

GENDER WITHIN LESBIAN SEXUALITY: BUTCH AND FEMME PERSPECTIVES

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In this article, we examine descriptions of sexuality from “butch” and “femme”-identified women, providing an understanding of how these genders influence sexual relationships. We describe how constructivist and essentialist tensions are intertwined as both sets of women argue that some aspects of their lesbian genders are intrinsic to their sense of self, while other aspects are socially constructed. In the analysis, lesbian sexuality and these gender identities appeared to interact in three main ways, by creating a system of sexuality that (1) validates discredited gender experiences, (2) recognizes the different types of power affiliated with butch and femme gender, and (3) affirms and asserts political values.

This research explores the division made by many feminists (e.g., Unger & Crawford, 1993) between *sex*, a construct relating to biological characteristics, and *gender*, a social construct resulting from the assignation of traits and qualities. The meaning of gender within lesbian communities has changed across time. Lesbians first became visible as a culture (see Faderman, 1991), during the post World War II emergence of butch-femme communities in the US. Although these lesbian gender constructs were distinct from heterosexual genders, they entailed all the complexity of heterosexual genders at that time, including the pressure to maintain a dichotomous gender system. Butch women were expected to appear and behave in a manner resembling masculine images of the period, while femme women expressed an aesthetic that exaggerated the feminine imagery popular at that time (e.g., Lapovsky-Kennedy & Davis, 1993).

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With the second wave of the feminist movement challenging the necessity of gender in the 1960s these butch/femme dynamics were reconceptualized as mimicking the patriarchal relationships that feminism wished to replace. Butch women were thought to be aping men, while femme women were accused of objectifying themselves. During this era, most butch and femme women adopted the androgynous aesthetic of the feminist culture, as a preferable choice to facing exclusion from the feminist-lesbian community (e.g., Feinberg, 1993; Nestle, 1992). The "political lesbianism" movement was founded, under which lesbianism was not so much based upon sexual desire as upon motives to eradicate gender oppression (see Faderman, 1991). Lesbian desire was predicated upon partners' sameness and the absence of gender and power differences associated with gender.

In the 1980s, the butch/femme culture began to reemerge in select communities as women reclaimed these identities (Nestle, 1992). Butch-femme cultures then were contextualized within a feminist framework, coexisting with feminist-androgynous lesbian cultures and allowing greater flexibility in constructing gender identities (see Levitt & Hiestand, 2004). This revived butch-femme sexuality was not a predominantly political enterprise, but was motivated by desire, with romantic and sexual relations constructed around the sexual tensions created by gender difference.

The lesbian genders, "butch" and "femme," have been receiving much attention in the current theoretical literature on lesbian experience (e.g., Halberstam, 1998; Munt, 1998). Recent empirical analyses have been conducted, exploring the ways butch and femme women understand and experience these gender identities. Survey (Levitt & Horne, 2002), interview (Hiestand & Levitt, in press; Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, 2003; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004) and physiological research (Pearcey, Docherty, & Dabbs, 1996; Singh, Vidaurri, Zambarano, & Dabbs, 1999) have documented that these lesbian genders are experienced as having innate components as well as components that are culturally constructed.

In a grounded theory analysis of butch women's experiences (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004), the core finding was that this gender results from a desire to remain authentic to an internal sense of gender in the face of social pressure to be feminine. This conflict required women to balance needs for safety, interpersonal connection, and authenticity while being sensitive to the changing meanings of gender expression within a given context. A similar study of femme women (Levitt, Gerrish & Hiestand, 2003) found personal integrity to be a core value, as the women pushed to be recognized as "real lesbians" in the face of homophobia (and femmephobia within the lesbian community) and acted to transform traditional femininity by asserting their attraction to butch

women. Distinct from these prior works, the present analysis examines descriptions by both butch and femme women about the intersection of their lesbian gender and sexuality.

METHOD

The reader is referred to detailed descriptions of the method in the foundational studies on femme and butch experience upon which the present article builds (Levitt, Gerrish & Hiestand, 2003; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004). In those studies, 12 butch- and 12 femme-identified lesbians were interviewed about their experience of their genders. The participants were predominately Caucasian, with only one Latina-identified participant, and ranged in age (butches, 23–62, mean = 38.9, *SD* = 10.4; femmes, 21–53, mean = 35.3, *SD* = 9.0). The main question in each interview was, “What does it mean for you to be butch or femme?” Interviews were approximately one-hour in duration.

Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Three credibility checks were conducted through the use of (1) participant feedback after each interview and (2) on the completed results, as well as (3) consensus-seeking discussion among the research team. Both studies reached saturation at the ninth transcript, which indicated that the addition of three new transcripts did not generate new categories suggested the models were comprehensive.

RESULTS

The themes from both the hierarchies were identified that related to sexuality (see Table 1). They are organized in this section under the rubrics of attraction, flirtation and sexual activity. In these results, an “F” following a quote signifies that the statement was made by a femme participant and a “B” signifies a quote by a butch participant.

Attraction: The Recognition of Difference in Butch-Femme Seduction

Gender identities such as butch, femme or androgynous helped interviewees to structure romantic interpersonal interactions in the community, in much the same way that biological sex does in many heterosexual contexts. These gender-identifiers helped women to identify and communicate their attractions to others, as, within the lesbian community,

Table 1 Dynamics in butch and femme sexuality

	Femme	Butch
Attracting Others	The power of generating desire in other via signifiers of both strength and feminine beauty	The power of having your desire coveted, that is, of having someone want to give herself to you
The Risks Entailed in Gender Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The threat of being exposed but not being desired • The threat of not being recognized as lesbian 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The threat of having ones' desire rejected • The threat of having ones' gender misread as male
Agency-Choice Flirtation with other	Choice to accept/reject desire <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrating one's ability to command desire • Demonstrating ones' ability to accept or reject desire (often by teasing to reject or consider others' desire) 	Choice to desire/not desire <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrating one's desire • Demonstrating that one's desire is coveted (often by teasing not to offer desire or by showing the value of ones' desire)
Sexual Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tends to affirm the gender of the other by heightening gender differences • Tends to be sensitive to butch vulnerabilities in sexuality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tends to be oriented towards pleasing the other sexually • Some sexual activity as potentially threatening to ones' sense of gender authenticity

the implicit expectation was that butch and femme women were attracted to one another (or to women on the other side of the butch-femme continuum). One femme woman illustrated this assumption, "I don't know if a [another] femme women has ever flirted with me. I mean, maybe I would just never even notice" (F-08). Similarly, a butch participant described,

When I see a woman who looks butch, I can like her look, I can think, "Yeah, there's someone who looks like a good person to know," but my immediate reaction wouldn't be—"Ooh, I'd like to date her" or "I wonder how she kisses . . ." whereas if I see a woman that's more feminine, I get a different type of charge and I get different ideas in my head and my body reacts a different way and I get an emotional charge . . . a woman who is attractive in a sort of womanly way touches me in physical ways, a chemistry thing, a charge like electricity. (B-08)

The identification of these different presences became the way women languaged gender, often describing others by their degree of these genders (e.g., “butch-y”).

Attraction most often was described as the exchange of these energies, entailing a femme performance inspiring desire via signs of feminine sexuality and strength and a butch performance of the power to be seductive. Butch women’s sexual performance often entailed demonstrating their desire to femmes, or acting as though their desire was coveted. As a tribute of their desire, butch women were more often expected to take the risk of inviting femmes on dates or initiating sexual activity, although femmes reported first signaling their interest and becoming more assertive as relationships developed. While femme women could increase sexual tension by demonstrating their power to accept or reject butch desire, butch women could increase sexual tension by demonstrating the worth of their desire.

Despite the community expectations of butch-femme attraction, two participants were in relationships with similarly gendered women (e.g., femme-femme) at the time of the interviews. The vast majority, however, expressed a current preference for dating the other gender (i.e., butch-femme), with only one of the interviewees expressing a stronger attraction to similarly-gendered partners. For this reason, the present article focuses upon butch-femme sexuality.

Although lesbian gender was understood as having an innate or essential energy, women described a process of socialization, in which they internalized the meanings attached to gendered expressions in lesbian subculture, and learned to both read and express sexual messages.

In a lesbian context it doesn’t have the same kind of . . . objectifying feeling that doing some of the same things [does in heterosexual contexts] . . . like dressing up sexy in skimpy black tank top thing. . . . Like when I was straight I would never wear that out to a bar . . . because of the feeling of being kind of . . . objectified, seen as slutty But in a lesbian context I would feel more of a whole person. . . . The lesbians see me as ‘Of course she’s a smart dynamic woman and of course she can be a professional and a sex kitten.
(F-08)

The meaning of being sexy in a femme way was distinct from heterosexual femininity as it communicated not a message of being an object *only*, but rather a message that she was *also* able to command sexual admiration and desire. Even though a sign may take on a heterosexual guise, its signification was different.

Femme women defended themselves vociferously against the charge

that their attraction to butches meant they were really attracted to men. "I don't dress like a straight woman, you know, I dress—to turn on butches!" (F-07). They argued that their sexual performance had a different social meaning.

It all sounds essentialist, but . . . with men I learned very early on . . . how to be like a real seductress type. And I thought I'd given a lot of that up but, until I decided to be with women. . . . With women it just, it's [about attraction getting negotiated] like—I don't know—it just, I felt really exposed that night in my little slinky dress . . . And the woman I was with was thrilled . . . there's a certain performativity about being a lesbian that I enjoy, there's something I mean like it's more real to me it's more, you know, it's more about real emotional connections. (F-10)

Femme sexuality did not erase a woman's agency but demonstrated that she could withstand being vulnerable to the gaze of others. It subverted heterosexual feminine sexuality by consciously attempting to arouse desire in other women.

There were lesbian cultural symbols that came to be associated with the different butch and femme energies: "I'm goin' out with my girlfriend, I don't put on a sarong . . . (chuckles) I put on my you know my jeans and whatever I stuff I know that really turns her on and slick my hair back" (B-10). Because they were aware of the heterosexual cultural pressures on butch women to betray their internal gender and the accompanying dangers of homophobic harassment, femme women admired butch women's courage and were disturbed when butch partners bowed to these pressures to display a feminine aesthetic: "All I could think of was 'God, if she did that [dressed feminine] I'd be really grossed out—I wouldn't be attracted to her!'" (F-03). Both the betrayal of their gender and their gender similarity disrupted femmes' sense of attraction.

When the women were in relationships with similarly gendered women (e.g., butch-but), they described acting to exaggerate differences in order to heighten sexual attraction. This conscious building of differences did not always work out though, as the adoption of either position might not remain comfortable. Participants described these failures, "I encouraged [her acting butch] because I liked it. I wanted her to, but it was not who she was, so, you know it was, it was hard for her" (F-02). "[I was] a butch trying to take care of a butch, but I was more like into relating to her as a femme, and she was a butch, and it drove her nuts that I was trying to take care of her" (B-11). These experiences led women to become increasingly interested in partners with lesbian gender identities different from their own.

Flirtation: An Exchange of Gendered Gestures to Recognize and Heighten Tension

Interviewees repeatedly asserted that flirting was a process in which attractiveness was acknowledged and power was exchanged in such a way so as to maintain tension. Both partners asserted power and expressed respect for one another's power.

It's not about, umm, who has the upper-hand; it's getting negotiated. . . . Maybe that's a good way to say it, "an invitation." Or allowing space for things to happen . . . but that space can't be opened up by another party. . . . It has to be an invitation. (F-05)

Femme women were thought to nonverbally invite interest by signifying a willingness to respond to butch desire and consider giving themselves sexually.

Butch-femme flirting entailed a process in which the recognition of gender difference was communicated. One butch explained:

[I do] the kind of things that men like to do with women I'm more aware of letting them go first [through doors] . . . I want to do everything . . . to make them like me. . . . Showing them I like them by respecting them. . . . Complimenting is important too. (B-07)

A femme participant agreed, "Between butches and femmes in that [flirting] um, well, it's acknowledging you for your femmeness" (F-07).

As butch women so rarely had their gender acknowledged or understood in mainstream culture, and femme women so rarely had their sexual orientation acknowledged, flirting by stressing difference became a form of validation for both women.

With butch women . . . I'm more inclined to act like there's secrets we [femmes] have that they don't have. Whether there are or not is beside the point. . . . The point is the game. . . . And lots of sexual energy gets exchanged. . . . It's sort of like, "I'm femme and I have these secrets. . . . And, maybe, if you're nice, I'll tell them to you. But you have to be nice. And, nice looks like, 'Rub my feet.'" You know (laughter), that kind of thing. (F-01)

This energy appeared to be intensified by confidence in either a femme or butch sexuality. Femme women repeatedly described the erotic power of butch women who appeared confident about their desirability: "It's an attitude. It's something that comes from—I don't know, radiates

from them. It's an energy. It's not a look. It's not a haircut. It's not a body type" (F-11). Similarly, butch interviewees also described the erotic power of feminine self-assurance.

A strong feminine woman seems to have a certain power, a certain in-chargeness, that the butch woman doesn't have. They both have their own place of power in the relationship. Strong feminine women seem to have a more precise and well-thought out way of getting what they want. (B-04)

The different types of lesbian gender energies and expressions of confident sexuality were described repeatedly as the foundation for attraction.

Although butch women and femme women recognized the butch power in offering or withholding desire, both partners also recognized the agentic power inherent in the femme position.

I just have a very forceful personality and so . . . I respond to a woman who is attempting to control me in any way shape or form. Because I know, ultimately, if I give up that control it's my choice. To give it up and let her be in control which I'm *not* always willing to do. Which is probably also part of the attraction and she knows that. She knows that I'm not always going to let her be in control and there are times I'm going to fight that. (F-01)

Flirtation was based on a pairing of two self-determining women in a context of uncertainty about the possibility of romantic or sexual interaction who then both willfully decided that they desired one another.

Negotiating Sexuality: Soothing Vulnerability, Playing with Gender

Butch women were attracted to femme women's sexual nature, but both butch and femme participants emphasized that this femininity did not connote passivity. One femme woman described:

I made a comment during the course of sexual play . . . something about being helpless or not being able to resist. . . . And, she stopped and went, "I don't like helpless women in my bed. . . ." Because that triggered an emotional response for her, that she didn't like the way that felt. The role was that she was taking advantage of me. (F-01)

A desire to have sexual *consent* won and the display of gender difference was the medium in which this negotiation occurred.

“When I was in bed with women who were feminine like me, um . . . it was, I am very aggressive in bed and I tend to want to top [set the scene]. And I found that it wasn’t as fun topping another femme. I don’t know why. It just, it bothered me. . . . But, when I was, when I’m in bed with a butch, and I top a butch, it has a whole different meaning and I think it’s a power thing, too, on my part. . . . I don’t get the surge from being on top.” (F-01)

Without the contrast in gendered power from a butch partner, the pleasure of being in charge was missing.

Although women did not describe their differences using the construct of passivity-activity, lesbian gender was enacted within sexuality in a number of ways. Dildos have long been a signifier of butch gender, and the older butch women even described their use before mass produced ones were accessible.

Well, I made my own. Out of a crutch tip, you know like the crutch pad on top of a crutch, they used to have those rubber pads and um . . . how old was I when I first, probably about sixteen, and I wrapped lambswool around it and then put a bunch of condoms on top of it. I kind of—I punched a hole through it, you know, so that I could tie it on, but I loved to wear it. (B-09)

In contrast, only femme participants reported wearing lingerie, and they tended to be more hesitant to wear dildos, which enhanced a butch aesthetic.

“I do not like wearing a strap-on. I don’t like the way I look with one on . . . I take pride in being able to [use one], but I don’t necessarily like having one on. I think it fucks with my image of who I am in bed and what I should look like. . . . There was one woman in particular . . . who wanted me to wear the dildo. But, for her, it was all about the dildo. . . . It wasn’t about the image I did or didn’t present when I had the dildo on. . . . She just wanted to get screwed (*laughs*). . . . So, it didn’t bother me to have it on, because I knew that that’s what her thing was.” (F-01)

As dildos were read as signifiers of butchness, they tended to only be used functionally by femmes during the act of sex, if at all. As they enhanced butch’s sexual self image and sense of their own gender, some butch women described not only using dildos sexually, but wearing them routinely under clothing, or wearing them at lesbian events.

Although only one of the participants identified herself as “stone butch,” the term for women who like to touch their partners sexually but don’t like to be touched sexually themselves, three of the other butches also conveyed shared hesitations around touch. In contrast to

the pride that being “stone” held in the 1950s as a signifier of butch status, their discomfort with touch could be an obstacle.

I can really put myself on a severe trip about being penetrated. I’m butch, I’m not supposed to have that happen, you know, which I know is total bullshit. . . . it’s just like, when you penetrate me I am female. . . . There’s no two ways about that and a lot of butches that I know, myself included, are way more comfortable with having their ass penetrated than their vagina penetrated just cause like, ok, everybody’s got an ass, boys have an ass. . . . I think a lot of it just has to do with, um—like “Are you still going to consider me [to be butch] the way that you did [before vaginal penetration]”—(*Laughs*). . . . I think, I guess it seems like it makes me more—emotionally vulnerable. They’re [femmes] more apt to understand—my weirdness about it. More apt to understand that, you know, some nights I just don’t want to do that. (B-03)

After resisting great social pressure to assume a feminine gender expression, butch women were confronted by their femaleness in acts of sexuality, and so these acts had to be negotiated in such a way as to maintain and validate their butch gender. Many butch women expressed admiration for femme women’s ability to be brave enough to withstand the vulnerability of being the object of their gaze and touch during sexuality and sought ways to become comfortable themselves.

I do want to be touched. I do enjoy it. I, um, sometimes it takes me awhile to get worked up to it, so if I’m the—the do-er first, then I get all that pleasure plus it gets me all—steamed up too. Whereas if someone pounced on me—quickly—it might take a little bit to get me going. I think I’m a giver by nature . . . my upbringing . . . I think I’m the caretaking person . . . the protector . . . and, as a result of that, my first and most immediate [concern] is for someone else. I don’t know if that goes with butch and femme but—I have a feeling it does. (B-08)

Many of the women described differences in butch and femme caregiving styles in which femmes gave more emotional care and butches gave physical care (see Levitt & Hiestand, 2004)—styles that carried over into their sexuality.

Although femme women did tend to understand that butch partners were reluctant to engage in sexual activities that cast them in a feminine role, and enjoyed being the recipient of touch themselves, sexual interaction could be difficult to negotiate. Femme women were expected to be sensitive to these issues because of their experience in dating other butches.

[At first] I didn't question it. And also because I was scared to. When somebody comes up and says "Don't you do that . . ." it does kind of make you feel "Oh, there's something, wrong down there." She always wanted to service me. That's how she got off. . . . That got old . . . I felt like I was exploiting, you know, like I got off and she would you know, do all this work. And also there was times where I wanted to [please her]. . . . I just, um . . . took the good with the not-so-good and I thought that this was the role. (F-11)

In addition to the feeling of indebtedness and self-doubt, femme women also had to learn that their partners' hesitations did not signify a lack of affection.

I do realize it has nothing to do with me, but I guess my feelings are hurt a lot, because I feel like, you know, "If you love me, you let go and you feel. . . ." But, you know, when it comes down to it, I do realize like it's just—it's not natural for them, just like it's not natural for me to—act like them. Does that make sense? (F-03)

Femme women repeatedly described the importance of ongoing conversation about needs, boundaries, and comfort levels in maintaining a safe yet exciting sexual interaction. At the same time, both butch and femme women described an intense enjoyment of the erotic tone lesbian gender lent to sexual interaction.

DISCUSSION

This article has explicated the intersection of butch-femme lesbian sexuality and gender in the process of attraction, flirtation, and sexual activity. In interpreting these findings, it is important to note that not all lesbians are in butch-femme relationships or claim these gender identities, and that this data has been gathered from a predominantly Caucasian group of women who all were affiliated at some point with one community. Still, this study makes an important contribution, as there has not been any overt discussion of butch-femme sexuality within the psychological literature; not only does it bring to light the experiences of an unrepresented group, it helps to explain how a sexuality based upon gender difference might unfold, even in a context where both partners are of the same physical sex.

In the analysis above, gender appeared to interact with sexuality in three main ways. First, the recognition of butch and femme gender in romantic relationships remedied the invisibility and/or discrimination that partners faced outside of the butch-femme community. The

femme women interviewed often had to contend against charges that their sexual attraction to butch women meant they were really heterosexual and so flirtation validated their lesbian status. For the butch women interviewed, sexuality could be the site of both vulnerability and affirmation as their gender was so rarely recognized. Butch-femme sexuality allowed them to express their sexuality without undermining their butchness.

Second, butch-femme community formed a construct system in which gender differences could be recognized and their performances heightened to generate sexual attraction and tension. Differences in style of seduction were clear, as femme women described acting to inspire desire and butch women responded, or butch women acted to show that their desire was valuable and femme women responded. The mutual appreciation conveyed for these enactments of gender difference allowed sexual tensions to heighten, while instilling a sense of safety and intimacy. Although the femme women interviewed wanted to be gazed upon and desired by butch women, this construct was different from being the *desired object*, as it was, in part, their *subjectivity* that defined them as femme as they consciously chose their lesbian context, and their display of confidence and strength enhanced their desirability. Lesbian gender difference heightened the eroticism within a process of willful desire because it allowed for the exchange of symbols that affirmed the power of both women as their interest was expressed.

Finally, there was a political basis to desire. Both butch and femme women conceptualized their gender performances as having an element of political resistance as they challenged traditional gender and sexual orientation boundaries. For desire to be engaged both genders required not only the appearance of gender signs, but the display of agency and strength. Femme women were respected and admired for being strong enough to enact a defiant femininity, and butch women for defying femininity itself. Butch-femme attraction appeared to be based upon a value system in which both partners were dedicated to respecting their own and one another's gender and sexuality, in the face of systems that negated their experiences. It entailed a value of rebelliousness and a deliberate act to subvert sexuality by recognizing gender differences within a single-sex system.

Butch-femme sexuality is grounded in the recognition of the difference between sex and gender. It supports the criticisms of gender theorists (e.g., Butler, 1990) who argue that men have no more dominion over masculinity than women and point to the constructed nature of gender performance, but it reconciles them with an essentialist understanding of gender that is independent of a person's physical sex.

In this analysis, constructivist and essentialist tensions are intertwined as both sets of women argued that aspects of their lesbian genders were intrinsic to their sense of self (see Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, 2003; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004; Levitt & Horne, 2003) but were also aware that the meanings and signs of their genders were constructed within communities and changed over place and time. 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.

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