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Butch, Femme, or Neither?  
What Owning These Identities Means

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Masters of Art in Sociology

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by  
Joey Cooter  
May 2014

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## ABSTRACT

Butch, Femme, or Neither?

What Owning These Identities Means

by

Joey Cooter

Despite an increased awareness of the diversity of gender identities, butch and femme roles continue to be viewed as lesbian stereotypes that reinforce rather than challenge heteronormativity. This study explores how self-identified butch and femme lesbian women define themselves and how their identities influence their sexual/romantic relationships. Interviews were conducted with 20 lesbians who identified as butch, femme, or neither to learn what these identities meant to them. While the interviewees saw their identities as unique, a number of similarities emerged. This thesis analyzes the themes of conflict with a gender binary model, stereotypes of butch and femme, replication of heterosexuality, labeling stigma, family support, and finally romantic/sexual relationships. Women identifying as butch and femme attempt to defy the societal norms of what gender identity and relationship behavior should look like, yet they may unintentionally reinforce heteronormative gender roles.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Butch and femme identities and gender roles are essentialized as characteristics of lesbians (Ardill and O' Sullivan 1990). Butches are viewed and represented as masculinized women with short hair, dressed in masculine clothing, and usually found under the hood of a car, while femmes are viewed and represented as women with long flowing hair, smoky eye makeup, and seductive clothing, just waiting to catch the eye of some poor unsuspecting butch. However, the terms butch and femme are far more complex than simple aesthetics. With that being said what do the terms butch and femme mean within the LGBTQ community<sup>1</sup>? Are the terms butch and femme simply adjectives or are they gender identities? If they are gender identities, what does it mean to embrace an identity that carries negative connotations?

The purpose in conducting research on the subject of the butch and femme identities and the sexual dynamic between the two is an attempt to discover what exactly is butch and what exactly is femme and whether there must be a butch/femme pairing to sustain a relationship. This study permits a better understanding of LGBTQ experiences and relationships and how they are similar to or different from heterosexual relationship experiences. Any additional information that can be used to increase knowledge and awareness of LGBTQ issues can assist in teaching tolerance as a better educated public translates to a more accepting public.

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<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The lesbian identities of butch and femme have been a topic of constant debate within LGBTQ circles. The butch/femme dynamic has been described as both a conformist “imitation of heterosexuality” (Faderman 1991:217) and as a key challenge to the dominance of heterosexuality (Davis and Kennedy 1993). Davis and Kennedy also describe it as a “deeply felt expression of individual identity and personal code guiding appearance...a system for organizing social relationships...working-class lesbians’ only means of expressing resistance to the heterosexual world” (1992: 62). While the butch/femme dynamic may seem to reproduce heteronormative relationship behavior, it also defies the traditional patriarchal model of heterosexual relationships because the intimate partners are the same sex.

Given this contradiction, there is a significant gap of knowledge on the subject of LGBTQ people and their experiences in comparison to what is known about individuals who fit the heterosexual societal norm. Based on the literature I found on the LGBTQ population and their experiences, most studies lumped LGBTQ data into only one category and then compared it to heterosexual data. Studies that compared the data between LGBTQ groups were rare. In one such study, Worthington and Reynolds (2009) explain the importance of taking a closer look at group differences in the LGBTQ “community.” They explain that most research compares heterosexuality and homosexuality as a dichotomy. Research that delves into sexual orientation usually forces the participants to label themselves, boxing them into one category or another such as gay, lesbian, or bi-sexual. Worthington and Reynolds (2009) point to plentiful literature that focuses on different aspects of sexual orientations and identities, suggesting that there may



be more to sexual orientation subgroups than is generally believed. In other words, when research studies are designed with restricted categories, they ignore the complex aspects of sexual identity.

Worthington and Reynolds's (2009) research focused on within-group differences of 2,372 self-identified lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and heterosexual individuals. Using the Sexual Orientation Identity Scale; The Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale for Heterosexuals; and the Measure of Sexual Identity Exploration and Commitment, they were able to identify 12 clusters of sexual orientation. Diamond (2005) conducted research that falls closely in line with Worthington and Reynolds by explaining how important it is for researchers to examine alternative criteria that will allow for an accurate categorization of sexual identity. Diamond's longitudinal study of sexual identity categories explains that as self-identification becomes more complex and more accepted within society, researchers studying sexual orientation have begun to question the overall practicality of studying categories such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual due to the mounting evidence of non-exclusivity in sexuality, particularly among women. Likewise, Worthington and Reynolds explain that sexual self-identification has become increasingly complex as terms become outdated and discarded while new terms emerge and are added to the list of increasingly possible identities such as heteroflexibility, metrosexual, and bicurious, to name a few (2009).

The creation of new labels shows that sexuality is flexible and identities are changing, so it makes sense to conduct a longitudinal such as Diamond's. Her goal in conducting the longitudinal study examining the sexual characteristics of those who changed their categorization of sexual identity<sup>2</sup> and those who did not was to find within and between group differences in the women who identified as lesbian, bi-sexual, and heterosexual. She found that nothing

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<sup>2</sup>For example, changed from lesbian to bi-sexual.

exceptional separated the identities of the women whose identities remained constant from those that were evolving, as well as further diversity of categories. Looking at literature concerning the developing categorizations of sexual identity, it is not realistic to narrow down a standard image of what it means to be a lesbian, as sexual identity is fluid and complex. Placing the emphasis on finding a “standard” lesbian obscures the diversity within sexual identity categories. Otherness is defined by those in power, the dominant group. In an effort to maintain their dominance, dominant group members define and claim positive attributes that magnify their powerful position and assign negative attributes to members of subordinate groups that reinforce their inferior position, a process called “oppressive othering” (Schwalbe et al. 2000). In order to change people’s structured ideas of sexual identity, there must be a willingness to look at “otherness” in new and critical ways. This is problematic because it is always much easier to look at others critically before or rather than oneself, especially with such complex and taboo topics as sexual identity.

In order to better understand the differences between terms I provide definitions for sex, gender, and gender identity, butch, and femme. Sex has been defined by the biological status of male and female; it includes attributes such as sex chromosomes, hormones, reproductive structures, and genitalia (American Psychological Association 2006). Gender can be understood as an achieved status: that which is constructed through psychological, cultural, and social means (West and Zimmerman 1987:125). Thus, gender explains how people in our society categorize individuals based on stereotypical behaviors attributed to an individual’s physical sex, and gender identity can be explained as how people may feel themselves to be and act, which may or may not be the same as their physical sex. The Oxford Dictionary (2013) defines “butch” as manlike or masculine in appearance or behavior, typically aggressively or ostentatiously so, and

defines “femme” as a lesbian or effeminate male homosexual who takes a traditionally feminine sexual role, often contrasted with butch. While I have included a definition of butch and femme recognized by mainstream heterosexual society, it is important to note that my aim is to allow the experiences of the individuals who self-identify as such to provide a more useful definition of the terms.

For a better understanding of the terms butch and femme it is important to explore a brief history. Butch and femme communities within the LGBTQ world began to take shape after WWII, when it became more acceptable for women to wear pants and other more traditionally masculine apparel (Levitt and Heistand 2004). Levitt and Heistand (2004) explain that while the lesbian gender constructs of butch and femme were distinct from conventional ways that heterosexuals performed gender, they reflected heteronormative behavior. This included the emphasis in maintaining a similar dichotomous or binary gender system. The expectation was that butch women would appear and behave in a manner approximating the masculine images of the time and femme women would express themselves outwardly in an exaggerated feminine manner.

At the time when men and women were very much expected to fit into the normative gender boundaries, lesbian women found it safe to present to the outside world as either feminine or attempt to “pass” as male. Levitt and Heistand (2004) explain “passing” and how having the ability to pass allowed many butch women employment opportunities and safety from harassment. Butch and femme have been defined as attributes reflective of clothing style, haircuts, and makeup. However, this does not allow for the fluidity of sexual identity because many times people exhibit an external persona that is not in line with their internal attitude or personality.

Since WWII, sexual orientations and gender identity expressions have grown more diverse; however, the ownership of either the butch or femme label seem to have remained static in terms of behavior and expected roles. Ardell and O'Sullivan (1990) question whether the labels of butch and femme are constricting or liberating for lesbians. By entertaining the idea that the non-feminine woman is a signifier of butchness, the absolutist relationship between sex and gender become unbalanced. Judith Butler (1990) explains that if we look at gender as being completely independent of sex, gender then becomes free of constraints. Freedom from constraints or expectations means that masculine and feminine are not attached to biological sex. Therefore, masculine and feminine could symbolize both biological male and female without the negative connotations attached because gender norms are socially constructed and have no ties to biological sex. However, while the idea of gender as being free of constraints is ideal, this is unrealistic in a patriarchal society because the gender binary itself is a consequence of patriarchy (Johnson 2004). The complexities of these terms and what they mean to the individual varies. Do butch or femme refer to physical appearance alone? Do these concepts relate to how masculinity and femininity are enacted? Appearance does not dictate behavior; an individual can look one way and feel and act another. There is a lot of pressure on women who identify as lesbian to choose a butch or femme label for themselves and the underlying current of choosing a label may well be a reflection of the expectation to look like what you say and feel you are.

Earlier I wrote of historical lesbian gender constructs and the similarities with heterosexual genders of the time. One such similarity was the emphasis on maintaining a dichotomous gender system. Based on these similarities, some common assumptions about butch and femme identities are that these expressions of gender are an attempt to replicate the binary that buttresses heterosexuality, and the idea that a butch must be matched with a femme in terms

of a sexual or romantic relationship. In response to ideas about the butch/femme dynamic being heteronormative, J alas (2005) claims that despite the fact the dynamic appears similar to heterosexual relationships, it is in fact specific to the lesbian community, and that heterosexual ideas of roles and gender do not determine the identities or relationships of butch and femme individuals. Nestle (1987) echoes the same sentiments in explaining that the butch/femme dynamic is an erotic statement made by two women together. There is butch sexuality and femme sexuality, both unique forms of sexual expression. Nestle rejects that they mean a woman playing a man or a woman playing being with a man. She explains that these unique forms of sexual expression are lesbian specific sexuality, having both a historical background and cultural meaning. Regardless of how it looks, Nestle and J alas argue that it is not a copy of heterosexuality but rather an expression of sexuality between two women that is distinctly lesbian. J alas (2005) also describes butch and femme as being a “second order” gender category, serving as labels that help to manage how some lesbians experience masculinity in not belonging to a primary gender. As second order, the labels of butch and femme are secondary to the initial label of lesbian, a label within a label. By arguing that butch and femme are second order gender categories, J alas (2005) and Nestle (1987) claim that butch or femme identities are not a replication of heterosexual behavior but rather a new and unique way of being female.

In reference to the sexual preferences of butch and femme women, Heistand and Levitt (2005) conducted an examination of how gender expression intersects with sexuality in butch and femme couple relationships. They explain that butch and femme women were seldom recognized and understood within mainstream culture. Butch women did not have their gender recognized and femme women did not have their sexual orientation recognized. What grew out of this lack of recognition was flirting that stressed the differences between the two, which

became a validation of these identities for butch and femme women. By the putting emphasis on one another's differences through flirtation, butches and femmes encourage each other's gender identities. This in turn helps to increase their conviction in their own gender identity. In order to better understand how the butch and femme gender roles are expressed and experienced on a personal level and within a relationship, important patterns and experiences of women who self-identify as either butch or femme must be examined.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODS

This study explores how self-identified butch and femme lesbian women describe their identity formation and how their identities influence their sexual/romantic relationships. I conducted interviews with 20 lesbians who identified as butch, femme, or neither.<sup>3</sup> Their ages ranged from 20 – 52.<sup>4</sup> The interviews were conducted in person, all located within a 100 mile radius of Johnson City, TN. I initially sought self-identified butch or femme women to participate in the study. However, five participants identified as neither butch nor femme.<sup>5</sup> I contacted individuals I knew within the community, providing my contact information and a brief explanation of the study. For the additional participants, I relied on a snowball sample, asking these contacts to pass my information on to people they knew. Once potential participants contacted me, I explained the purpose of the research and the interview process in detail. From this point I worked with the participants' schedules to make the interview process as convenient as possible for them.

The interviews consisted of 18 questions that covered the respondents' perceptions of the labels butch and femme and what it meant for them to identify as a butch or femme woman.<sup>6</sup> The questions were structured to allow comparisons between participants while capturing each unique story. I chose to collect data via in-depth interviews rather than a questionnaire as a better way to examine the experiences of my participants. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to an hour depending on how talkative the respondent was. I audio-recorded the interviews and gave

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<sup>3</sup> Seven women identified as femme, eight women identified as butch, and five women identified as neither.

<sup>4</sup> Average age of 37.7

<sup>5</sup> While the study was geared at women who self-identified as butch or femme, based on interest I chose to include women that identified as neither. I felt it would be a good example of the fluidity of sexuality and gender expression.

<sup>6</sup> When I realized I had respondents who did not identify with butch or femme I tailored questions 4, 5, and 6 to accommodate this new sample.

each participant a pseudonym. Before questioning began, participants were informed that they were welcome to decline to answer any question they felt uncomfortable with and were also welcome to end the interview at any time. Working with the grounded theory approach allows the researcher to capture emergent themes as she/he analyzes the data and develop a theoretical framework (Charmaz 1983), each interview was transcribed in full and then uploaded into the qualitative analysis program Nvivo. The transcriptions were then analyzed using an open coding system. I created a list of themes based on a read through of my data and notes taken during the interview process. Once I assigned these codes, I reanalyzed the transcripts to account for additional emergent themes and patterns as well as any overlapping themes. As Charmaz, who works in the “grounded theory” tradition explains,

Codes serve to summarize, synthesize, and sort many observations made of the data. By providing the pivotal link between the data collection and its conceptual rendering, coding becomes the fundamental means of developing the analysis....Researchers use codes to pull together and categorize a series of otherwise discrete events, statements, and observations which they identify in the data. (Charmaz 1983: 112).

A socio-demographic section was also administered and this information is shown in Table 1, which provides the following information: pseudonym, age, identity,<sup>7</sup> race, education level, income bracket, political view, religious affiliation, and involvement in LGBTQ activist groups. I felt this information would complement the ethnographic portion of the study and allow for more complete comparisons to be made between participants. The demographic portion was administered after each interview was completed with the understanding it was not a necessary component to the interview. Each interview is complete with the demographic portion as no respondent declined to complete this component.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

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<sup>7</sup> Identity as in butch, femme, or neither.



Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Race	Education	Income	Political View	Religious Affiliation	Activism
Sara	28	F	B	SC	15-24,999	L	P	N
Kelly	24	N	W	SC	10-14,999	VL	P	N
Ann	28	F	B	CD	15-24,999	L	P	N
Brandi	22	N	W	SC	10-14,999	VL	NA	S
Chris	20	N	W	HS	10-14,999	VL	NA	R
Donna	32	B	W	HS	10-14,999	VL	NA	R
Wendy	46	B	W	HS	65-79,999	L	P	R
Lilly	42	F	W	CD	65-79,999	L	C	R
Lynn	47	B	W	SC	25-34,999	M	P	N
Julie	52	B	W	SC	80-94,999	C	NA	N
Tucker	50	F	W	SC	35-49,999	C	P	N
Mary	42	F	W	HS	25-34,999	M	NA	N
Teresa	35	B	B	HS	25-34,999	L	P	N
Robin	35	B	W	CD	50-64,999	VL	NA	R
Susan	26	F	H	CD	35-49,999	VL	C	N
Amy	23	N	W	CD	25-34,999	VL	NA	N
Diane	39	F	B	SC	25-34,999	L	P	N
Rebecca	25	N	W	CD	35-49,999	L	NA	S
Linda	52	B	B	SC	25-34,999	M	P	N
Marie	33	B	W	CD	65-79,999	L	P	N

*Notes:* Gender Identity: B=butch, F=femme, N=neither

Race: AI/AN=American Indian or Alaskan Native, A=Asian, B=Black, NH/OP=Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, H=Hispanic, W=White

Education: LHS=12th grade or less, HS=high school or GED, SC=some college/AS degree/technical school, CD=college degree, GS=Graduate school degree

Income bracket: Noted in dollars for household

Political views: VC=very conservative, C=conservative, M=moderate, L=liberal, VL=very liberal

Religious Affiliation: P=Protestant, C=Catholic, J=Jewish, M=Mormon, A=Atheist/Agnostic, O=Other, NA= No Affiliation

Activist Group Involvement: N=never, S=seldom, R=regularly, VA=very active

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

#### Conflict Between Identity and Gender Binary

In conducting this study, I sought to gain a sense of what it is like for women who embrace or reject the labels of butch and femme, to discover how these gender identities evolve, and learn what effect they have on romantic relationships, if any. As the study progressed, I found that there is also an area between butch and femme that many lesbian women identify with. While it was clear that each respondent had a unique story and experience, a number of common themes emerged. In this chapter I focus on the differences in the themes and patterns that emerged between the participants.

Traditionally gender reflects the socially constructed markings of masculinity and femininity. Individuals in society show the division between genders through attributes that have been conventionally assigned to males and females. But not everyone claims an expected gender identity. Respondents spoke of their gender identity as who they “naturally” were, and explained that they portrayed masculine or feminine traits even before they realized that there were gender expectations. Respondents also explained that while they did not know the terms butch or femme, let alone lesbian, growing up, they did understand and know the terms masculine and feminine. In fact many used the terms interchangeably. As Wendy explains: “I was butch before I even knew what that meant. I have always been very masculine, that is just how I felt comfortable. I never felt comfortable expressing myself as feminine that just seemed so wrong to me, for me.” Similarly, Ann states: “Yeah, I have always identified as feminine, I am a twin, and you just interviewed my sister. I am a not quite as girly girl as my sister, but I love makeup, I love dressing up and looking good.”

Regardless of how the respondents used the terms, they all felt that the way they self-identified was the core of their personality. Because the terms masculine and feminine are socially constructed descriptions of behavior, traits, and qualities deemed acceptable for males and females, some struggled with their conflicting identities. As Robin explains,

Like I said I have always been butch. I just struggled with that because I felt I was going against my beliefs, against how I was raised. How I felt about myself hasn't changed, but to others it might seem it has because of my appearance changes. I was definitely more feminine in appearance before I became completely comfortable in my own skin.

Constructed views of normative gender behavior do not account for who people feel they are. Women who identified as femme had an easier time accepting their gender identity because they reflected expected gender norms. It is important to note that gender identity is not an indicator of sexuality; many femme respondents had an easier time accepting their gender identity but a difficult time accepting and coming to terms with their sexuality.

### Stereotypes of Butch and Femme

Many respondents believed that, for them, characteristics of butch and femme are not rigidly defined because these categories reflect an intrinsic feeling. However, they described other people's ideas about butch and femme as influenced by stereotypes about how to look and act:

Well I am not sure you have to have certain characteristics, but I think that there are clear guidelines that society would have you follow. I think that society would have Butch women being aggressive and tomboyish... (pause) you know, the one to take care of things, fix things. I think for Femme women they are the "lipstick." You know look straight, dress up, take care of the house, not aggressive. I don't think this is what has to be, but I will say I see this a lot, maybe it's what people think they need to do. (Sara)

While the respondents did not always agree on the characteristics of butch and femme, they did agree that the imposed stereotypes shape the characteristics. Some common stereotypes of butch and femme include: butch women want to be men, all butch women pack,<sup>8</sup> are “top” only, meaning they provide the sexual pleasure for their partner but do not receive, they have only masculine interests, and are always masculine in appearance with masculine mannerisms. While femme women are thought to be experimenting, not having found the right man, and if partnered with a butch, they really just want a man, Ann explains,

I don't think you have to act one way or another, I think it's more what other people expect. I think the expectation is that butch women fulfill the “man's” role so they should be aggressive, take care of things as in provide, and fix things. I think Femme women are expected to dress up, take care of the house, and be the obedient housewife. I think people expect that traditional male/female balance or else they can't make sense of it.

The majority of respondents echoed this sentiment, explaining that actual characteristics of butch and femme were stereotypical expectations. “I feel like it can't be just about two women loving each other and being attracted to each other, that people feel there has to be some ‘male’ piece to it” (Chris). While the terms butch and femme have some shared meaning, it is clear that respondents had a varied understanding of the terms and what they mean. It seemed there are no concrete definitions of butch and femme. One respondent pointed out that they may not even apply exclusively to lesbians:

Lesbian is what I am, but butch is who I am. I feel that lesbian is the label you get if you are attracted to women because people always have to put a name or label to something. But the butch and femme thing is just who you are, it's more a part of you. I mean if you think about butch and femme these labels are not just for lesbians; these can also describe straight people or gay men. Some people are just more masculine or more feminine regardless of their sexual orientation. (Teresa)

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<sup>8</sup> Wear a prosthetic penis.

Although identifying as a butch or femme relates more to feelings and actions, social forces still influence one's identity. Of the women I interviewed, those who identified as butch did appear to present themselves as more stereotypically masculine and those who identified as femme appeared more stereotypically feminine. While respondents were quick to explain that being butch or femme was more than exhibiting heteronormative behaviors, they acknowledged that outward appearance many times reflected this:

I know people look at me and think “there goes one of those butch lesbians” and I know that as a woman who identifies as butch, people expect me to dress the way I do. But it's not because it's the expectation, it's because it's what I feel comfortable wearing. I guess in some ways my outward appearance legitimizes the stereotype of butch women, but stereotypes are so ingrained in our lives I don't think there is any way around it.  
(Rebecca)

#### Not Choosing Sides

While most respondents identified as either a butch or femme lesbian woman, there were five respondents who identified as neither. These women tended to present themselves in a more androgynous manner but did explain that depending on their mood they may dress more stereotypically feminine or masculine. Kelly explains, “You know I don't identify as either. I like masculine things, I like feminine things, but I suppose I am most comfortable with things that are a mix of the two, somewhere in between.” Just as the respondents who identified as butch or femme felt that the way they self-identified was the core of their personality, so did the women who identified as neither. “I have always been a tomboy, it doesn't bother me to wear feminine clothes or masculine clothes, but I guess I am most comfortable in unisex clothes and that's just always been me” (Amy).

Women who present in an androgynous way are automatically assumed to be masculine because they present no clear cut stereotypical markers of masculine or feminine. Thus, in the

absence of displaying stereotypically feminine markers, women are automatically assumed to be butch. It is important to note that the absence of stereotypically feminine attributes cannot be used as an indicator someone's of gender or sexual identity. People may come to feel that they cannot fulfill conventional gender expectations. They may not embrace the idea of choosing a label, but instead want to enjoy the flexibility of navigating both masculine and feminine roles in new ways,

I mean I wear makeup and I dress up and like typical girl things, but I don't really feel like I am really femme or butch. I think I am somewhere in between the two and I really hate to be labeled, labels really bother me... I want to be known for who I am not what people think I am (Brandi).

Chris echoed Brandi's distaste for labels,

Wow, I hate those labels, I don't identify as either ...I think I am just me. I guess you could say I am in the middle somewhere if you need to know exactly. But I wonder a lot why people are so worried about fitting into a label that may not fit them well at all. I mean I am feminine, I am masculine, I am difficult and just one label wouldn't work for me. I think as a whole people are so worried about meeting some standard created by society and they lose who they really are by doing that. People may not understand me and think I am confused because I choose not to label myself, but I am just fine ...no confusion here!

People have views of themselves that do not fit in a tidy fashion into the social concept of gender. For those lesbians who identify as neither butch nor femme, gender is not one or the other but a combination of feminine and masculine. While gender roles are seemingly more flexible and fluid, traditional gender roles and stereotypes still largely persist. The women who identify as neither butch nor femme are striving for the breakdown of generalizations and stereotypes surrounding gender attributes, differences and roles, yet they may still experience pressure from others to explain themselves.

### Replication of Heterosexuality or Something Else?

On the surface, butch and femme identities replicate the gender binary that supports heterosexuality. Butch and femme women may enact heteronormativity in their relationships, but they do not seem to strictly adhere to it. Heteronormative relationships have historically been the only accepted way to navigate adult life. Only recently has there been the smallest amount of tolerance for families and relationships that depart from the heterosexist norm. The majority of the individuals in alternative/ homosexual family types were raised by heterosexual couples or individuals and heteronormativity was the blueprint for learning how to act in relationships:

I really think this is the expectation and I can see how it is in some ways. I learned how to treat women by watching my dad and mom and I remember thinking “that’s what I want.” So, I learned about relationships by having a heterosexual relationship as my guide. I think it’s way more complex than it being a simple reflection but I do think there is some truth there. (Wendy)

Lilly explained how we learn by example, “I think that for the most part people regardless of their sexual identity are raised in heterosexual households. I feel like there are different types of families, but heterosexual households have been the blueprint for the most part. We learn through watching and being taught.” Respondents agree that while there are similarities between butch/femme roles and heterosexuality, they are not identical. Even though heterosexuality and the gender binary have influenced lesbian gender identities, respondents saw butch and femme roles as specific to the lesbian community. Robin said, “I learned how to love and be in a relationship from watching my parents and grandparents who were straight. But I don’t think it’s a complete reflection because it’s not about a man and woman, but about two women.” Ann echoed her sentiment, “I think this is the expectation, but I do not think this has to be the way it is. I think everything revolves around traditional roles, but if we take away the labels we just have people loving and caring about each other.”

### Stigma Associated with Labels

While most respondents maintained that identifying as butch or femme was their choice and yet also something they felt internally, it remains that preconceived notions and social expectations influenced their experience. For example, the majority of femme respondents reported that they had an easier time than butch women navigating mainstream heterosexual society. This is because they have the ability to “pass” as heterosexual and are therefore not perceived as lesbian; they are, however, assumed to be straight. Ann explained, “I think the femme women are more accepted in general because people only make the initial assumption that they are straight so they treat them as they would anyone else.” Butch women, on the other hand, are automatically identified as lesbian, even if this is not the case:

It’s about putting a label on something you don’t understand... I mean people assume if you look the least bit butch then you are a lesbian. They do the same thing to men, if a man looks or acts the least bit feminine he must be gay. Instead of letting people express themselves how they want and accepting it ...Bam they slap a label on it and try to explain it. (Robin)

Goffman (1963) explains in his work on stigma that individuals who do not fit with mainstream societal standards are stigmatized. This is an important concept when discussing the difference in experience between butch and femme women. By not adhering to gender norms, an individual is perceived negatively as non-conforming. People fail to accept non-conformists, which prevents full social acceptance and leads to stigma. Because femme women are assumed to be heterosexual they would be what Goffman terms “discreditable,” as having the ability to pass, but running the risk of being discovered. Butch women are already assumed to be lesbian, and subsequently are “discredited,” in that they are automatically stigmatized based on outward appearance. It is important to note that butch women are assumed to be lesbian, but butchness is not an indicator of lesbianism. In our gendered and heterosexist society, lesbians are assumed to



be masculine because they desire women. That is, they are assumed to be similar to heterosexual men. Therefore masculine women, straight or otherwise, get lumped in the butch lesbian category,

In high school I played softball, as did many of my friends. I remember one of my good friends being harassed all the time because she played softball and looked masculine. Everyone assumed she was a lesbian, she wasn't, she was just a tomboy...but she had that butchy appearance. No one ever suspected I was a lesbian because I don't look like what people expect. It's sad that it doesn't matter who you really are, just how you look. (Diane)

Respondents who identify as neither butch nor femme also speak about being judged based on appearance. Chris shares how she is treated differently based on clothing choice: "On days I decide to wear more masculine clothes and say a hat, I am treated different than I am when I am in my more feminine clothes." If a woman appears androgynous then she, too, is automatically assumed to be masculine and therefore a butch lesbian,

It is very frustrating that people want to put a label on who I am, and that label is 9 times out of 10 butch. Not that there is anything wrong with being butch, I am not saying that, but I am not butch or femme! I understand that I am pegged as butch because my appearance is androgynous and most people don't know what to do with that other than assume. I guess there is the idea that if you don't look femme, you must be butch. (Amy)

Lorber (1994) explains that people get uncomfortable when they do not know or cannot tell what another individual's gender status is. As a result butch women elicit discomfort in individuals outside the lesbian community because they do not reflect the traditional gender norms for women. This is threatening because in a patriarchal society masculinity is valued and men as a dominant group are threatened by women taking on traditionally "male" roles. A woman acting masculine could be looked at as challenging the exclusivity of masculinity, perhaps even mocking manliness. Therefore even though masculinity and the roles surrounding masculinity are valued, a woman who is masculine or takes on masculine roles is not (Kleinman, n.d.).

Femme lesbian women seem to be more accepted because they reflect the conventional expectation. Lynn shares, “I think overall femme women are far more accepted in general than butch women are. I think it’s because they [people] are more comfortable around a woman who is feminine in appearance because that is the expectation of what a woman should be; anything other than what the expectation is [can] make people uncomfortable.” Just as butch women are always “out,” so to speak, femme respondents all spoke of always being assumed to be heterosexual, therefore in a constant state of coming out. Susan had this to say about assumptions: “In my own experience I find as a femme I am assumed to be straight. So, I get looks of shock when people find out I am a lesbian, like I am joking and pulling their leg. I actually have an aunt that I had to tell I am a lesbian for a year before she believed me, now she thinks I am just confused.”

It is clear that no matter how people identify they are constantly facing assumptions about who they are. In making the decision to let people assume or not, thoughts of personal safety may come into play. LGBTQ individuals face the risk of encountering hate, discrimination in navigating a world where homophobia exists, and with homophobia comes the possibility of being targeted for a hate crime. I found it interesting that none of my respondents spoke of encountering such hate or discrimination. They did however, as discussed earlier, speak about comfort levels and how butch women cause discomfort and how sometimes situations can be awkward when people assume the individual is a man. They also spoke of not just being judged by people outside the lesbian community but also by those within the lesbian community. Respondents explained that many times identifying as a butch or femme lesbian one is able to secure their position and know the expectations within the lesbian community. Learning the

expectations for the labels of butch and femme came from established lesbians who identified as such. Julie explains learning what being butch was from other lesbians,

I have just always been very masculine in appearance even looking at photos from when I was little and dressed in frilly dresses I look like a little boy in a dress. The way I see myself has not changed over time. The only thing that has changed over time has been how comfortable I am with how I see myself. Like I said when I was 16 I met other lesbians and began to understand I was a lesbian and had butch and femme explained to me. Having the butch expectations explained to me and feeling like I didn't fit all of them made accepting myself a bit of a long road.

When people exhibit behavior considered outside the norm it can cause discomfort for them because they are met with disapproval and anger. The push to label oneself within the lesbian community could be an attempt to get some level of comfort back by creating norms that work within the non-conformity. Erikson (1966) explains that group solidarity is formed among members of the majority in society by labeling the non-conforming individual as deviant and pointing out their deviant behavior as different and insulting to the expected social norms. This draws people of the community together with a common bond, serving to maintain the illusion of control and normalcy. Once the common bond is set by and for the "normal" members of society, then boundary lines can be drawn and boundary maintenance begins. The so called "deviant" individual is assessed in terms of their compliance or non-compliance with these norms. One can apply this same logic to the lesbian community: labeling represents an attempt to regain some level of comfort. Conversely, a lesbian who refuses to label herself steps outside the normal range of accepted behaviors for the lesbian community. Lesbians who do not label themselves challenge heteronormativity by upsetting the gender binary. This would upset the illusion of control and normalcy that members of the lesbian community attempt to maintain.

## Family Support

Historically the family has been the principal learning environment for gender socialization. Many parents and adults treat boys and girls differently and hold them to sex specific expectations and social pressures. Berger and Luckmann (1966) explain that gender socialization as secondary socialization also occurs when individuals form interactions within the larger society. Through all of these interactions with family and others, the individual comes to understand the way others perceive them. This, in turn, affects how they see and present themselves to others. Respondents spoke in detail about how they grew up and the level of family support they had. The respondents who had a high level of family support found that the process of self-acceptance came much easier,

I have always known there was something different about me, of course I didn't know what it was until I was a bit older, but I actually came out when I was fourteen. I was really lucky to have a supportive family and they encouraged me to be who I felt I was. They didn't want me hiding myself, I remember my mom telling me she was proud of me no matter what and I should be proud of myself as well. I was really very lucky, well I still am...I have a great family! (Chris)

Brandi explained that she and her siblings were not pushed or forced to adhere to gender norms,

I was very lucky because my parents did not push me in one way or the other. I mean my mom bought me dresses and cute girl things, but I wasn't forced to wear them and I had lots of friends that their mom made them dress up. My parents didn't seem to care if my brother and I played with each other's toys. I remember my dad asking my brother why he wanted to play with me and my dolls and he said "I am practicing to be a good dad" and my dad was "well, ok." So I feel very lucky to have had parents like that.

Some participants reported that their parents initially pushed traditional gender norms and forced their daughters to dress like girls, but when confronted by their child's point of view they realized it was not in the best interest of their child to continue with such expectations. Teresa explains how this happened for her,

I was raised in a very conservative Christian family, and there were clear expectations of me. How I was supposed to act and dress, I went along with this until I was about 11 and then I just couldn't, it was too much, I was so uncomfortable. Having to wear dresses and very feminine clothes was just wrong for me. I was so uncomfortable and embarrassed that I would have rather never gone out in public. When I was about 11, I was supposed to be getting dressed for church one Sunday, I remember just sitting in my floor crying because I would have rather done anything than to have put those tights and my dress on. My mom came in and at first was upset because I wasn't dressed, but when she saw me sitting there crying she calmed down and asked me what was wrong. I remember telling her it hurt to not be myself and that I didn't feel right in dresses and I was sorry because I knew she would be mad and not love me if I didn't wear them. My mom sat with me in the floor and told me I would never have to wear a dress again unless I wanted to.

Some respondents reported that they have always identified as butch, but their parents forced them to wear feminine clothes when they were young. These women also experienced low levels of family support, which resulted in a long process to self-acceptance. These same women also reported that as a result of strict gendered raising they steered far away from feminine clothing and would never wear anything feminine again,

I was raised in a strict church going family in a tiny town in Kentucky where everyone knew everyone's business. To slip around and go against the grain would not have happened, just because everyone had their nose in everyone else's business. I also knew what my parents would think about this because I had heard their views on sinners and the fiery pits of hell they would burn in. These were regular conversations in my house and I had to come to terms with the fact that this is how I was raised but not what I believed and that took a while. I mean no one wants to disappoint their family, but I eventually had to realize I didn't want to disappoint myself. (Tucker)

Lynn shares her struggles with a non-supportive and constricting family,

I was expected to be a well-mannered lady. My parents set clear expectations on how we were to act and dress. Like I said I met my first girlfriend when I was 16 and I hid this from my family for as long as I could . But one day my mom found some of the letters that my girlfriend and I had written each other while I was at school, when I got home my parents had our preacher there and they had him pray over me and try to exorcise the demons from me. They were convinced that my being attracted to women was the devil's work and if they exorcised the demons from me I would be cured. They also sent me to a therapist for several years because I didn't meet the expectation they had for me.

We are labeled by others based on whether we conform to or contradict the established norms. It is from these interactions we begin to form conclusions about who we are, as well as others forming conclusions of who we are. We then take others' views of us and internalize them, establishing meanings about who we are, a concept is known as the looking-glass self (Cooley 1902). Charles Cooley explains that every person we interact with serves as a mirror, and in each "mirror" we see a reflection of ourselves that is based on our assumptions of that individual's observation and judgment of us. These interactions shape the way we form identity. With each interaction the individual forms images of who they are and what that means within our society. Based on how interactions play out, our self-images may be positive or negative. Examining the information supplied by my respondents, it seems that from a very young age some women are drawn to either masculine or feminine roles even when they are taught and raised to follow strictly feminine gender norms.

Because of the importance that family holds, it can be demoralizing and debilitating when an individual does not have the support and understanding of family, making the road to self-acceptance more difficult. Based on the respondents' life stories, many stifled who they felt they were to follow the expectations of their parents, some up into adulthood. For this reason, respondents whose gender expression changed over time from feminine to masculine explained that their gender identity was always butch, it was only their gender expression that changed. Without family support the reflection of self was a negative one and it was a process for them to have gender expression match their gender identity as Tucker explained, "I mean no one wants to disappoint their family, but I eventually had to realize I didn't want to disappoint myself."

## Romantic Relationships and Sexual Exchange

The openness respondents showed in sharing childhood memories was continued during their discussion of romantic relationships. All respondents seemed to be very comfortable with their sexuality and sexual expression. Respondents seemed to have found what worked for them and they embraced that in themselves and in their partner if they had a partner, “I love women it doesn’t matter what their appearance is, as long as when we get to the bedroom they are working with what I am working with, I am happy” (Brandi).

The respondents were very open about what they were attracted to and what that attraction meant. Some butches did not want and had never been touched or penetrated, some were fine with touching as long as there was no penetration of any kind. These women reported receiving their pleasure through pleasing their partner. Wendy explains how sexual exchange works for her:

This can be difficult because for the most part in a sexual relationship for me I am a top<sup>9</sup> only. I think that’s because sex puts people in vulnerable positions and I have always felt like I didn’t want to be put in a position like that. I know it’s wrong but I felt like it would in some way take away from my being the butch.

A few butch respondents initially did not want to be touched, but stated that as their relationship progressed and trust grew the sexual relationship became more of a reciprocal one,

Sexually it can be difficult to navigate, I am usually the “top” and that’s it ...it’s not that I don’t like being touched, but I have to be really comfortable with the other person to have this happen, so it is not automatically a sharing sexual relationship. I am comfortable with my current partner and so there are times that it is sharing, but that doesn’t have to be all the time for me. I have found women take this personal like I am not attracted to them or they are not sexy enough, so it has been difficult sometimes. (Donna)

Julie explains how the “top” only dynamic has changed for her,

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<sup>9</sup> While this term is more commonly associated with gay male sexuality and penetration, respondents used it to explain not only penetration, but touching of any kind. As a top, they provide sexual pleasure for their partner, it is not a sexually reciprocal relationship.

When I say I am not the stereotypical butch I also mean I am not a top only; however this is something that has changed over time. When I first came out I was advised (laughs) well I guess they thought they were doing me a favor. Anyhow I was advised that as a butch I was the giver and not the receiver, that is, if I allowed myself to be on the receiving end that somehow diminished my butch identity, that to be taken seriously I needed to be the aggressive top only. This never seemed right to me because it didn't feel right, I like sex and I like to be on the receiving end of the sexual activity. So, letting go of what I thought I should do for what felt right took some time.

The above quote is a prime example of how not following the norm may cause some discomfort for the individual. The discomfort is twofold until the decision is made as to which discomfort is worse, the discomfort from not following the norm or the discomfort from not following what feels right for the individual. Also, just because a respondent identified as femme did not mean she was not involved in or interested in a reciprocal sexual relationship. Many femmes made sure to point out they were not “pillow princesses,”<sup>10</sup> meaning they are not just receivers. “My current girlfriend is very masculine looking, but I am far more aggressive than her in the bedroom, I don't know if I can say this ...but, well, I am no “pillow princess” (Sara) . Just as butch respondents explained that they sometimes grew to have a more reciprocal sexual relationship with partners and how that was a new experience they had to adjust to, femme women explained their adjusting to initially non sexual reciprocal relationships. Lilly explains sexual exchange between her and her partner Wendy,<sup>11</sup>

Like Wendy said, when we first began our relationship it was very one sided and I had never experienced that before. So, for the first few months I tried to adjust and be understanding of Wendy's feelings, but I realized that was not completely satisfying for me... We had a long discussion and Wendy talked about how she felt about me perhaps feeling different about her if she put herself in that position of vulnerability, I could see how she may feel that way, but just explained how I felt. You know it was because I loved her and was attracted to her and wanted to make sure she felt as good as she made me feel. It was a bit slow going at first but now we do have a more equal sexual relationship in which we are both satisfied and that's important to me.

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<sup>10</sup> Meaning just lying on their back during sex, not reciprocating sexually. A pillow princess/top pairing does not require a reciprocal sexual relationship.

<sup>11</sup> Wendy and her partner were interviewed together at their request.



No matter how they identified, the women reported the sexual component of a relationship to be of great importance. Most respondents were paired in a butch/femme relationship, even if they stated that they had no preference how their partner or a potential partner identified. Based on the information provided by respondents, there is a commonality among butch lesbians in taking on the sexually dominant role. However, interviews showed that this was sometimes open for change depending on comfort and trust level with their partner.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The most significant self-identification commonality in my interviews with 20 lesbian women was the process they underwent to define themselves. The process followed what seemed to be a four- part path: one: understanding lesbianism, two: understanding butch and femme, three: understanding they identified as a lesbian, four: dealing with external pressure of exhibiting normative behavior, then reconciling that with who they felt they were. After carefully reviewing the data, I found many commonalities among each self-identified group. Butch women for the most part reported tending to be more masculine in appearance; as a result, they are automatically labeled as lesbian. This automatic lesbian label increases the risk of encountering homophobia and discrimination including internalized homophobia. They also experience pressure from both outside and within the LGBTQ community and struggle with being viewed as a failure for different reasons. By not embracing the patriarchal model of what a woman should be, butch women are viewed as failing to “do femininity” in the eyes of mainstream heterosexual society. In the LGBTQ community these same women are viewed as failing to “do masculinity” if they do not act sufficiently butch.

Within relationships butch women tend to take on our society’s stereotypical expectation for enacting masculinity such as the protector, handyman, and sexual dominant. Butch lesbian women reported that their sexual gratification derived from sexually gratifying their femme partner. Most expressed that they are or were a “top only” because receiving sexual pleasure made them feel vulnerable, which undermines a traditional “man” role. Sexual vulnerability does not reflect “macho man sex,” which conventionally emphasizes male sexual prowess and

physical gratification while placing the female in a subordinate sexual role. Women are heteronormatively expected to display emotional sensitivity and physical weakness compared to men's emotional insensitivity and physical strength (Sattel 1976). The finding about butch lesbians' reluctance to receive sexual pleasure is interesting because the role of "top only" heightens the gender expectation of male inexpressiveness and expands it from a primarily emotional context to a sexual one.

Femme women tend to emphasize their outward expression of femininity, which gives them the ability to pass as heterosexual, but they must deal with the fear of being found out and discredited. By looking like the norm for women, which carries the connotation of heterosexuality, they initially encounter less homophobia and discrimination; however, they still encounter discrimination as women. They must navigate the process of continuously coming out as people do not assume that a femme woman is lesbian. However, if their partner is butch, femme women will experience homophobia and discrimination by association, a courtesy stigma (Goffman 1963) when out with her partner. Respondents explained that it is a different type of discrimination and judgment than a butch woman experiences because femme women are thought to be experimenting or confused. Also femme women as lesbians are not as stigmatized by mainstream heterosexual society as butch women are. This is evident in the porn industry, where women-on-women sex films abound, but these are depictions of femme women. Two femme women together are thought to be hot and exciting for a heterosexual male audience. The change to disgust and unease comes when a femme and a butch are paired; this combination is not found in any types of mainstream sexual media.

The role of a femme within relationships tends to be a take on the traditional female role as the wife and caretaker. A difference from the traditional role of caretaker is that respondents

report a sharing of household responsibilities. Sexually, femme women reported they usually allowed their partners to take the lead but also enjoyed being able to do this as well. The majority of femme respondents wanted a sexually reciprocal relationship with their butch partners and for some this was a process of building trust and allowing their butch partners to understand that if the relationship was reciprocal it did not make them see their partner as less butch.

Women who identify as neither butch nor femme tend to have a neutral/androgynous outward expression. These women explain they are not opposed to expressing masculine or feminine dress and will wear both as the mood strikes. When dressed more masculine than feminine they experience higher levels of homophobia and discrimination and are assumed to be butch, because even though they are not stereotypically butch they are not stereotypically femme either. When women do not display femininity, they are automatically perceived as butch and lesbian, whether or not they truly are. Within a relationship, the role of a woman who identifies as neither butch nor femme seems to be a combination of what is considered the role of a male and the role of a female. These women tend to not only be in the middle with outward appearance but also with relationship roles.

Concerning the butch/femme dynamic and if it is a replication of the gender binary that supports heterosexuality/heterosexism, respondents agree that there are similarities, but nevertheless claim it is unique to the LGBTQ community. Heistand and Levitt (2005) and Jalas (2005) suggest that there is somewhat of a heterosexual component built into the relationship/sexual dynamic of a butch and femme pairing. Lesbians are attracted to women, which defies the norms, but the choosing of a label could be a way to re-create a norm within a non-normative community, a way to get back some element of comfort lost in defying the norm. This falls in line with Jalas's (2005) research that suggests butches may be attracted to femmes

because a femme's appearance is reflective of what society deems a man should be attracted to, while femmes find butch women attractive because they exhibit the masculine traits and that is also what society deems a female should be attracted to. Heistand and Levitt (2005) explain the sexual dynamic between a butch and femme pairing, "Within a lesbian sphere, gender difference was a way of recognizing, heightening, and validating essential, developmental, and cultural differences in experience, ultimately leading to a charged romantic sexuality" (p. 51). While there is defiance of the norm in identifying as a lesbian, butch and femme women are unintentionally reinforcing heterosexism by being attracted to masculine and feminine, respectively.

When discussing the sexual interaction/dynamic between a butch and a femme it could be inferred based on the interview data as fulfilling an expectation. After talking to my respondents and hearing about the stereotypical ideas surrounding lesbians, the stereotypical ideas may flow over into what people think is expected of them. There is the belief that sexually, butch women are tops and some respondents did report being a top only. The idea behind this was that if the sexual relationship were reciprocal it will diminish their butch-ness in the eyes of their partner and it opens them up to being vulnerable as discussed above. While there is the idea that all butch women pack, this is not the case; however, many women use dildos during sexual activity. Based on what my respondents report, this does not mean they want to be men. Likewise just because a femme enjoys being penetrated with a dildo, does not mean she really wants a man. What an individual likes during sex is not an indicator of their sexuality, for example heterosexual people use dildos and other phallic type sex toys. This shows that sexual practice preferences are not an indicator of sexuality.

Femme women who are stereotypically thought to be passive and not the aggressor reported to be sexually assertive and not “pillow princesses” in that they very much enjoy sexual relationships in which they can sexually pleasure their partners. Some are willing to forgo the reciprocal sexual relationship if they really care for and love their partner. Some butch respondents explain that while they were self-proclaimed top only women, they were willing to open up and engage in a sexual reciprocal relationship once they built trust with their partners. Only a few respondents reported that they do not enjoy everyday activities considered traditionally feminine. Most are happy to do both traditionally masculine and feminine activities and are happy to equally share household activities with their partner.

While my study was geared at lesbians who identified as butch or femme, I had several individuals contact me who identified as neither. In looking at the demographic data the first difference I noticed about these women was age. The respondents who identified as neither butch nor femme were younger. This shows and is a great example that sexuality and gender expression are not static things and that they are fluid and evolving as all things evolve. Historically, lesbians had to choose a label and express themselves through the stereotypical ideas of what that label meant for acceptance within the lesbian community in order to be taken seriously. While there is still pressure to choose a label within the lesbian community, women are able to more freely express themselves as they choose without the labels. In examining the interview data in combination with demographic data, the older the respondent, the more intent they were on owning a label. This was especially true of respondents who identified as butch. The younger the respondents, the more comfortable they appeared with a more ambiguous label, floating somewhere in between butch and femme. This reflects the evolution of sexual orientations and gender identity expressions and the creation of new labels that Diamond (2005)

speaks of. Also, in looking at the demographic data, the respondents who identified as neither butch nor femme were more likely to identify as having no religious affiliation. This makes sense because patriarchy is deeply embedded within Christianity. The respondents who reported being affiliated with a religious group would have had gender norms further pushed on them. It seems that the individuals who grew up with heightened religious affiliation either embraced the feminine norms or identify as butch. I didn't ask any other religious questions so it is hard to say what this means exactly, but it is interesting.

As for the question of religious affiliation and self-identification the majority of respondents that identify as neither reported not being raised in a church-going family. However, the majority of respondents who identify as butch or femme reported being raised in moderate to conservative Christian households, which promoted the strict gender binary structure that is supported within Christianity. Being raised in such a strictly heteronormative environment could be responsible for lesbian women feeling that they have to adhere to gender norms (femme) or strike out in the complete opposite direction (butch). The younger lesbians identifying as neither butch nor femme could be evidence of weaker religious affiliation and lower church attendance found in many younger people today (Baker 2009). Without being raised in such a strict gendering environment these women may feel more comfortable to embrace who they feel they are, rather than who they feel they should be.

In conducting this research I wanted to understand what it means to an individual to identify as a butch or femme and how these identities affect romantic relationships. I also wanted to learn if participants believed that there must be a butch femme pairing to sustain a romantic relationship. What I found is that identifying as a butch or femme woman is extremely important to some, but not all. They believed that identifying as a butch, femme, or neither does not dictate

how an individual should look, who they should be attracted to, or how they should act within the confines of their relationship. While most respondents agreed that the heterosexual norm is used as a blueprint, so to speak, they stand firm in declaring that their butch or femme identities and the dynamic between them does not replicate heterosexuality.

However, the majority of the respondents mirror and enact heterosexual norms in their daily lives without even realizing it. Their application of labels to themselves and others solidifies that there is a norm and that anything that falls outside the accepted norm is frowned upon. In addition, the labels also serve to strengthen heteronormativity by having individuals choose either a masculine or feminine role/label. (Fields 2001). By enacting the butch/femme roles, heterosexism is unintentionally reinforced. The women who identify as butch or femme are not social and sexual rebels who break free from reproducing heterosexuality; instead, the rebels are the women who identify as neither. These women manage to escape the trap of the gender binary by not choosing a masculine or feminine label but navigating between the two. We are socialized to think in terms of a gender binary which reinforces the heterosexual ideology within our culture. We need to come to a place where sexuality, not just heterosexuality, is viewed as naturally occurring and unquestioned (Fields 2001). Keeping to the butch/femme roles and not understanding the unintentional consequences of doing so allows a system of heterosexual advantage to remain the norm, reinforcing the inequality and ongoing sexual stigma that lesbians encounter.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Interview Questions

**Interview #** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Self- identifies as Butch** \_\_\_\_\_ **Femme** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location of interview:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Questions:**

1. Are you currently in a relationship?
2. \* If yes to Q 1 \*How would you define your relationship?
3. How many years would you say you have known you were a lesbian?
4. How many years would you say you have identified as Butch or Femme?
5. What does it mean to you to identify as Butch or Femme and how is that different from just identifying as lesbian?
6. Can you tell me how you came to identify as Butch or Femme and has the way you identify as Butch or Femme changed over time?
7. What do you consider to be characteristics of a Butch and a Femme woman? And are these similar to masculine or feminine; how?
8. How do you think mainstream heterosexual society views women that identify as Butch or Femme?
9. Do you think your self –identity is a reflection heterosexual gender roles? Why or why not?
10. Growing up did you adhere to assigned gender norms?
11. Were gender norms pushed on you growing up?

12. Do you think your adherence or non-adherence to the assigned gender norms had any bearing on the way you self-identify?
13. Do you have children?
14. \*If yes to Q11\* As a parent have you pushed gender norms on your child or do you allow them to express themselves in the ways they feel comfortable with?
15. Do you believe that your identification as Butch or Femme influences your sexual or romantic relationships?
16. Does your identity as Butch or Femme affect your sexual or romantic relationship roles, expectations, and dynamics? And if so, how?
17. Do you find that you tend to be attracted to either a Butch or a Femme and do you think this has anything to do with how you self- identify?
18. How do you negotiate the roles and expectations that, in heterosexual relationships, are typically assigned to gender?

Appendix B

Demographic Survey

1. Can you specify your race: American Indian or Alaskan Native\_\_\_\_ Asian\_\_\_\_ Black or African American\_\_\_\_ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander\_\_\_\_ Hispanic\_\_\_\_ White\_\_\_\_

2. What is the highest level of education you have completed: 12th grade or less\_\_\_\_ High school graduate or GED\_\_\_\_ Some college/ AS degree/ Technical school\_\_\_\_ College Degree\_\_\_\_ Graduate school degree\_\_\_\_

3. What is the income level for your household: Under 9,999\_\_\_\_ 10,000 -14,999\_\_\_\_ 15,000 - 24,999\_\_\_\_ 25,000 -34,999\_\_\_\_ 35,000 - 49,999\_\_\_\_ 50,000 - 64,999\_\_\_\_ 65,000 - 79,999\_\_\_\_ 80,000 - 94,999\_\_\_\_ 95,000 - 114,999\_\_\_\_ 115,000 - 129,999\_\_\_\_ 130,000 - 144,999\_\_\_\_ 145,000 or more\_\_\_\_

4. How would you describe your political views: Very conservative\_\_\_\_ Conservative\_\_\_\_ Moderate\_\_\_\_ Liberal\_\_\_\_ Very Liberal\_\_\_\_

5. What is your religious affiliation, if any: Protestant\_\_\_\_ Catholic\_\_\_\_ Jewish\_\_\_\_ Mormon\_\_\_\_ Atheist/ Agnostic\_\_\_\_ Other\_\_\_\_ (Specify)\_\_\_\_ No affiliation\_\_\_\_

6. Do you participate in any LGBTQT activist groups: Never\_\_\_\_ Seldom\_\_\_\_ Regularly\_\_\_\_ Very Active\_\_\_\_

If yes to Question 6 what activist groups are you involved in?

VITA

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