

A Quest for Authenticity: Contemporary Butch Gender

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A model of contemporary butch identity has been constructed from the analysis of a series of semistructured interviews with butch-identified women who described their gender in relation to their own experiences and beliefs. The analytic process entailed a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The results of the study describe how butch-identified women conceptualize their gender identity and how it affects their social relations within lesbian and heterosexual communities. The core category in this model (i.e., A Quest for Authenticity) frames butch identity as entailing an ongoing process of negotiation between an essential sense of lesbian gender and gender presentation demands that are understood in relation to the signification and meaning of genders across social contexts.

KEY WORDS: butch; lesbian; transgender; homosexual; gender.

Within the last 15 years, there has been an explosion of writing on butch and femme experience. Much of this literature is in the form of theory, biography, poetry, fiction, and erotica (e.g., Burana & Due, 1994; Butler, 1991; Harris & Crocker, 1997; Munt, 1998; Nestle, 1992), and it describes the great enthusiasm with which gender is being explored and challenged across lesbian communities. In contemporary feminist writing, “gender” commonly is distinguished from the biological “sex” to delineate it as a cultural construct that is socially developed (e.g., Unger & Crawford, 1993). Similarly, in this emerging body of literature, “lesbian genders,” such as “butch” and “femme,” have been assigned the status of genders. Like heterosexual genders, these lesbian genders can function culturally to structure expectations of personal identity, social interactions, and romantic play, and allow for communities composed of participants who ascribe to one sex, “female,” but to a diversity of gender identities. The experience of claiming a lesbian gender, however, has rarely been explored empirically, which leaves questions about its interac-

tion with personal, interpersonal, and cultural factors unanswered.

The Politics of Lesbian Gender

The study of lesbian gender is complicated by a history that has attributed different political meanings to these genders, which has led to varied degrees of acceptance and suspicion across decades and across lesbian communities. The genders “butch” and “femme” arose in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, in the aftermath of World War II—when women’s roles shifted and allowed them to don pants and create the possibility of a subsequent butch aesthetic (see Feinberg, 1996, for a history of cross-dressing before this period). The ability to “pass” as men offered butch women opportunities for employment, a safety from harassment, as well as an identity within the lesbian community.

To participate in the lesbian community, working class women of this era adopted either a butch or femme appearance and interactional style (e.g., Lapovsky-Kennedy & Davis, 1993). Whereas femme women exaggerated signs of traditional femininity, butch women’s adoption of a style read by heterosexuals as “masculine” marked them as lesbian and left them subject to frequent discrimination.

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The emerging visibility of the butch–femme culture was too threatening for many middle- or upper-class lesbians—as they had more to lose should their names be publicly disclosed, as often was the case following police raids of bars (Faderman, 1991).

There are many documentations of the radical change in lesbian culture in response to the feminist movement of the 1960s (e.g., Feinberg, 1993; Halberstam, 1998a; Kane & Coolidge, 2000). Both heterosexual and lesbian feminists at the time viewed butch/femme dynamics as mimicking the patriarchal relationships that they were challenging. Lesbians who presented their gender in these forms were viewed as atavistic; butches were accused of claiming male privilege, and femmes were accused of encouraging the objectification of women. These feminist-lesbians adopted an “androgynous” aesthetic that minimized gender-cues and embodied their resistance to the social restraints of masculine and feminine genders, which differed from Bem’s (Bem, 1974) later use of androgyny that referred to individuals who have both masculine and feminine gender traits. During this era, butch and femme women either withdrew or adopted the androgynous aesthetic of that culture, as a choice preferable to facing exclusion from the feminist-lesbian community.

In the 1980s, the butch/femme culture began to reemerge in selected communities as women reclaimed these identities (e.g., Faderman, 1991). This resurgence of butch–femme, however, occurred within a feminist lesbian context as well as a more progressive mainstream culture. As a result, there was greater flexibility in constructing butch and femme identities (e.g., Nestle, 1992). Although traditionally this culture was associated with the working class, there is some evidence that the class divisions that existed until recently (Weber, 1996) may be fading today (Levitt & Horne, 2002). This movement reconstructed butch–femme as lesbianism motivated by sexual desire—in stark contrast to the political lesbianism of the early feminist movement.

Although butch/femme may have been shaped by the images of heterosexual gender at the time (e.g., Halberstam, 1998a; Strickland, 2002), this culture remained radically different in a number of ways. It allowed women to form lesbian relationships, to resist public discrimination, and to develop gender categories that were distinct from either male or female genders. Today, the positioning of butch–femme genders has been complicated by its history, as many lesbian communities reject these genders and uphold early feminist values, whereas others celebrate the

possibilities of adopting and shaping lesbian gender identities. Questions remain about how women who reclaim these identities reconstitute their meaning in our postmodern age.

An Essentialist Empirical Literature

Lesbian gender causes social scientists to wrestle with the conundrum of social construction and essentialism and challenges proponents of both positions. Most often lesbian essay and fiction writers root their experiences in an internal sense of gender that is experienced as a powerful aspect of their identity (e.g., Munt, 1998). Correspondingly, most of the empirical work in this area has been framed within a biological or essentialist framework, that is, it has focused on romantic attraction or physical traits. Of the limited empirical work on butch–femme genders, the most well-known is by Loulan (1990), who surveyed lesbians about their attractions and sexual desires. Her work substantiated the reciprocal attraction between lesbians who self-identified using butch and femme terms. More recently, researchers have documented lesbians’ emphasis on gender presentation within romantic attraction by examining classified ads placed by lesbians (Bailey, Kim, Hills, & Linsenmeier, 1997; Smith & Stillman, 2002).

These lesbian gender terms often are understood within an essentialist understanding of personal identity. Levitt and Horne (2002) conducted a survey of women within a separatist community in which 92% of respondents believed that lesbian gender expression was influenced by innate factors. As well, the butch women in that study indicated that they became aware of their sexual orientation earlier than did femme women (at approximately 15 years of age instead of at 22 years). Furthermore, butch women have been found to have a more masculine body shape (i.e., higher waist-to-hip ratios) and less desire to give birth than their more feminine romantic partners (Singh, Vidaurri, Zambarano, & Dabbs, 1999). As well, butches have been found to have a higher level of testosterone than more feminine lesbians (Pearcey, Docherty, & Dabbs, 1996; Singh et al., 1999).

Although a body of research on lesbian gender that supports an essentialist understanding of gender is developing, another literature that comes largely from philosophy and women’s studies has been emerging alongside of it. These gender theorists tend to focus on elements of gender that are based in

socially constructed meanings, such as gender performance and play (e.g., Butler, 1990/1999). There has been little research on the question of how essential and socially constructed elements might be interwoven within these gender experiences. As butchness has tended to be examined as a composite of corporeal or sexual traits, rather than as a gender identity with complexities equal to those of traditional masculine and feminine genders, there is little empirical writing on the psychological or social experience of being butch.

Study Objectives

The purpose of this study was to develop an empirical model of butch-identity that is founded upon contemporary butch women's descriptions of their own identities and experiences, instead of upon theoretical or historical bases. It is a companion piece to a project on femme gender that utilized the same method of analysis and question protocol (Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, 2003). Through the interpretation of exploratory interviews, the project aims to allow women to voice their construal of self and to communicate that perception in its complexity. We began this study to develop our own understanding of how contemporary butch lesbians make their identities intelligible and to explore how their experience might inform the understanding of gender identities more broadly.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were members of a lesbian community in northern Florida that uses butch-femme terms to recognize lesbian gender and is supportive of butch-femme identities (see Levitt & Horne, 2002, for a detailed description of this community and a survey of their attitudes). This community can be considered a lesbian separatist community to the extent that community activities (offered throughout each week) are open to women only, and that participating members are assumed to be lesbian. Advertisements were placed within the lesbian community newsletter to recruit interviewees who self-identify as butch. In addition, snowballing recruitment occurred in that some interviewees referred others to the project.

This community is composed predominantly of European Americans and the participants interviewed reflect this demographic. Of the 12 women interviewed, one participant identified herself as Latina, two as Jewish, one as Italian, and the rest identified as "White." Diversity in participant characteristics is a strength of grounded theory approaches where researchers seek to diversify sources of information in the service of developing results that are as rich and encompassing as possible (see Patton's, 1990, principle of maximal variation). The diversity was sought within this sample in terms of relationship status (five single and seven were partnered), age (range of 23–67 years, mean = 38.9), occupation (includes professional, managerial, clerical, labor, healthcare, and the arts), geographic background (includes a woman of Caribbean-South American origin and women raised in northern and southern U.S. states), and length of time in the community (range of 2–25 years, mean = 12.9). It has been the interviewer's experience that familiarity enables the disclosure of more intimate experiences, and two participants directly reported that they would not have been as forthcoming with someone from outside the community.

Interviews

The central question of this interview was: "What does it mean to you to be butch?" Prompts encouraged the women to describe the ways they experienced their identities within mainstream society, lesbian community, and romantic relationships. An exploratory style of interviewing was adopted, in which we used open-ended questions and nonbiasing prompts. All interviews were conducted by the first author, who had been part of the community for approximately 1 year at the time. Interviews ranged from 1 to 3 hr in length.

Because the interviewer and the participants socialized within the same community, there was concern that the interview might create a potential imbalance in power—as the interviewer would have access to personal information about participants at any future meetings. Guided by a feminist ethic, the interviewer allowed participants to ask about her gender experience following each interview. This exchange equalized power during the data collection and allowed for the mutual experience of learning. Although this discussion was not included as part of the formal data under analysis, it further sensitized the interviewer to concepts and experiences that were important to the women interviewed.

Grounded Theory Analysis

The analysis was conducted using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) original approach to grounded theory (as opposed to Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which has been supported by Rennie's (2000) argument that it is the form most coherent with a hermeneutic framework. It is an inductive approach that allows investigators to compare units of interview transcript in order to identify and organize the common themes present. This method has been advanced in psychological research as a way to explore subjective experience and facilitate the development of theories (see Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988).

First, transcripts of the interview were divided into "meaning units"—each of which expresses one idea (see Giorgi, 1970). Each unit was assigned a descriptive label that captured that idea. Units were grouped into categories using a process of constant comparison in which each label was compared with every other label. Categories then were compared to one another in a similar fashion, and higher order categories were created. These higher order categories then were compared and grouped, in turn, to create a hierarchical model. This process continued until a core category was created to reflect an idea central to the conceptualization of the phenomenon.

Memos, or notes, were taken throughout the analytical process to record shifts in understanding and were utilized to bracket theories that developed during the analysis so that they did not unduly influence the data sorting. As well, both researchers used memoing to record their personal biases and experiences that might bring foreclosure to the process of conceptualization by accepting a premature understanding. Data collection was halted when saturation was reached—when additional categories do not appear to be forthcoming despite the analysis of new data. In the present study, the last three transcripts did not add new categories to the hierarchy, and so the model was considered to be saturated after the analysis of nine transcripts.

Credibility Checks

Three checks were conducted to increase the credibility of the results. First, at the end of each interview, all participants were asked to reflect upon the process of the interview. They considered whether they would have said anything different to an inter-

viewer with other demographic characteristics (e.g., was butch, Latina, older) or whether they could envision questions that were not asked that would help elucidate their gender experience. Any further information that was revealed about their experience of their gender was incorporated into the hierarchy. This questioning allowed the interviewer to address possible constraining influences of the interviewing context and to obtain descriptions of butch gender experiences that were as complete as possible. Most participants said that they would not have shared anything more with the interviewer had she had a nonfemme gender presentation, although two women said that there might have been more "bonding" if the interviewer had been butch.

The process of consensus between researchers strengthens the claim to credibility. The researchers met weekly for a period of 1 year while the analysis of this project was underway in order to discuss the generation of categories and the labeling of concepts. The researchers offered different perspectives to this process of analysis; one as a femme-identified lesbian who had lived in the community in question and interviewed the women, and the other as a butch-identified lesbian who brought her lived gender experience to the process of analysis.

After the model was complete, the first author returned to the community and met with three women there (one butch-identified participant, one femme-identified, and one androgynous-identified woman) in order to seek feedback on the results of the present study, as well as those of a corresponding study on femme identity (Levitt et al., 2003). The three women were asked to give their impressions of how well the results of the two studies captured the unique identities of "femme" and "butch" women. Although the femme and androgynous women did not share the internal experience of being butch, they had both engaged in the process of striving to understand butch identity within their relationships and community interactions (and, indeed, discussion of gender identities was common throughout the community). Although some grounded theory researchers have argued that it is unnecessary to "check" findings with others as the results reflect the hermeneutic understanding of the data from the perspective of the researcher who has sole access to all reports (see Rennie, 2000), the convergence of the four different vantage points allowed for further strengthening of the credibility of the findings. The three women strongly endorsed both models. The butch consultant, who was a participant in the present study, responded

to the core category by saying that, although she had not herself articulated authenticity as the driving force behind being butch, the conceptualization resonated with her past experiences and helped her to articulate her sense of her gender.

RESULTS

Innate-Choice Debates: An Essential Experience

Most respondents strongly believed that their lesbianism was entirely innate (see Table I). Although there were some participants who expressed some uncertainty about whether socialization contributed to their lesbian orientation, none felt that being a lesbian was a choice. All respondents agreed even more vociferously that being butch is an essential aspect of who they are. None of the women had ever decided to be butch, rather it was described as simply being themselves: “I’ve always been butch, [although] it’s like I didn’t have that word until I came into the gay community. I’d always been attracted to femmey girls . . . [I knew] from when I was 4” (P-09). Only one of the 12 participants described trying to become romantically or sexually involved with men, and this brief experience occurred only after she had already claimed a lesbian identity as the conscious result of a spiritual quest to broaden her sense of self. For all participants, being butch was experienced as an unmalleable aspect of self, so essential that it even preceded their awareness of that label.

Butch Perceptions of Gender: Butch as Beyond Masculinity or Femininity

Respondents described the construct of “butchness” as having a specific meaning formed within the

Table I. Innate-Choice Debates: An Essential Experience

Categories	N ^a	Subcategories
Innate-choice debates re: lesbianism	5	Unsure if being a lesbian may be genetic or a choice Lesbian is innate
Innate-choice debates re: gender orientation	9	Butch as the “way I am” or as essential Butch as innate
Overall endorsement	10	

^aNumber of participants, of 12, who contributed meaning units to this category.

Table II. Butch Perceptions of Gender: Butch as Beyond Masculinity and Femininity

Categories	N ^a	Subcategories
Butch gender identity	11	Butch as a lesbian community identifier, interpersonally formed Butch as an important gender identifier to me—the way I am Butch women have a certain energy, more masculine
Butch and femininity: female identity	10	Discomfort with being feminine—female Comfort with being female
Butch and masculinity: male identity	11	Butch as being mistaken for men, or being able to pass as a man Identifies as a man some of the time Enjoys more traditionally masculine activities It would be easier to be a guy Butch is not trying to be a man Butch is having traits associated with being male
Butch and transgender: trans identity	6	Identity as third sex Transsexual movement as helpful by creating third-sex category Butches considering sex changes mostly when they were younger, not now Negative perceptions of gender reassignment Butches as able to choose between gender enactments
Perspectives on heterosexual gender definitions	5	Heterosexual gender matters as it is enforced by society Perceptions of heterosexual gender by society as changing, equalizing, individuating Woman has a complex definition, many types
Overall endorsement	11	

^aNumber of participants, of 12, who contributed meaning units to this category.

lesbian community. Although this identity was seen as socially derived, its associated characteristics were not (see Table II).

It’s how I’m defined in lesbian culture by the lesbian community and I don’t have a problem with that. But I can identify as butch too. Whether the label is there or not, I’m going to be who I am. The label’s not shaping me . . . It’s the only way I can be, I guess. . . . The clothes that I wear and the way I carry myself, or whatever, are that way. Because that’s unique, people label it as butch. But it’s just, I didn’t strive to be butch. . . . I just happen to fall into that category. (P-01)

When asked to describe what it means to be butch, participants found the meaning difficult to pin down. They said that it is not located in any one trait, such as how strong a woman is or how she dresses or looks. The most common response (given by six participants) was that butchness is a certain energy or essence—one more commonly associated in our culture with masculinity. This energy expressed one's gender and composed a core aspect of the self, which makes butch a primary identifier for some.

Many respondents described discomfort at the thought of being feminine, which was experienced as a betrayal of their butch gender. Dress codes or external pressures that forced them to appear feminine evoked feelings of embarrassment, weakness, and vulnerability—just as many women might feel if made to wear clothing (e.g., pink frilly dresses) that was discordant with their own sense of their femininity. Despite the high levels of discomfort with femininity, however, all participants expressed contentment with being women. Indeed, their identities as butch enabled them to identify as women by allowing them to be female yet still prize their internal sense of gender. One woman described this process of realization:

I was just watching them [other butch women]. I was just like, "Wow. She's a woman." You know, she was—but she also was a woman who would get mistaken as a man. . . . But when I looked at her, I was like, "Yeah. She's a woman though. She's a woman." And that meant something. It wasn't like sexual or anything of that nature. It was just like, "Wow. I can be a woman *and* be who I am. I always thought that being who I was meant that I was trying to be a guy; and I get mistaken as 'sir' often. But it doesn't bother me like it used to. Because I know that I am a woman. Just a different kind." (P-04)

By owning their butch gender, participants were able to identify strongly as female and still be authentic to their sense of self. Although a number of participants had considered a sex change at an earlier point in their lives, because they had found a community that supported the expression of their butch gender, these considerations now seemed unnecessary.

Some respondents struggled with their own internalization of the sexism they saw in society. They experienced the importance of gender categories to others; as in their daily experiences they witnessed the frustration people felt when attempting to force them into male or female categories. They objected to the gender roles that they saw as expectations in het-

erosexual women's interpersonal relationships, such as being expected to take on most of the housework and childcare and to be passive in relationships with men. Although they were aware of shifting gender roles as cultural definitions of women have become more complex, some interviewees reported a concern that part of their own resistance to being feminine might be a form of stereotyping. Even though they did not consciously confuse these traits, they wondered if they associated being feminine with being weak or passive.

Because of their heightened awareness of gender, some participants described being able to enact deliberate gender performances to suit their emotional state or interpersonal interaction. The shift to feel more feminine was not always volitional though and was sometimes disturbing:

Growing up, I think that I had the "female is weaker and less than." I definitely got a clear picture of that. . . . I think the more acceptance that I have about who I am and the more I'm ok with who I am in the world, then the more comfortable I am. And the more choice I have in how I'm going to relate. Some days, sometimes it is frustrating when I'm feeling like that very female part . . . because it does feel weaker. I know in my head, rationally, that's not true, but some days it doesn't feel that way as all. (P-03)

Participants chose to be more feminine at times when it allowed them access to desired aspects of themselves. For instance, some women allowed themselves to be more feminine when they wanted to be spiritual, to put others at ease, or to be emotionally vulnerable with a romantic partner, and they adopted a more butch presence when they felt more sexual, insecure, or playful.

Several participants reported sometimes identifying as masculine, as "third sex," as transgendered, or as identifying more with men than with women. They talked of enjoying more typically masculine activities (e.g., car work, plumbing), of having traits associated with men, and of adopting male gender roles. However, they all were adamant that being a butch does not mean that one is trying to be a man or wants to be one. One participant explained, "I feel that I am a strong woman and that's it. I don't feel that I'm male, I don't identify as male. I never wanted to be a man" (P-02). As the distinction between being biologically male and having traits typically ascribed to men was clear, the word "masculine" often was self-consciously selected as a poor substitute for the missing term for female masculinity. Butch was asserted as an independent gender—a gender that

is often unrecognized, discredited, and disregarded, which forces them to be viewed through the lens of masculinity.

In part due to this absent construct, butch women reported often having their gender mistaken in public: “I think that’s a commonality that I have with my butch friends. I get called sir at least every day, if not lots of times a day” (P-10). For some, being misidentified was very uncomfortable, whereas others were not bothered by it, or even purposefully passed as male at times as a way to play with their gender presentation or to increase their feeling of safety within dangerous situations (e.g., walking alone at night).

Growing Up as a Butch Lesbian: Coming to Terms With Being Different

Many of the butch women described similar childhood experiences (see Table III). Participants described a very early sense of being different from other children in school. One interviewee recollected, “I didn’t look like a girl, I didn’t play like a girl, and I didn’t belong with the girls” (P-10). Starting from about the age of 5 through their early teens, they were aware of their attraction to women. Many respondents recognized their attraction to women before they could name it.

Most respondents described conflicts with their parents who tried to encourage their gender conformity. “I used to fight with my mom every night over what I had to wear. She wanted me to wear a dress, and I hated wearing them” (P-01). Another woman said, “I couldn’t stand wearing girl’s clothes . . . I just wanted to wear flannel shirts, boy’s t-shirts, Levi’s” (P-11). Parents had different approaches to the issue: some enforced a dress code, or took their daughters to therapy, whereas others allowed their daughters to dress as they felt comfortable.

Many of the interviewees described childhoods filled with confusion and shame.

My parents and my family, my grandmother said, “Act like a girl, be like a girl, do like that,” you know. It was always “Like a girl!” which meant that I wasn’t like a girl. I was more like a boy, and that was not right. You know the only thing I could identify with was “I’m not like a girl, I’m more like a boy”—But I am a girl. And I like girls, so what does that mean? (P-04)

Some girls believed that they were meant to be boys and worried that they were “a mistake.” They struggled with their self image alone; they had no one with

Table III. Growing Up as a Butch Lesbian: Coming to Terms With Being Different

Categories	N ^a	Subcategories
Experiences specific to school	5	Felt alone or different from other women, seemed lesbian Tried to seem heterosexual or dated boys Pressure to be feminine Harassment from other children Teachers were overall supportive
Becoming comfortable being butch	6	Butch identification became increasingly comfortable Recovery, AA programs that aid in becoming comfortable with being butch Overcoming negative views of being a butch lesbian
Being a butch child	10	Parental information Dress as an issue—pressure to be feminine Puberty as a betrayal of body Young butch thoughts, about self and sexuality Being a boy or a nongirl
Learning about butch–femme or coming out as butch	10	Butch–femme are complex genders Butch role models Coming out as butch Early butch–femme experiences, or experimenting with androgyny Having butch–femme rules explained to me Rules are unspoken At first did not understand butch–femme Butch–femme as playful
Coming out as lesbian	11	Coming out as lesbian Realizing she is a lesbian Being lesbian or being butch first
Overall endorsement	11	

^aNumber of participants, of 12, who contributed meaning units to this category.

whom they could share their experiences. This isolation was reinforced at times by religious messages, “I did somehow grab the idea that it was an abomination and I was burning in hell forever . . . a very fire and brimstone kind of thing. . . . It was really scary. How long did I feel that way? Um, until I was 21. . . . Til I finally said, ‘Fuck it, whatever. I’m in hell already. Who cares?’” (P-04).

Most of the respondents described themselves as tomboys, and they socialized as boys rather than as girls: “I lived as a boy . . . I dressed as a boy . . . I hung out with the boys . . . I flirted with the girls” (P-10). Trouble for these children was often exacerbated at

puberty. After this period they could no longer deny that their bodies were female, and others' expectations that they should be feminine intensified. "I felt like my body was betraying my mind because until then it had been very convenient. Everybody thought I was a boy. . . . It was like betrayal. . . . my guy friends were able to express their interest in the opposite sex and I wasn't" (P-03). As gender became more of an issue, previous friendships with boys often grew more difficult, and the interviewees generally either chose not to date or to feign interest in boys.

Two women described attempts to be heterosexual or to pass as heterosexual by dating boys: "From age 14 to 19 I dated this one male person. . . . I tried to be [heterosexual]. I tried to have a desire" (P-08). There was strong pressure to be feminine, and the women described repeated experiences of harassment. "They called me queer. . . . and they called me other names, too you know just kinda nasty names that you call, freak of nature kind of stuff" (P-10). Several girls had teachers or parents assume that they were lesbian due to their gender atypicality. At times this awareness was reassuring, but at other times it was quite distressing.

Most women came out to others in their late teens or early 20s, although one said that she came out at the age of 12. Coming out as a lesbian was reported to be an important experience for the respondents, as it allowed them to be honest about their sexual orientation and to gain acceptance from others. Not all participants came out to their families, and those who did described varied family reactions, from very supportive to completely rejecting.

As the women entered the lesbian community in their cities of origin, they began to become more comfortable with themselves as butch women. Most women adopted this gender identifier after learning about it within lesbian culture, but some claimed it despite the lesbian culture at the time: "I was reading old literature. There wasn't very much out then about lesbians, but I recognized myself as butch. . . . but the stronger feminism got the more that was looked at as sexist and not cool. [In my androgynous phase] I secretly identified as butch. . . . I started identifying as butch [openly] probably in the mid-1980s" (P-10). Other participants had to overcome negative feelings and stereotypes about lesbians and butches before they were able to adopt either identity. Once they did understand the positive position of butch identity within lesbian culture, however, most women claimed this identity as their own with a sense of re-

lief: "As soon as I decided, 'This is who I am and who I'm going to be and I'm tired of pretending to be somebody else,' it all felt very natural for me" (P-04).

Learning the social rules of how butch-femme and androgynous women interacted within lesbian community was not always easy. "Butch girls would not dance with me, and the femmes did. I thought, 'phooey' but I didn't know it was a butch-femme thing. . . . And somebody said, 'Well, she's butch, girl, she's not gonna dance with you.' And it never occurred to me. It was just like an awakening" (P-06). Similarly, realizing that they were sexually desirable to many lesbians they found attractive *because* they were butch was an important turning point for some women. A number of the respondents had older butch role models who helped them value their butchness and taught them how to relate to others as a butch: "It's someone who just has a broader experience base than you do, who's willing to share that with you, and who cares about you and has a love for you" (P-03). By offering a parental form of love, these mentors supplemented the missing affection in the lives of those young women who were closeted from or rejected by their own parents.

Expectations of Butches: I Am Not a Stereotype

In the interview, most participants stressed that butches do not always fit the existing stereotypes of their gender category that are most often present within lesbian contexts (see Table IV). They experienced expectations from others to be tough, to be a leader, to take care of and protect others, not to cry, not to date other butches, to be sexually dominant, and to take care of chores designated as men's responsibilities. Although respondents thought that some stereotypes fit, they still found them constraining, hard to live up to, and often inaccurate. One woman said, "I kind of like feeling protected by a person. I kind of like feeling stronger in a way. . . . [but] still it feels good to be able to [say] I don't have to drive all the time, it feels good for you to drive the car most of the time" (P-08). At the same time, women differentiated expectations of butches today from in the 1950s. They thought that now women identified as butch because it allowed them the freedom to be themselves, rather than because of lesbian community expectations, and many women reported no pressure at all to conform to butch-identified expectations: "Lesbian culture is big. It's always been cutting edge. . . . There

Table IV. Expectations of Butches: I Am Not a Stereotype

Categories	N ^a	Subcategories
Does not fit butch stereotype	9	No subcategories
Fits butch stereotype	3	No subcategories
There are no expectations within lesbian community	5	No subcategories
Expectations are hard to live up to—pressuring or restraining	8	Labels can feel restraining
Expectations are male role: skills, tough, leadership, attract feminine partner	10	Expected to be in positions of leadership To have a male role, male skills, be tough Expectation of butch–femme attraction
Overall endorsement	11	

^aNumber of participants, of 12, who contributed meaning units to this category.

aren’t defined roles in lesbian culture for partners in relationships. Because someone’s butch doesn’t mean that they aren’t the one who likes to cook and clean. . . . It’s as individual as the women are” (P-01).

Aesthetic Aspects of Being Butch: Representing My Gender in a Safe Manner

All participants said that dressing in women’s clothing makes them feel uneasy: “A drag queen will dress like a woman and . . . they get their persona when they’re dressed up as a woman. Well, I would be the opposite. It is just like, I am who I am, but when I do this [dress femininely] I’m in drag. I’m not really who I am. . . . I’m acting” (P-02). The challenge for these women was to find a degree of masculine appearance that was comfortable but which they could manage in different social contexts (see Table V). The women described how they enacted a butch aesthetic, such as with haircuts, clothing, and ways of moving or being “comfortable” in one’s body. Their pleasure in flirting and heightening these sexually attractive qualities was evident.

The appearance of many butches made them discernable as lesbian and unlikely to pass as heterosexual. One participant explained, “You’re more identifiable as a lesbian . . . you can’t be closeted if you’re butch” (P-01). Women described their appearance as an advantage as they did not need to come out to others verbally and their presence reminded others that lesbians are members of society, although this visibility also made them targets for discrimination.

Table V. Aesthetic Aspects of Being Butch: Self Presentation

Categories	N ^a	Subcategories
Adopting a degree of butch appearance that feels true to self	9	Dressing in women’s clothing feels like in drag—feels untrue to self Being butch is comfortable and true to self Masculine dress as preferable Butch and haircuts Butch as finding a degree of masculine appearance that fits
Butch visibility	9	Butch as a nonrecognized gender Passing as male Butches easy to identify as lesbians—harder to pass as heterosexual
Overall endorsement	11	

^aNumber of participants, of 12, who contributed meaning units to this category.

Emotional Qualities of Being Butch: Balancing Care and Strength

Many respondents described how being butch makes them feel more powerful and assertive (see Table VI). They enjoyed feelings of strength and confidence that they could not access if they tried to force themselves into unnatural traditional gender roles. As a result, they were less afraid of confrontation, and enjoyed making decisions more. They felt less vulnerable when portraying their butch gender. This sense of protection was important when steeling themselves for scrutiny or potential discrimination: “It [dressing butch] feels like appropriate safety, especially standing up in front of strangers, I need to guard my energy a little” (P-10). Becoming more butch was sometimes described as a way to guard tender emotions from being hurt. This same participant continued, “The more pain I got on the inside, the more leather I wore, the bigger dick I wore” (P-10). After a history of having their gender pathologized or insulted, they needed to confront discrimination and to be assertive in order to protect themselves or others. They could overdramatize their internal sense of gender to distance threatening others.

At the same time, participants reported having to struggle to reconcile their tough exterior with a more sensitive caring side: “I like to be tough. I like to be strong. In fact, it’s just a protective mechanism. . . . A lot of butch women have been injured. They’ve been hurt. They’ve been hurt by men. They’ve been hurt by the world—and they put on this tough shell like

Table VI. Emotional Qualities of Being Butch: Balancing Care and Strength

Categories	<i>N</i> ^a	Subcategories
The struggle to be vulnerable when caring	8	The struggle to be emotional and butch and not inaccessible Being butch and strong as a way to deal with vulnerability with others As butch respects women
Being butch as a sense of strength	9	Being butch and more masculine helps her feel strong Butches are comfortable being assertive Protect self by seeming tougher Being butch is about being powerful, dominant, tough
Overall endorsement	9	

^aNumber of participants, of 12, who contributed meaning units to this category.

armor, like ‘you can’t hurt me’ kind of attitude, but inside they’re always soft. And I see that’s what butch is. It’s someone who pretends or somehow puts on a front, but in fact is a woman” (P-08). Repeatedly, butch women talked about their respect for femme or nonbutch women who were seen as better able to be vulnerable. Some women reported internal struggles between these two tendencies. One participant described an ongoing discussion within her butch-support group: “The meetings . . . are about life and how to live . . . learning how to really relate in a really genuine way to anybody . . . like being able to be vulnerable, being able to let go of some of the power in my relationship” (P-10). A number of women discussed the need to resist using butch defenses to the point that they closed down emotionally, and they described conscious decisions to admit their emotions into romantic relationships.

Social Relations: Negotiating Butch Identity With Others

Within Romantic Relationships: Sharing Power and Care

Within the lesbian community we studied, gender identities such as butch, femme, or androgynous help to structure interpersonal interactions in much the same way that biological sex does in many heterosexual contexts. Several respondents described that their butch identity allowed them to name their

attractions—to realize to whom they are attracted and who might be attracted to their own aesthetic style (see Table VII). Within lesbian communities, the implicit assumption is that butch and femme women are attracted to one another (or to androgynous women on the opposite side of the butch–femme continuum). Despite this expectation, one participant was in a relationship with another butch woman, and five others said that they would or had dated women who were butch. Although there is an openness to butch–butch dating within this community, butch–femme dating is the norm. Of these five women, all reported also being attracted to femme women, and four expressed a preference for dating femmes. None of the women expressed a stronger attraction to other butches than

Table VII. Social Relations: Negotiating Butch Identity With Others

Categories	<i>N</i> ^a	Subcategories
Butches in romantic or sexual relationships	11	Marriages of convenience Butches dating preferences or attractions Butch sexuality
Social relations within the lesbian community	11	Relating to other butches Socializing with both butches and femmes—differences Structure within the lesbian community Butch perceptions of femmes Butches in romantic or dating relationships
Social relations within the heterosexual community	11	Relating to heterosexual women Relating to heterosexual men Relating in the professional world Separating from heterosexual society Discrimination and harassment
Being political and butch	7	Butches stand up for themselves and their femmes Educating and challenging others regarding gender Butches will fight to be true to self
Cultural differences in butch identity	9	Latin American culture U.S. culture History of butch–femme in U.S. culture Class differences—working class as more comfortable for butch–femme
Overall endorsement	11	

^aNumber of participants, of 12, who contributed meaning units to this category.

to femmes, and all had dated more femmes than butches.

All the participants thought that power was shared more equally within their romantic relationships than within most heterosexual relationships. They adhered to an egalitarian approach in which housework and chores were divided on the basis of women's preferences to engage in different chores. Repeatedly, butch women described enjoying responsibilities that are typically women's, such as cooking, and how the distribution of chores is idiosyncratic within each relationship. Although some women expressed preferences for responsibilities that are more butch-identified (such as car-work), the division of labor still was negotiated with each partner. None of the butch interviewees thought that they had more control in their relationships than their partners did; in fact, some said that their femme partners were really in control.

Although most of the butch women described a desire to take care of their partners, this desire was not rooted in a sense of having more power or responsibility, but rather a sense of great respect (sometimes verging on reverence) for their partners and an accompanying desire to please them. Often caretaking was described as "physical" (as opposed to emotional caretaking, often ascribed to femmes): "I feel always really strongly into being protective and nurturing in a very physical way . . . against any physical harm that could come. If I'm walking down the street, I'll walk closer to traffic, you know, that I could be ready to be more physical" (P-04). Traditional signs of masculinity were radicalized. Instead of being signs of differences in physical strength or power, as they might be within a male-female context, women consciously gave them the meaning of solicitous devotion. They became mutually negotiated signs of eroticism and feminism, as these symbols that were being offered to and accepted by female partners of comparable physical strength heightened the women's sense of equality and lesbian sexuality.

Butch Sexuality: Negotiating Desire With the Safety to Be Authentic

Devotion to other is most evident in butch sexuality, which, for many of the women, centered on pleasing their partners. Although only one participant identified as a "stone butch," the term for a butch who does not like to be touched sexually herself but is sexually fulfilled by pleasuring her partner, three

other women relayed different levels of discomfort with being touched: "I have a lot of respect for her when I'm, you know, when I'm making love to her . . . , but it's really hard for me to be vulnerable in that way" (P-10). They described being pleased (e.g., vaginal penetration) as associated with femininity in ways that made them feel emotionally vulnerable or gender-incongruent, and instead they tended to enjoy giving pleasure. Advances that placed them in a feminine receptive role could distract them from their sexual desire and halt sexual relations. Femme partners were described as familiar with butch sexuality and, therefore, as sensitive to these hesitations. Most of the participants, however, did not describe any hesitations with being pleased sexually and some explicitly talked about the stone butch as an identity of the past.

Although the women expressed the belief that either butch or femme partners could initiate sex, they described an erotic script in which femmes initiated it through flirting and butches by responding: "That's the femme looking and inviting you [the butch] in body language to ask her to dance. That's the femme saying 'come hither' and the butch follows" (P-06). As in heterosexual contexts, scripts like these allow for the minimization of rejection if one partner is not interested and they recognize and affirm gender differences between the partners.

Within the Lesbian Community: Relating to Other Lesbian Genders

All the butches interviewed saw femmes as strong individuals who enjoy a feminine gender presentation and feel most sexual within that presentation. Femmes were described as allies: "They [femmes] are more understanding of what I have to go through" (P-03). Because of the potential for attraction between butch and femme women, friendships with femmes often were negotiated with care. Some butches desired these friendships, however, as they could offer different resources than butch friends: "That's where I can relate with femmes . . . more emotionally and more experientially" (P-03). When relating to other butches, they had a sense of mutual interest, shared struggle, and support. Because of this bond, some found it easier to confide in other butches about experiences related to their gender identities. "We just have mutual respect" (P-01). Because there was not the expectation of attraction, friendships between butches were described as rarely

containing romantic tensions and often built around shared activities. Within this community, androgynous or nonidentifying lesbians are read as being “more butch” or “more femme,” depending on their gender presentation, and social interactions are structured accordingly.

Many of the respondents saw the lesbian community as increasingly tolerant and supportive of butch–femme relationships, and they found validation of their butch identities within it. Several participants noted, however, that often communities are more affirming of butches than of femmes: “The lesbian community is more butch-positive than femme-positive. I think it’s [sexism] reflected in society as a whole” (P-05). They believed that butches were mistakenly seen as “more lesbian” than femmes and they were concerned about the discrimination that femme women faced because of this stereotype.

Friendships With Heterosexual Women: To Flirt or Not to Flirt

Friendships with heterosexual women were not uncommon. Although butch women could enjoy these friendships, there was the potential for misunderstandings. In particular, friendships could become complicated if heterosexual friends flirted with butch women as if they were men or if they treated participants as though they were feminine women and misread their gender entirely. Some participants found it too difficult to maintain friendships with heterosexual women as they rarely understood butch gender enough to be able to respect the participants’ internal sense of gender while maintaining the necessary boundaries.

Friendships With Heterosexual Men: Buddies or Threats?

The butch participants seemed to have more positive relationships with heterosexual male friends that were often characterized by camaraderie and respect. Complications arose at times if the men interacted with participants as butch and forgot that they were also female. One participant described interacting with some close male friends: “It gets weird at times . . . a lot of the time we’ll joke . . . [about] sexual things, girlfriends, or whatever, but when they get to that sort of phase of ‘Yeah, I shagged this girl,’ treat-

ing women as objects, that’s where I kind of like recoil. But it’s interesting that they *do* get comfortable enough to go there around me, cause it’s not something you do around women very much” (P-03). Several respondents gave examples of men who seemed to be threatened by them, however, particularly when they were considered to be in competition.

Relating in the Professional World: The Challenge of Securing Respect

The participants described being largely comfortable in their work environments. Although some reported needing to be closeted or trying to pass as heterosexual, many did not. One woman described her butchness as a workplace asset, “I think that they have learned to treat me as an equal and view me as professional when I present myself as a butch. They can argue with me about things more openly, but also they have this respect.” (P-02). Unfortunately, there also were stories about workplace harassment, sometimes related to being lesbian and other times to being butch. One woman reported, “If you’re butch you’re gonna get more grief than a woman who looks feminine. So you’re gonna have a few more battles than a femme girl” (P-01). Many of the butches learned to avoid or ignore harassment or would try to protect themselves by changing jobs or by seeming tougher.

Discrimination and Harassment: Pressures to Be Inauthentic

All of the participants described social pressures to change their gender expression; these took the form of familial or peer pressures or harassment and discrimination. Most frequently, women described being harassed by strangers. They were identified as lesbian and were called derogatory names, chased, threatened, chastised, and sent out of women’s restrooms or activities. Participants described being stared at, having parents pull children away from them, having men act threateningly, and having people be rude to them in general. The butch women described their harassment as different from that of femme lesbians, who were thought to face sexual harassment more often, but aggressive harassment less often.

Participants described different reactions to harassment and discrimination. Depending on their mood, social context demands, and level of safety, they could avoid or ignore difficulties, become angry

or confrontational, or appear tough and wait. Some women would encourage people to expand their gender categories: “Well, I usually pop a few witty sayings . . . I’ll let them know I have a brain . . . and that usually throws them for a loop, and then I become immediately charming and likeable and then they like me and they’re really confused” (P-03). Decisions about whether or not to correct others and how to deal with harassment occurred daily for some of the women. It was largely because of these shared tribulations that many women in the community had a great sense of respect for butches, as they courageously challenged gender norms despite the personal risks entailed.

Being Political and Butch: Advocating Authenticity

For many of the participants their butch identity developed in conjunction with the need to be ready to take stands on political or interpersonal conflicts. Many of the women were regularly mistaken as men or faced discrimination when their gender was unclear. They described having to stand up for themselves and protect their partners in a variety of contexts. One interviewee said, “I don’t want to leave that part of me, I want to fight for it. I say ‘This is the way that I am, you’re going to accept me the way that I am . . .’” (P-02). Being butch itself was seen as a political act. By adopting this gender presentation, they made lesbianism visible in society and acted to broaden the category of women. “Women who are butch don’t look like women in general so that confuses people concerning gender . . . and makes them think” (P-01). Women described opening up dialogues about gender diversity at times, for instance, by asking why their gender was important within the context at hand and by using other’s confusion to create a teachable moment. The women took pride in their advocacy role, and they believed that the serious daily risks they took could help to sensitize others about women’s gender diversity and about lesbian existence.

Cultural Differences in Butch Identity

Butch identities were described in relation to socioeconomic class, time period, and geographic location. Participants described how their identities shifted in different geographic contexts and through the different political climates within the lesbian community. Women described feeling more comfort-

able identifying as butch in the 1980s than when the androgynous-feminist lesbians had rejected butch aesthetics in the 1970s. As well, they described butch-femme culture as more accepted within the working classes and their own experiences of greater discrimination within upper class contexts.

One participant described her experience as being butch, or “marimacha” in South America—where femmes were not recognized as lesbian, but rather as unfortunate heterosexual women who were seduced into a deviant relationship. She described the extreme dangers in being lesbian and the corresponding difficulties in conducting advocacy. Marriages of convenience were necessary, with lesbian and male homosexual couples marrying each other and cohabitating. She described her sense of liberation upon arriving in the United States and the challenges of adjusting to a culture where she could be out.

The Quest for Authenticity: The Core Category

Within a grounded-theory analysis, the core category is the theme that represents an important motif that runs across the other categories. The core category for this analysis is “Quest for Authenticity.” Through many of the themes previously described, butch women sought to remain authentic to their internal sense of gender while negotiating different aspects of their lives. They described pressures to be both too-feminine or too-masculine and the need to locate a method of being social, sexual, physical, and emotional that felt comfortable and true to themselves across a variety of situations. The development of comfort and pride in their gender expression is fundamental to their self-perception and relationships with others. Although the desire for authenticity is not unique to butch women, their quest was obscured in three ways: (1) by the confounding of sex and gender, which led to charges that their desired gender expression signified a *lack* of fidelity to their sex, (2) by the framing of gender as entirely essential, which at times led to pressures to be butch in a stereotypical or inauthentic manner, or (3) by the framing of gender as entirely constructed, which denied any intrinsic sense of gender that might drive a quest for authenticity. A discussion of the implications of this category follows.

DISCUSSION

An empirically-based model of contemporary butch gender was generated based upon reported

psychological and social experiences of women who share this identity. The development of such a model expands the appreciation of both women's and lesbians' identities by generating an understanding of the different ways one can be a woman or a lesbian. Also, it sheds light on social processes through which gender can be constructed. The acknowledgment of butch gender identity broadens the prevailing dichotomous gender system by emphasizing the independence of gender and physical sex.

Although the participants had diverse geographical origins, ages, socioeconomic classes, and occupations, they all shared an affiliation with one lesbian community, therefore readers should exercise caution when generalizing our findings to other communities. As well, it is important to note that many lesbians do not classify themselves as butch (or femme or androgynous) and so may not share a sense of gender with these participants. Although these interviewees held a unified understanding that their gender and sexual orientation were an intrinsic part of themselves, research suggests that different sets of women have distinct experiences of and motivations for being lesbian (see Kitzinger, 1987; Levitt & Horne, 2002).

Similarly, most of the discussion of sexuality in this study was in butch–femme terms, which reflects the norms of the participants and their community, although butch women also may have romantic relationships with women who are not femme-identified. Also, it is important to stress that gender identities within this community were not binary in formation; among their identities were “soft butches,” “androgynous women,” and “high femmes.” Although most women in the community described their gender in relation to butch–femme terms, there was also an acceptance that many women did not claim either identity.

Still, by allowing women to describe their own experiences and not relying on preexisting questionnaires, we enabled women to articulate the issues they thought were relevant to their gender and allowed for the inclusion of experiences that might otherwise have remained invisible. The study of women who have developed a butch gender identity that they experience as positive and healthy can enrich our understanding of both masculinity and femininity.

These findings present challenges to theorists who view butch gender as *either* a performative act or as biologically driven. Although it would require a separate article to provide an in-depth description of the ways that constructivist and essentialist components are combined in butch–femme identities, some central points can be presented.

The Construction of Authenticity

There are two main ways in which butch gender has been described as a construction. First, there has been the pejorative description of butch lesbians as “women aping men.” This misconstrual of butch-identity as “role-playing” is pervasive and trivializes the meaning of this gender. The implicit assumption is that butches' sex (female) should determine their gender (the expression of femininity), and therefore any divergence must be superficial imitation. Butch identities often are pathologized further through associations with antiegalitarianism, oppression, and developing or nonindustrialized cultures (e.g., Lynch & Reilly, 1986). For instance,

Many politically oriented lesbians in the United States object to role-playing as an extension of patriarchal repression. Yet there is widespread recognition that role-playing has been a part of lesbian behavior historically and continues to some extent. . . . If many American lesbians have largely abandoned role-playing, lesbians in Peru, Brazil, and the Philippines tend to accept it as an ordinary part of lesbian life and many actively perpetuate it. (Whitam, Daskalos, Sobolewski, & Padilla, 1998, p. 40)

In contrast, this study's core category, a quest for authenticity, challenges both the notion of artificiality and the conflation of sex and gender. As well, it emphasizes these women's accomplishment in creating a distinct “butch” gender identity with all the social, romantic, and personal complexities that characterize other genders.

Second, other constructivist theorists claim not that butch gender alone is a construction but rather that *all* genders are distinct from physical sex, and result instead from performative acts that have acquired cultural meaning through their repetition. Often such theorists view butch identity as subversive in that it brings to light this conflation of gender and sex, but they seem to imply that gender is entirely a social construction. For instance, Butler (1990/1999) communicates her hope that, if we made intelligible new gender identity possibilities, these “cultural configurations of sex and gender might then proliferate or, rather, their present proliferation might then become articulable within the discourses that establish cultural life, confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness” (p. 190).

Although we agree that butch gender does accomplish that aim, it is difficult to reconcile the understanding of gender as pure performance with the reports from our participants, many whom reported

“always” being butch. Their illustrations of this claim with multiple preschool memories of gender confusion (preceding many interactions with the culture at large), made clear that their sense of gender disparity was not experienced as either a volitional or intellectual decision as the term “performance” can suggest. Butler herself qualified her earlier writing in her 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble* (1990). “I would deny that all of the internal world of the psyche is but an effect of a stylized set of acts” (p. xv) and calls for a psychic theory of performativity at work. Although she locates agency within the act of signification and repetition of gender practice, this research suggests that there may be an agent *outside of* the performance who experiences comfort or discomfort with behaviors and then calls for either performative repetition or the questioning of cultural practices.

At the conclusion of this research, we do not wish to position lesbian gender as entirely based upon either a biological etiology or culturally embedded psychodynamic processes (e.g., Butler, 1998; Irigaray, 1996). These paradigms oversimplify lesbians’ experience. What seems important, instead, is that there is an early and strong sense of gender that is *experienced* as though it is biological in nature and that drives these women to maintain their gender differences, even in the face of the great discrimination that they face in the world (see Levitt & Horne, 2002). There appear to be at least three processes in interaction: Butch gender is (1) experienced as driven by an essential aspect that (2) is reflexively construed in relation to the available social constructions of gender and then (3) performed in relation to contextual and internal needs—by negotiating, in relation to one’s audience, the dual aims of securing social acceptance and maintaining authenticity to one’s inner sense of gender.

The Quest as Contextually Sensitive

Although an essential sense of butch gender clearly exists, there are social factors at play too, as all participants described adjusting their gender performance in relation to the supportiveness of their environments as well as their needs at the time. Desires to be political, sexual, safe, and interpersonally connected led participants to display their butch gender differently across contexts. When in mainstream society, they had to decide whether to “push” the edge of acceptability and maintain their sense of authenticity or to tone down their gender performance, as that authenticity might distance others or engender threat.

When in lesbian spaces, the participants were more likely to “play” with their butchness and celebrate a freedom of sexuality and gender, but they might have to resist pressures to be *too* stereotypically butch.

The women had an internal sense of gender that they experienced as essential, but they still were conscious that naming this gender as “butch” was a social construction. It was due to this awareness that they could feel at ease in shaping their own gender—as there is no single correct way to be butch; in this way, butch identity development is a postmodern process. From this critical stance, they could assess which aspects of gender presentation felt comfortable, and they could consciously approach gender formation with a sense of self-exploration and creativity. The awareness of their agency within the construction of their butch gender development heightened their sense of possibility, and so the women adopted this identity as a label for a personal *reflexivity* that enhanced their ability to be themselves, rather than as a guide that prescribed how they should be.

The freedom to construe an idiosyncratic butch identity was stressed in multiple interviews as women shifted from an understanding of gender as dichotomous to a realization of gender continuums (e.g., Lloyd, 1997; Weston, 1995). Unlike in the butch-femme culture in the 1950s and 1960s (see Lapovsky-Kennedy & Davis, 1993), the participants’ identities were not socially mandated, but were claimed after an introspective process and a realization that its meanings within lesbian culture provided a sense of experiential validation.

The historicity of the current realization(s) of butch gender can be traced. Contemporary butch gender has emerged at a time when butch women have been able to access an essentialist gender identity from the 1950s that is buttressed by the modern struggle for same-sex civil rights which argues that sexual orientation is innate (e.g., Greenberg & Bailey, 1993). At the same time, they have had to reconcile these essentialist perspectives with feminists who are largely aligning themselves with a constructivist approach to identity formation (e.g., Butler, 1990/1999) and question foundational understandings of any gender. The convergence of these constructivist and essentialist perspectives has created the possibility for the reconstrual of butch gender experience in which women can describe comfortably altering their gender performances alongside of their conviction that their gender results from an internal gender experience. Butch women draw attention to the complex agentic process of gender identity development, which may

entail the performance of socially constructed aspects of an essential gender.

Butch as a Transgendered Identity

Butch women can be considered a part of the transgendered community, as they fall outside of traditional male and female categories (e.g., Feinberg, 1993). By altering the image of a woman, and by generating a distinctly different gender performance, they traverse the boundaries of gender. Currently, however, much writing under the rubric of “transgender” is being focused on transsexualism so that, when it is discussed, butch gender often is cast as a precondition for women who later transition into men (FtMs). Theorists or therapists who only explore processes of creating or increasing gender-sex congruence, rather than the maintenance of incongruence within transgendered identities may negate the experience and desires of butch women and contribute to the existing tensions between butch and FtM communities (for a description of these tensions see Halberstam, 1998b; Hale, 1998).

In this study, some of the women considered themselves to be “transgendered” whereas others did not use this label in their self-descriptions. A few of the women had considered gender reassignment surgery earlier in their lives as a way to find female partners or to adapt to societal expectations and pressures, but all said that, even then, they did not have an intrinsic *desire* to be male. When they found a community that introduced an alternative gender category (i.e., butch) they experienced a freedom from a binary construct of gender and were allowed to develop a sense of gender that validated their own transcendence. After having developed a sense of confidence in their gender identity, the participants described becoming comfortable and proud of the butch parts of themselves that had been the source of their ostracism since childhood.

Future Directions

In a recent symposium (Bess & Firestein, 2001), researchers described the difficulties in some transgendered women’s support groups, as the transsexual women focused discussion on drug and surgical changes, and other group members, who did not desire biological change, remained uninvolved or left the group unaided. Although some resources are be-

ing developed to help butch and femme women to develop positive identities (e.g., Levitt & Bigler, 2003), it is important to educate counselors and therapists about multiple transgendered experiences so that a variety of options are available to the development of a positive and authentic sense of gender. Butch women can be referred to web resources, to literature, and, depending on their locale, to community activities that support their identities.

The generation of resources for butch girls and women can help them to develop a strong and positive identification as they face challenges that are unique from those faced by other lesbians. Because of their childhood confusion about their sexual orientation and gender (see Levitt & Horne, 2002), which is often experienced by others as well as by themselves, butch girls may face additional challenges in developing a healthy sense of self-esteem. They can face great discrimination and harassment because of their gender atypicality (see Herek, 1995; Levitt & Horne, 2002) and accrue stressful experiences that may continue through adulthood. Our data highlight ways in which butch experience may be in need of separate study from lesbian experience in general. As well, our results demonstrate the complexity of gender identity. Gender identity development can be multilayered and entails an internal sense of gender that is understood and comes to be performed in relation to the signification and meaning of genders within different social contexts, an identity process guided by an agentic reflexivity and desire for authenticity.

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