this study focusing on body image within the lesbian community, looking particularly at gender identity. Participants self-identified as lesbians and were over the age of 18. Participants were solicited through announcements posted on listservs, mass electronic mail messages that were forwarded by group leaders at higher education institutions (all groups were affiliated with the Gay/Lesbian/Queer student population), and word of mouth. The internet proved to be most effective for contacting and locating leaders in these groups. Nine participants were interviewed two times each at their chosen locations in two large-size and one medium-size city in the Southeast. Most participants were solicited in connection to several universities in these cities; however, the sample was representative of more than just the Southeast. Participants in this study represented diverse regions of the United States.

Each semi-structured interview was a maximum of two hours long and was audio taped to be transcribed. Typically, I had one to two days between interviews to conduct preliminary data analysis on the first interview with a participant before continuing to the second. Four sets of interviews allowed additional time to transcribe data fully since access to the participants was not limited by distance, whereas traveling made such in-depth analysis impossible for the other five participants. The first interview for one participant was destroyed due to an equipment malfunction, but field notes were compiled to recover some information.

Once all interviews were finished and transcribed, final data analysis began with several initial reads of the transcripts and field notes. Codes were developed and combined using qualitative analytical methods by tracing themes and recurring ideas (Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Next, an individual case analysis of each participant was compiled using both field notes and interview transcripts. Final analysis consisted of continuing two forms of analysis: case and cross-case. For the cross-case analysis, codes were collapsed into broader themes, e.g., “family issues with sexuality” was combined with “the coming out process.” These broader categories provided the basis for analyzing thematic similarities and differences across participants. Individual case analysis was used to establish unique patterns and ideas for each participant.

Results and Discussion

Negotiating Heterosexualized Gender Norms: Recurring Themes

While this study sought to investigate eating, body image, and gender identity, a wealth of information was presented in transcripts and field notes. Many themes were duplicated throughout the interviews with different participants. However, as lesbians, many of them voiced differing concerns about their bodies and gender identities. Interestingly, a similar discourse about the tensions between heterosexualized gender roles and how each individual perceives and shapes her body was shared by many of the participants in this study. As a result, this analysis discusses the themes voiced by many participants about appearance and the body as well as the negotiation of lesbian-specific gender identity spaces.

“The girl next door”: **What a lesbian looks like.** Providing an authentic representation of any group is impossible. Lesbians are no exception. Often, it is easier to define what a lesbian is not supposed to look like, that is, feminine or “girlie.” Take Kate for example; “I guess I could like put on a show. I could get all dolled up and be like this pretty girl with nice things. And that wasn’t people’s typical idea of what a lesbian was.” As Kate explains, being feminine or “girlie” is not something usually associated with being a lesbian. Her reasons for getting “all dolled up,” on the other hand, are intrinsically connected to heterosexual ideas about what a woman should look like. Mena describes the “typical lesbian” or stereotypes associated with lesbians by stating “People have this stereotypical image of what a lesbian looks like ... like a football player ... or she almost looks androgynous, like a man, very butch.” Her observation about the stereotypical lesbian as being “manly and butch” was typical for this sample. However, defining sexuality via gender identity becomes a problem for lesbians. That is, “reading” lesbian sexuality is often connected to appearing feminine, masculine, or androgynous. Looking feminine becomes a way to look heterosexual and many lesbians seem to go down

this path in an attempt to be read as straight. Locating this desire within a heterosexual gender identity framework, Tina discusses what kind of representation of lesbians is useful in the larger society. She says, “[With gay marriage and being in the public eye] you want to have a representation that people can read and that they can understand. But also something that’s popular.” That is, what can heterosexuals “read” as lesbian without being threatened? Again this balancing act that lesbians play, both individually and as a collective, illuminates the tensions that come along with negotiating these difficult identifying markers. This contradiction means that lesbians must appear feminine (i.e., heterosexual) in order to be an acceptable representation of a woman.

Many lesbians negotiate the boundaries by ignoring them. While it is difficult to succeed in this, many participants expressed their rejection of categories and labels both inside and outside the lesbian community. Tina explains that lesbians often go through a second “coming out” when learning the language, actions, and appearance of an assumed gender identity. She asserts:

It’s like you come out, so you’ve identified yourself as a lesbian. Well, are you butch or femme? [The labels] that are supposed to be really liberating are really, like structured ... and very difficult to maneuver around in.

Tina is expressing what many participants explained as their rejection of categories within the lesbian community. These often constricting identities are placed into two categories: butch and femme. Butch lesbians are expected to assume masculine (or male) appearances and roles. Femmes are often expected to not only look feminine, but to also exaggerate normative ideas of femininity. For some, this notion is very liberating in that these femme women are allowed to almost ridicule heterosexual ideas of femininity; however, it is only one half of the binary. That is, it is difficult to negotiate space between butch and femme. While some find identifying as a lesbian extremely liberating, the margins still exist within this larger minority group. As Elizabeth explains, many lesbians find “not looking like a lesbian” to be equally liberating:

[The categories and labels] I reject [them] because I don’t like categories. [I’m more of a] “girl next door lesbian.” The person you meet and you don’t necessarily know right off the bat if they are a lesbian and then they shock you later on when they drop it in a conversation.

For Elizabeth, appearing like “the girl next door” is a way to effectively negotiate her gender identity. She, like many of the participants, wants to blend in with the larger community around her. By blending in, lesbians are not trapped in a sort of appearance contrary where the larger expectation of looking feminine (and thus heterosexual) must be negotiated with a “lesbian look.” This rejection of the traditional lesbian image, whether that is butch, androgynous, or femme, means that they can simply become a constant and stable staple: the girl next door.

“Giving off a ‘straight’ vibe”: Clothing, readability, and appearance. Appearance is undeniably connected to clothing choices. For lesbians, this connection becomes much more complicated. Not only do clothes indicate wealth, style, or locale; they now become a way to define one’s gender identity and, in some cases, one’s sexuality. Every single participant in this study cited clothing as a marker of gender identity and, consequently, sexuality. While this is not the only reason lesbians choose certain clothes, it was agreed that all of them are read on some level by the clothes that they wear.

Some participants expressed a desire to look feminine enough, specifically, to pass as heterosexual. Many of the lesbians in this study, at one point or another, subscribed to heterosexualized ideas about gender identity and sexuality in an attempt to achieve this appearance. Clothing is integral to this process. Tina explains, “the roles that the clothes [play], appearing feminine is all that matters. It’s not really if you are or not, it’s as if you look like a girl, so you must be a girl.” In this case “looking like a girl” is central to maintaining not only a feminine appearance, but a heterosexual one.

Other participants explained why looking feminine through clothing choices is essential to looking straight and thus appeasing heterosexuals around them. Rena elaborates:

I have to give off a ‘straight vibe’ ... because I wouldn’t want to be seen as a bad influence [for my sixteen and under softball team]. [In] the ‘lesbian handbook’ ... you know, one of the rules. You just don’t make other people uncomfortable.

This societal pressure to appear not only feminine, but heterosexual, puts many lesbians in a difficult position in terms of expressing their gendered identities outwardly. As Rena explains, she must not only appear heterosexual, but must also behave in a feminine manner.

The wrong side of the store: The role of men's clothing. While clothing is a large part of gender identity for lesbians, many of the participants in this study choose to wear men's clothes for various other reasons. Some expressed that their body shape called for the cut of male clothing. Michelle said, "some of the women's clothes I can't wear because they are too tailored and I have broad shoulders. So I get men's shirts and they fit better." Some women also discussed choosing clothes that were loose and did not boldly express a feminine appearance as a way to negotiate an identity outside the boundaries of butch and femme. They talked about this style of dress as not only being physically comfortable but also as being a better representation of their identity as well.

In terms of clothes, I always find myself shopping on the male side of the store ... I just feel more comfortable wearing that clothing because it doesn't "cut you out" as much [as women's clothes]. (Tina)

I guess comfort for me is physically comfortable like nothing that is too tight or restricting on me. The advantage [of men's clothes] is comfort. The disadvantages are that people who stare, you get looks. (Rena)

Carving a space out between the roles of butch and femme is not an easy task for lesbians. However, these participants often said that their choice in clothing and appearance reflects the versatility of their gender identity. Elizabeth explains, "My clothes are more a reflection of the way I am feeling. Am I feeling like being feminine and girlie, or am I feeling like I just want to plop down and have a beer."

"You're not dykie enough": The experience of feminine lesbians. Many women in this study felt that they are not identifiable as lesbians. For different participants this had varying impacts on their identity. Elizabeth felt pressure to conform to the butch/femme binary in some ways. She expressed a need for lesbians (and heterosexuals) to be able to read not only her sexuality but also her gender identity. She explains, "We tend to classify people and so there is more of that with other lesbians. Are you butch or femme? They are like 'we are surprised you are a lesbian because you don't seem dykie enough.'" This questioning of another's sexuality based on her gender identity is not unusual among lesbians, as Elizabeth suggests. The invisibility of feminine lesbians extends beyond the heterosexual community; lesbians, too, tend to perceive feminine women as less likely to be homosexual. The majority of lesbians in this study indicated

that feminine lesbians are often viewed as “not real lesbians.” Mena also is concerned with readability as a lesbian:

[Being more feminine] I think people would question my sexuality more frequently than if I was more butch. They assume I am a straight girl just being curious or playing and then going home to her man.

One explanation for why feminine lesbians experience ridicule and continuous questioning of their sexuality can be connected to negotiating heteronormative roles and ideas. Many lesbians see feminine women as ones who occupy a space with heterosexual privilege: they pass. Many of the participants in this study expressed a need to appear feminine in one situation or another, so it follows logically that the community as a whole may collectively reject women who appear to be buying into the stereotypes of what a woman should look like. What is interesting about this is that most women either try, or have tried, to appear feminine on one or more occasions, even lesbians. The same women in this study who admitted to appearing feminine in one situation or another (in order to pass or escape ridicule) also said that they have participated in the marginalization of feminine lesbians on the basis of their gender identity. That is, feminine women are pushed to the margins of the lesbian community because they are often seen as an embodiment of the feminine ideal that lesbians are supposed to challenge with their appearance and their sexual preferences, despite the fact that “everybody does it [attempts to appear feminine].”

Daughter, sister, girlfriend: Conforming to the roles. Family interactions present a very touchy predicament for many lesbians, and definitely for the ones in this study. All of the nine participants expressed some change in behavior around either their families or old friends when (or after) coming out to them. Particularly, some participants in this study acknowledged the fact that they often alter their clothing and other markers of their gendered identities to avoid conflict. This was especially true for those participants who identified more on the butch or androgynous side of the gender spectrum. While many of them acknowledged that they wanted to express their gender identities outwardly, they altered that expression in many ways in order to align their gender identity with their female sex.

I change my behavior when I am around my family. I dress differently sometimes because I know my dad doesn't like me to wear the same clothes he does. And I sort of try to think about what my [heterosexual] sisters wear... but I

am more comfortable wearing baggy jeans and a baseball cap. (Brenda)

Many lesbians also feel pressure to conform to limited binary gender roles in their relationships with others. While they may reject categories of butch and femme (one partner playing the masculine or male role and one playing the feminine or female role) on an intellectual level, most participants admitted to playing the roles at one time or another:

I mean I'm not going to be a hypocrite and say that I haven't [played the roles]. I mean obviously I do fit those roles, and I have. In theory it's really good to talk about and makes great conversation, but like in terms of a relationship, I've played [them]. I mean it would be great to be this ultimate subverter of categories, but you know, I'm not. I pretty much play into them too. Like when I go to gay clubs or bars I tend to dress more masculine. I've never dressed like a girl any of the times I go out. (Tina)

Tina's desire to "dress ... masculine" when going to lesbian spaces is a clear marker of her own gender identity. She considers herself well in the middle of the gender spectrum and believes her gender identity is fluid and always changing; however, while around other lesbians her gender identity seems to become more important in terms of appearance and clothing. Many of the lesbians in this sample were prone to err on the side of heterosexual norms when negotiating their own identities. One example is that of Rena and her profession:

I have, you know, girlie-girl clothes ... in the major I am in we have to meet with a lot of companies. So I do have to dress business appropriate. But still, I'm in a pants suit, not a sun dress.

For Rena, appearing feminine is a compromise of her identity. She describes dressing "business appropriate" but does not want to lose her identity, i.e., she does not want to wear feminine clothes but does not want to appear too masculine either. Another example of asserting one's identity is Kate's account. She states, "For a family event ... I did have it in my head that I wanted to be on the feminine side as much as I could. And when I am around my family, I want to continue to be." In Kate's case, she identifies strongly as a feminine lesbian. However, her ideas about appearing feminine in front of her family are not grounded in her identification

as a femme lesbian. Instead they are heterosexual ideas derived from her family's own beliefs about what a real woman looks like. Despite her identification, she still feels the need to reinforce that with her heterosexual family at all times. Maintaining her feminine role may also be a way for her to challenge the stereotypes those around her have about lesbians while also asserting her own identity.

Butch, femme, and versatile: Lesbian bodies. Body size and shape are important to many lesbians when it comes to locating a gendered identity. Not only do heterosexual norms affect everyone, but ideas about feminine and masculine body shapes are also important. Within the lesbian community, formulating a readable gender identity takes many forms. For Kate, her feminine identity is partially shaped by her perception of her own body. For Michelle, her masculine body type makes her feel more comfortable with her gender identity.

I think all people come with a body type. There is a body type that just can't pull off a tank top. I wear and have a feminine shape, a feminine hairstyle. (Kate)

With my body being more masculine and dominant I can put on that personality. (Michelle)

Gender identity is something that was described in many ways by different participants. Some said it was "fluid and ever changing," while others said it was an "expression of what's on the inside." For most of these participants, body shape and size was a factor in deciding markers of gender identity. Kate's observation above about body shape contributing to one's clothing choices, and thus, gendered identity, was echoed by most of the participants in this study. In Michelle's case, her masculine body plays a key role in the versatility she has as a self-identified butch lesbian. It is clear that body shape and size are important markers in the lesbian community in terms of how one is perceived (through sexuality and gender identity), and thus changing one's gender identity, in spite of body shape, is difficult for many lesbians. Some of the participants also struggle with negotiating prevailing discourses about what masculine and feminine look like and their own bodies.

I think that because I am generally a small person that people assume that is more feminine. That puts me in the feminine role just by default. If I try to play up myself to

be more masculine I have to do that by the clothes that I wear. (Brenda)

I don't think I can fit into the high femme category. Probably not the butch one either because it seems like their physical characteristics would be stronger, whether it would be strong muscles or strong features. There are so many extremes that I can't fit into. Like we were talking about wearing ties and stuff. I wouldn't want to wear one now because I wouldn't want it to sit out on my stomach. I would like for it to be very structured looking like a typical model, a male model. If it's not going to look like that then I don't want to express that sort of male gender. [Men's clothes] they don't accommodate for hips ... so if you are smaller, [men's] clothes would fit better. (Anne)

Brenda's issue is with others assuming she is feminine simply because she has a petite frame. Her solution to expressing her gender identity in a more readable way is to do that by wearing masculine clothes to play up that side of her gender. For Anne, her weight becomes a limitation to expressing her gender in the "extremes" she discusses. These extremes refer to the butch/femme dichotomy. Anne expresses a desire to conform more closely to a gender identity located on the butch side of the spectrum. Despite her "inner gender," Anne was more likely to wear a skirt than pants, or to put on make-up as opposed to going natural. Anne's explanation of these behaviors, despite her gender identity, was complicated. Anne describes her gender as incomplete because on the outside she has a curvy feminine appearance, while on the inside she feels more dominant, more butch. What is most telling here, however, is that she links her body appearance to her inability to successfully portray any particular outward gender identity.

Many of the participants in this study called their lesbian bodies versatile in one way or another. This versatility of gender identity and body shape was seen as a liberating experience to this sample. Tina explains, "I'm pretty comfortable with the way I look. I couldn't say that for a long time ... [with] the clothes that I wear I know there is a lot of versatility." This type of versatility and movement within gender categories provides room for lesbians to escape traditional notions of butch and femme. Some participants described their gender as empowering, especially when some fluidity exists:

I feel most comfortable with myself when I am fit and strong. To me it seems like a fine line. If you look intimidating you can avoid being bothered, but if you look too butch you could run into problems. (Michelle)

The fine line and versatility that both participants discuss above are indicative of the fluidity of gender identity. Over half of the participants described gender and identity as being fluid and changing concepts, both globally and individually. Gender as being fluid, or providing the means to put on and take off differing gender identities, and gender as a social performance, were also themes in many participant responses:

I think a lot of it [gender roles] is performative. I think most of it is performative. It is very easy to get into roles and to just continuously play them ... either you're butch or femme and if you identify as butch then you shouldn't do things a femme does. I mean people get confused when they can't read you. [Being a lesbian] is supposed to be liberating. (Tina)

[Gender], it's fluid. You could be really feminine one day and be very androgynous the next. (Anne)

I think everybody is a mix of masculine and feminine characteristics. (Brenda)

The performative gender that Tina mentions is clear within this sample of participants. They (like everyone) perform their gender identity on various levels. What is important about Tina's observations is that while heterosexualized gender norms are prevalent in all of society, lesbians can and will distort them by creating lesbian-specific gender norms. The exaggerated form of these norms is butch and femme, and an androgynous approach is also offered as a choice. Again, versatility comes up when discussing gender identity. Anne and Brenda's explanations of gender were echoed by most participants. Even those who do identify strongly with one end of the gender spectrum or the other, acknowledge ample space in the middle.

Conclusions: Reading the Body, Reading Gender

Gender identity can be described in many different ways by different lesbians. Because the participants in this sample represented a wide range of ideas about gender identity, body satisfaction and size, and what

a lesbian body represents, conclusions are difficult to formulate. Some observations, however, are clear.

First, lesbians are constantly challenging what women should look like. While lesbians are not completely outside heteronormative ideas about gender identity and roles, they do a good job of making their own rules. While the participants in this study acknowledged appearing feminine for one reason or another, usually linked to passing, this versatility in their appearances is most interesting. Negotiating gender and identity is something that lesbians must do every day over and over again. Negotiating what lesbians look like is something more complex and ever-changing according to the participants in this study. Lesbians take all shapes, sizes, and gender identities. Locating a single (or even hand full of) representation(s) of lesbian women is impossible.

Lesbians conform to and reject roles just like everyone else does. These women are not completely immune to playing roles in their relationships with others. Just as married people carve out individual and shared space (usually linked to sex roles), so do lesbians. While a complete explanation does not exist for the reasons why lesbians sometimes occupy the polar spaces and roles of butch and femme, it is clear that many lesbians do so. The current sample was generally well educated, and all of them had been in some type of long-term relationship in which they admitted to playing some kind of gender role.

Participants in this sample “did” their gender in a variety of ways. Part of this study examined the role of body shape and size in the formulation of gender identity and its performance. Shape and size often influenced or informed participants’ portrayal and perception of their gender identities in a myriad of ways: that is, some participants felt limited by their bodies while others described their bodies as a perfect match for the way they identified on the gender spectrum.

One thing is very clear: lesbians individually shape and determine their roles in society, relationships, and their gendered identities. Some participants expressed body size and shape as being factors in this determination, while others stated they just “felt right” wearing gender-specific clothes or adopting mannerisms and markers of one gender or another. No matter how lesbians are formulating their gendered selves, it is important to note that each individual chooses her own path. Lesbians are not an exception to this rule. The only difference is that lesbians are already on the outskirts of mainstream society, and they must work from a set of already well-defined roles within the larger, heterosexual community. Negotiating these tensions and working out an authentic lesbian body, appearance, and experience is up to each individual to do so as she pleases.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

A. Open-Ended

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Tell me about the University/College you attend?
3. What have been your experiences at this institution as a lesbian-identified student?
4. Tell me your coming out story or about the first time you came out to someone (family, friend, other).
5. What factors have made your sexual identification, as a lesbian, harder?
6. Easier?
7. Do you think lesbians sub-categorize themselves? How?
8. Do you fit into those categories? If so, how? If not, why? How do you reject them?
9. Define gender.
10. Do you feel like there are times you must change or alter your normal behavior? Where and when does this take place?
11. What problems do you think lesbians face that are similar to heterosexual women? Which are different?

B. Semi-Structured

1. Describe your physical appearance.
2. How does your appearance reflect the sub-category you fit into or your rejection of them?
3. How does your appearance reflect your sexuality/orientation if at all?
4. What influences your choices in attire, hairstyle, and your self-presentation?
5. Do you look for cues or clues to identify other lesbians?
6. How comfortable are you with the way you look? Why?
7. What factors influence how you feel about your body?
8. Tell me about your eating and exercise habits.
9. What importance does physical appearance play when looking for a potential partner?
10. Do you feel more or less comfortable about your body after coming out?
11. Have you ever struggled with what might be considered an eating disorder? If so can you talk a bit about that experience?
12. Some research indicates that lesbians are less likely to suffer from an eating disorder or low body esteem. Do you agree? Why or why not?