

The complexity of Butch and Femme among sexual minority women in the 21st century

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Sixty-four sexual minority women (22 femme, 21 butch, and 21 who identified as both or neither) were asked open-ended questions about butch and femme. The sample ranged from those who considered butch/femme to be core aspects of their identity to those who found the terms meaningless or outdated. Many women mentioned appearance and/or masculinity/femininity when describing butch and femme. Women were equally divided about whether butch/femme was important to them, and also whether or not it was related to sexual activity. Few women divided housework or childcare according to butch/femme roles. Participants often stated that bisexual women were likely to be femme, yet few bisexual women in this sample identified as either butch or femme. Concepts of butch (or 'stud') and femme were perceived as more common in the African American and Latina communities and less so in Native American communities.

Keywords: *butch; femme; lesbian identity; bisexual identity; queer identity.*

Consider the following quotes:

Butch – a woman who takes on (and usually improves) any or all of the aspects of a traditional heterosexual male's role, especially in relation to her partner. For instance, a butch can be butch because she wears men's jeans and drinks cheap beer and loves basketball, or because she opens doors for her lady, kills spiders for her lady, or refuses to let her lady drive. (Bristol, white lesbian, 20s)

I love gender fluidity in general, and the fluidity between butch, boy, FTM, and femme in one or between two people is just really fun to watch. I love the mystery of a gender presentation that's really hard to pin down. (Brendon, white genderqueer, 20s)

I resist the binary completely... who came up with these categories? (Butch, African American transman, 40s)

LESBIANS AND BISEXUAL WOMEN have used the terms 'butch' and 'femme' for over 100 years (Gibson & Meem, 2002), but the meanings of these terms are vague. Because lesbians were considered to be masculine in appearance, gender role behaviour, and choice of (female) partners, the word 'butch' referred to the ways in which lesbians were 'mannish' (Gibson & Meem, p.3). Femme lesbians were feminine in appearance and gender role behaviour, but subverted or destabilised concepts of gender in their lesbian identity and choice of female partners (Haller, 2009).

With the advent of the second-wave feminist movement in the 1970s, however, androgyny became the norm for lesbians (Loulan, 1990). Lesbians who didn't appear androgynous were termed 'politically incorrect'. In particular, 'old culture' lesbians who still identified as butch or femme roles were criticised (Loulan, 1990, p.41).

The 1980s and 1990s reflected greater diversity in the lesbian communities, as lesbians became more visible and lesbian communities became more multicultural. The lesbian 'baby boom' resulted in preg-

nant lesbians and lesbians rearing children. Postmodernism and queer theory questioned gender roles and gender identity. Butch/femme terms were reclaimed, but with a difference (see Faderman, 1992). Now women could change gender roles and appearance from one day to the next, or even dress in gender-blending ways. A butch no longer was limited to finding a femme lover. And some women now identified as transgender instead of butch.

There has been considerable interest in contemporary understandings of butch/femme in the humanities, with books such as *Persistent Desire: A Femme/Butch Reader* (Nestle, 1992), *Female Masculinity* (Halberstam, 1998) and *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Abate, 2008). The book *Stud: Dispelling the Myths* (Kamau, 2008) focuses on images and poetry about female masculinity in the African American communities. Popular books such as *The Femme's Guide to the Universe* (Rednour, 2000) and *Butch is a Noun* (Bergman, 2010), among many others, are aimed at young queer women.

Recent years have seen emphasis on the role that socio-economic class and race/ethnicity played in butch/femme identities, particularly in working-class settings and among African American and Latina communities (Lapovsky Kennedy & Davis, 1993). Increasingly, scholars have described butch/femme identities in historical or contemporary contexts across a number of cultures in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas (for overviews, see Blackwood & Wieringa, 1999; Morgan & Wieringa, 2006; Murray & Roscoe, 2001).

In contrast, there has been relatively little psychological research about butch/femme roles, and this research has assumed a one-dimensional understanding of the terms butch and femme. For example, Singh et al. (1999) asked lesbians to self-identify as butch or femme on a single item, and then compared butches and femmes on such variables as waist-to-hip ratio, testosterone levels, and desire to have children. Bailey et al. (1997) asked lesbians to identify as butch or

femme on a single item, and asked them to rate the attractiveness of lesbians in personal advertisements. An exception to such monolithic conceptions of butch/femme is research by Levitt and Horne (2002), who asked women to self-identify as butch, femme, androgynous, or other; these variables were then examined in light of sexual orientation, feminism, outness, and discrimination.

There is no question that many contemporary sexual minority women use the terms butch and femme as forms of self-identity and vehicles for understanding and describing women in their communities. The current project focused on the complexity of these terms and what they mean to sexual minority women in contemporary US communities. Does butch/femme refer to physical appearance, so that women can be identified as butch or femme via photographs or visual media? How does butch/femme relate to concepts of masculinity/femininity? What role does being butch or femme play in sexual activity? Is there a relationship between butch/femme and division of housework and childcare? Are these concepts different for women of different age cohorts, ethnic/racial identities, or sexual orientations?

Method

Announcements of the project were placed on internet listservs, and asked women to distribute the announcement to other listservs of which they were a part. Announcements emphasised that this study was looking for lesbian and bisexual women in specific age cohorts (20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and over 50), in rural and urban settings across the US, across income levels, and from diverse ethnic and racial groups, and that I would conduct telephone interviews with interested participants. Announcements also explained that this project focused on their understanding of butch/femme, and that I was also interested in women who do not find the terms butch or femme to be useful or representative. I interviewed 34 women over the telephone and four (local women)

in person. I had planned to conduct 40 interviews, but the announcement appeared on a number of internet sites and, as women contacted me near the end of the project, I asked them to reply to my interview questions via e-mail – 26 women did so. Thus the entire sample consisted of 64 women, which is quite large for a qualitative study. Not surprisingly, women who e-mailed responses tended to be younger (32 years on average) than those who I interviewed in person (48 years).

The participants came from 20 US states and two provinces of Canada. They ranged in age from 19 to 64, with one woman under age 20, 15 in their 20s, 14 in their 30s, 14 in their 40s, 11 in their 50s, and nine in their 60s. About one-third of participants (20 out of 64) were women of colour (African American, Asian American, Latina, Middle Eastern American, Native American, and biracial or biethnic).

The sample was about equally divided into those who identified as butch, those who identified as femme, and those who did not identify clearly as butch or femme. Of the 22 women who identified as femme, 15 of them identified as lesbian, one as dyke, one as bisexual, one as queer/bisexual, and four as queer. Of the 21 women who identified as butch or equivalent (two used the term 'stud,' which is more common in the African American communities and one used the term 'boi'), 11 identified as lesbian, one as dyke, two as gay, one as bisexual, two as queer, one as transgender, one as two-spirit (a term often used in Native American communities), and two did not identify with any of these terms. The remaining 21 women did not identify clearly as butch or femme; of these women, 11 said they were neither butch nor femme, three said 'other,' one 'in between butch and femme,' one 'medium-to-femme,' two androgynous, two both butch and femme, and one was a former butch who now identified as a transman (this participant came out as trans a few weeks before the interview and is the only one in the sample to use the pronoun 'he'). Of the

women who did not identify clearly as butch or femme, eight identified as lesbian, eight as bisexual, two as queer, one as transgender, one as two-spirit, and one as other.

Data were collected using a qualitative research methodology. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, tapes were sent back to participants for them to keep, and transcribed interviews were e-mailed to participants for their comments. Only a few women had comments (usually providing more detail, or asking me to change identifying information), and these changes were incorporated into the transcripts. Emails were edited in order to delete real names and addresses. Everyone was asked to provide a pseudonym.

The study focused on the following questions:

- Describe what the terms 'butch' and 'femme' mean to you. What are some characteristics of a butch and a femme woman? How important or valuable are these terms to you?
- How are conceptions of butch/femme similar to or difference from conceptions of masculine/feminine?
- How do you think your lesbian/bisexual communities view butch and femme? Is there a difference between lesbian and bisexual women in how butch or femme they are or supposed to be?
- How do you think mainstream heterosexual society views lesbians or bisexual women that are butch or femme? How are butches versus femmes accepted by families of origin, in the workplace, as mothers? Are hate crimes directed at women based on masculine appearance or attributes?
- How would you describe yourself in butch/femme terms? Has your self-identity about being butch/femme changed over time? In what ways? Are there situations where you feel more butch or femme? What are they?
- Do you currently have a lover? Describe your lover in butch/femme terms. How is this similar to or different from previous

lovers? Are you attracted to women based on certain physical or personality characteristics? If so, how are these related to someone being butch or femme? How is being butch or femme related to sexual activity?

- Describe which household tasks you and your lover do, and who does which tasks. (If children) who gave birth to each child? Describe which childcare tasks you and your lover do, and who does which tasks.

Results

The results were interpreted using thematic analysis, and aimed to provide a descriptive account of participants' experiences about butch and femme. As Braun and Clarke (2006) have described, thematic analysis is used to search for themes or patterns within an entire data set, and can be used within most theoretical frameworks. The questions (listed above) were chosen to form predetermined themes but also to allow for the emergence of new categories and subcategories from the participants' interviews. Direct quotes are used as examples below, followed by the participant's pseudonym, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and age decade.

What is butch/femme in the 21st century?

Participants had a large and diverse understanding of the concepts of butch and femme, resulting in the following themes: (1) identity; (2) appearance and clothing; (3) masculinity/femininity; (4) lovers/sexual activity; and (5) division of housework and childcare. Additionally, the concepts of butch and femme were not meaningful to some women, and women varied widely in how important these concepts were to them. Finally, the last section describes butch/femme across sexual identity, age, and race/ethnicity.

Identity

Fifteen women (23 per cent) described butch/femme in terms of identity, often as a very core part of themselves:

'For me, a butch/femme is a person who has an identity but it goes deep down inside; it's not just what it appears on the outside... I think it's the whole connection on a spiritual level. Even though physically you might be male or female, I think souls are also male/female or masculine/feminine.'
(Angel, Latina Mestiza lesbian, 40s)

Bluestocking (white lesbian, 50s) felt that women were born butch or femme: 'I honestly believe that in as much people are born gay, I believe we're also born butch or femme. And so one is the yin and one is the yang and there are so many degrees of feminine and butch. I'm quite feminine and I always have been and I like butches who are masculine but I think that they need to support one another and love one another and step up to the plate and create a life.' Fiona (white queer femme, late teens) viewed butch and femme as 'distinct genders'. Jackie (white lesbian, 40s) stated: 'I was butch long before I was a lesbian. It seems even more core to my being than my sexual orientation.' Jeanne (white lesbian, 40s) defined butch and femme as 'lesbian gender.' Simone (African American lesbian, 40s) said she uses 'these terms to identify different types of lesbians, like a race.' Quinn (white lesbian, 30s) wrote: 'Butches are a gender, femmes are a gender, andron are a gender, sporty dykes, artsy dykes, hippie chicks, etc., all allow for the range of human expression and the finding of like-minded friends.'

As these examples demonstrate, when women are describing butch/femme as more core than sexual orientation, or equivalent to race in categorical importance, this highlights the centrality of butch/femme in their lives. Women who conceptualised butch/femme as an identity usually viewed these concepts as central to all aspects of their lives.

Appearance and clothing

The majority of respondents (36, or 78 per cent) mentioned appearance or clothing when defining who was butch or femme.

Lizette (Latina lesbian, 30s) said 'Well, butches and femmes can be characterised by external qualities. The way they look... Certain mannerisms.' Charlie (Latina lesbian, 40s) defined butch/femme as follows: '...basically butch denotes to me in terms of women someone who is much more masculine, someone who tends to carry herself in a different way and femme would denote someone who is a lot more feminine and who wears more dresses whereas a butch might be more comfortable in what would be considered men's clothing, maybe t-shirts or button-down scale.' Charlie herself identifies as androgynous, which she defines as: 'What it means is that I feel comfortable going in between the two. On days off or on my time off, like right now I'm wearing sweatpants, t-shirt, and sweatshirt. But when I dress up for work or for special occasions I often wear skirts, dresses or suits... I'm comfortable moving within those two types of manners of dressing.'

Mandy (white lesbian, 20s) also described butch/femme appearance: 'Butch lesbians define their gender in masculine terms and demonstrate masculine qualities of appearance. Butches, to me are 'manly' women. A butch woman will often dress in menswear, even so far as wearing mens' underclothes and 'packing' [wearing a prosthetic penis]. To me, a butch lesbian is not to be confused with someone who wears androgynous clothing or appears androgynous. Butches are not androgynous, they are butch, which means they look like men. Femmes are lesbians who identify as very feminine. Femme lesbians are very comfortable embracing their femininity while also being lesbians. Femmes often dress in a similar fashion as heterosexual women. Sometimes butch and femme individuals display qualities of appearance of butch/femme very visibly and sometimes it is more subtle.'

Lukes and Land (1990) have emphasised the importance of appearance when sexual minorities want to be noticeable to others. They state (p.159): 'However, because sexual minorities are not easily identifiable to those

in other cultures, they also are not easily identifiable to each other. Because there is no protective coloration of the group, this can inhibit identification with their minority group members. In the complex web of when and how homosexuals decide to disclose their homosexuality, some may choose to do so by dressing in a stereotypical manner.' Thus it is not surprising that women who identify as butch or femme take on the appearance, posture, clothing, and other attributes of these identities, in order to be recognisable as butch or femme in their communities.

On the other hand, some women emphasised that appearance is not related to being butch or femme. As Doreen (white queer woman, 20s) explained, 'So someone can look butch or femme to me, but they're not 'really' butch or femme unless they self-identify that way.' Kimberly (white lesbian, 40s) said 'I think you can look butch and feel femme or look femme and feel butch.' And Rose (white queer/bisexual woman, 20s) stated: 'In my opinion, appearance does not dictate behaviour.'

Gender roles and relationship to masculinity/femininity

About one-third of participants defined butch/femme in terms of gender roles. Jennie (white lesbian, 40s) described this as follows: 'And my knowledge of actual butch and femme couples is that the femme is extrovert, the organiser, more interested in keeping up with friends and literally has the more feminine qualities in terms of girlfriends. And the butch, regardless of how butch they may be, are typically a little less social or interested in being social, doesn't mean they're anti-social, but just not as much so, less verbal, stereotypical male sort of situation.' Women mentioned many examples of gender roles, from toy preferences and activities in early childhood to current interests, hobbies, jobs, and personality characteristics.

When asked specifically whether butch/femme is related to masculinity or

femininity, respondents were about equally divided on whether or not this was the case. In fact, Dex (white and Latina lesbian, 30s) preferred the terms 'masculine/feminine' instead of butch/femme because they carry less stigma and seem clearer to her than butch and femme.

Ronya (Middle Eastern American gay woman, 20s) considered butch/femme important terms because she had a transgender lover and so people assume she is heterosexual. She said 'And so I find that often I'm kind of forced to come out over and over and over again... and that is even in the gay community where I almost have to prove that I'm gay enough to be included.'

The terms 'masculinity' and 'femininity' themselves are complex, as Lee (white bisexual woman, 60s) clarified: 'I experience myself as fairly androgynous – somewhere in the middle of the scale in terms of gender identity. But that doesn't mean I remotely am interested in being a male person – I just don't experience myself as particularly feminine in most of the usual ways that that term is used.' Margaret (white, woman-identified-butch, 30s) stated emphatically: 'Butch is not about masculine anything. Butch is about being in a woman's body and expressing a femaleness that is not attracted to men, is not mimicking men, in fact a being that is sort of the anti-male. Butch is a woman loving being. Men are basically women hating or at least women loathing.' And Tav (white woman, 60s) wrote: 'Masculine' and 'feminine' are traits defined by our culture, or society, as being most closely associated with the society's widely accepted genders, 'man' and 'woman'. 'Butch' and 'femme' are actually genders.'

Lovers and sexual activity

Generally speaking, women who identified as femme had butch lovers and vice versa. Of the 17 women who were currently in a relationship and who identified as femme, 15 (88 per cent) had butch lovers, and of the 17 women who were currently in a relationship and who identified as butch, 13 (76 per cent) had

femme lovers. Twelve women (19 per cent) were not currently in a relationship. Three women were currently married to men, another woman was currently dating men, and two women had lovers who were transgender. Three women were in polyamorous relationships; as Elizabeth (white queer woman, 20s) wrote: 'I currently have three lovers – two of whom are on the continuum of butch, and one who is more femme.'

Twenty women (31 per cent) felt that butch/femme was related to sexual activity, such as who initiated sex, who was a top or bottom, who used a strap-on dildo, etc. Twenty-three women (36 per cent) stated that butch/femme was not related to sexual activity. Although these percentages are fairly similar, the latter group had a lot more to say about sexual activity. Kate (white queer woman, 20s) stated: 'I would say that one place that our butch/femme dynamics don't totally extend is the bedroom.' Katherine (white bisexual woman, 30s) said: 'Neither term connotes anything sexual to me.' Susannah (white lesbian, 20s) described this issue as follows: 'There are many stereotypes about how being butch or femme relates to sexual activity, but I think they're ridiculous, sexist and damaging. Butches and femmes can both be tops, bottoms, switches or something else entirely, can both enjoy penetrating a partner and being penetrated, etc., and none of those things make a person more or less butch or femme. Butches and femmes have sex together in every possible configuration, and also in butch/butch and femme/femme pairings, and with people of every other sex and gender. The more the merrier, I say.'

An unexpected theme was that women felt more feminine when with butch women compared to sexual relationships with men. As Casey (white lesbian, 30s) explained: 'Oh, there is definitely a difference. I feel much more like a woman with a butch woman. I think with men I never really knew what my role was, I was never really comfortable with that. It was always more a matter of appearing the way you are supposed to

appear... I think that butch women are actually much more characteristic of what we think men are, than men actually are. They are those things that we say men are, they're controlled, they're not as emotional.' Similarly, Leyla (Middle Eastern American woman, 30s) said, 'I find myself more feminine with women... But I'm not sure whether it's more the attempt to make sure you know that your rights and your position in the relationship are more securely identified.' And Max (white lesbian, 40s) said: 'I just was having a conversation with someone a couple of weeks ago who said that when she was with a man, she got much butch because she didn't want to be seen in that really feminine way. Whereas with women, she feels more free to play with the feminine pretty side of things. And that made sense to me.'

Energy and vibes

Some women maintained that they could always tell whether women were butch or femme due to 'energy' or 'vibes' that other women emitted. According to these respondents, it was impossible to hide butch/femme identity, or, perhaps, ignore one's own sexual response to their presence.

'I've always said I can I.D. a butch naked, and have done so in hot tubs. I'll tell ya the gal who will get out and put on 'men's' clothes. How do I know? By the way she takes up space and holds her body. How she sits/stands. Her energetic expression' (Bella, white bisexual woman, 30s). Max (white lesbian, 40s) referred to butch/femme as 'some kind of energetic way of relating'. Brendon (white, genderqueer, 30s) defined butch as: 'Butch is beautiful. It's brash and brawny, or beguiling and sensitive. It's more of an energy – either you are or you aren't. Or you are under some circumstances. It's something that you notice about someone even if they're in the most feminine of attire, or something that you see from across a crowded room.' Sarah (white lesbian, 60s) said 'I know who's butch by what my response is to them.'

Opposites attract

Some women defined butch and femme in terms of opposites, yin and yang, positive and negative ions. For example, Charlie (Latina lesbian, 40s) described the relationship as: '...maybe like a symbiotic relationship where both are getting what they want but with different approaches. I think the butch really likes to feel needed like to feel important and that she's pleasing her femme and the femme does like to be pleased and so it works out in the end.' Ergun (African American and Native American transgender stud, 30s) stated: 'I feel that we are naturally chemically attracted to each other. On some mysterious level, we fit like a glove. True there are numerous femme/femme relationships that last for years. But, there is an invisible dynamic that exists between butches and femmes! There is a mystique!' Rachel (white lesbian, 50s) said: 'To me the most fundamental definition is something about erotic energy. I think that's the most meaningful and useful way for me to describe it. It's something about the complementarity of sexual energies. Even when people are fairly close together on the spectrum, there is some way that this small difference between them becomes a complementarity in the interaction and that is an erotic dynamic in most people's relationships.'

Bristol (white lesbian, 20s) was intrigued that, in her experience, femmes were often defined in relationship to butches: 'Femme—a woman who takes on any or all aspects of a traditional heterosexual female's role, almost exclusively in relation to her partner. Women who simply 'act like women' are not usually considered femme, because the incarnation of 'woman' is considered inherently feminine. Being femme usually refers to your relationship to your female partner or partners. I find it interesting that (in my experience) butches can be butches in and of themselves, but femmes are usually only considered femmes when attached to a butch (as in: 'Oh, a femme and her butch') or another femme lesbian (as in: 'Wait! Two femmes dating each other?').'

Relationship to division of housework and childcare

Nearly everyone agreed that butch and femme identities had little to do with division of household tasks among women in same-sex couples. Few women had children, but those that did similarly divided childcare across both butch and femme roles. Similarly, the majority of women did not relate the terms butch and femme to power and control.

Lance (white dyke, 20s) described housework as follows: 'There is no specific division of labour (except she does roaches, and I do pilot lights) – we prefer to do chores together, but that's not often practical time-wise.' Mandy (white lesbian, 20s) described equal division of housework due to her feminism: 'My current lover would very easily let me take over all the cleaning and cooking and she is very good at home repair and would like to do all home repair/maintenance tasks. Unfortunately, I am a feminist and insist that household chores should be shared. Although she would never say it, I do believe that she enjoys it when I take over the chores that are associated with women like cooking and cleaning but I do not enjoy taking on the role of 'the wife'.'

A few women had a more traditional set-up for housework, where femmes did more traditionally female tasks and butches the male ones. Julie (white queer femme, 40s) has a partner who is a transman. Her partner does the outdoor work and uses tools; Julie does the cooking. Bluestocking (white lesbian, 50s) thought back on her relationships with women and said that she, a femme, had had quite traditional division of household tasks with previous butch lovers: 'Usually quite the traditional role. The cook, the one who takes care of the house, the one who does the decorating, the one who – my one lover had a young child and I cared for the child. The traditional female role and the butch did the outdoor work. In our case we had a ranch and took care of their horses and the ranch and all that. Although I was the one who worked. And that's not all that

uncommon. Less common today, in fact considerably less common today but in my mom's time butches were quite unemployable so it was almost always the femmes who worked.'

Green and Mitchell (2002) have described how heterosexual couples are the real butches and femmes, given that even today, there is strong division of housework and childcare along gender lines in heterosexual relationships. In that regard, butch and femme women are models of equality. For example, Liz (Native American and white gay woman, 40s) explained that she was in a long-distance relationship and was looking forward to her lover moving back soon. Liz stated 'I'm retired military, kind of disabled vet, so I don't work, I'd be the stay-at-home butch, I'd be taking care of the house and all that.' It is hard to imagine a heterosexual man, retired from the military, looking forward to housework in the same way.

Butch and femme are not meaningful or not a good fit

Not everyone considered butch or femme to be good concepts for themselves or others. Some women struggled with these concepts during the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, others identified with both or neither, or invented new terms.

The era of the women's movement was hard. Several women described their attempts to 'pass' as androgynous during the second wave of the feminist movement. For example, Sycamore (Native American two-spirit woman, 50s) said 'It was hard to find femmes back then, by the way. They all looked the same [as butches].' Margaret (white woman-identified butch, 50s) wrote: 'You know, being butch in the heat of the women's movement sucked because they all decided that sexual orientation was political and that being butch was somehow a patriarchal expression. Total bullshit – way too intellectual to be real. What a story – fantasy. Being butch in the androgynous 1990s sucked – once again going against the grain

in a sub-population; the shaming for deviancy is mean and cruel. Now, it seems that butch is a lost identity. There is so much pressure on young butch women to transition - and they follow the crowd, call each other he, boi, take T <testosterone>. - I'm a dinosaur... last of a fading from visibility breed.'

Both or in between

Several women identified with the terms butch and femme but identified as both or in between. These women often described situations or relationships where they switch from butch to femme or vice versa. For example, Streetpunk (Native American two-spirit woman, 60s) said she was 'both or neither... I'm really situational.' Simone (African American bisexual woman, 40s) described herself as 'neither or both at the same time; it depends on my situation, the people I am surrounded by, almost chameleon-like.' Mariel (white bisexual woman, 30s) wrote: 'Generally I consider myself a bit of both. In fact I sort of have what I call 'girl mode' and 'boy mode,' to borrow terms from UK comedian and cross-dresser Eddie Izzard. When I'm with a woman, I notice I go more toward 'boy mode' - my voice lowers a bit, and I just FEEL more masculine. I don't feel I have to smile and bring my voice up high to please people so much. Even the way I walk and stand and carry myself is affected. I'm not sure if that makes sense, but it's just what happens - admittedly it's been a loooong time since I was with a woman sexually, but that's what happens with me. I often adopt this mode, even now, when I'm alone, too. But I work in retail and I am aware that I usually switch over into 'girl mode' when I'm at work, I think to appear more approachable and less threatening to customers.'

Other women described ways in which they were both butch and femme, such as Maureen (white bisexual woman, 30s): 'I'm not exactly sure how to identify with the butch/femme terms. I have short hair but that is due to my time spent in the army and

discovering the joys of not having to deal with long hair. I dress for comfort, but when I have to attend a black-tie affair I will pull out the heels and evening dress. I don't really wear make-up much anymore, but that is because my partner says she likes me better without it. My body type (read: large breasts) keeps me from ever being mistaken for a man. As a child I was always labeled a tomboy, but I was raised by my father after the death of my mother when I was four. My partner tells me I think like a man at times, but also tells me occasionally to 'stop being such a girl.' I guess I would have to say I'm somewhere in between butch and femme.'

Some women invented their own terms. Pan (Middle Eastern American bisexual woman, 30s) described herself as a 'glitter butch' - 'I'm a little flamboyant and I like sparkly things. I like glitter a lot. I like bright colours you know, pink... And, yeah, I like the gender fuck you know, the mixing up the male and female. It feels more 'right' for me. I guess there are a lot of people who are not traditionally gendered who tend more towards androgyny. But I've never really felt that way. I've always felt really male and very female.'

Meredith (white lesbian, 20s) identified as a 'faggot butch' because 'Well, because I'm not actually - some of the trappings of butch I don't partake in. Like the athleticism, the muscular being, sort of scowling and speaking in a very deep voice... I'm like 5'2" and sort of expressive. So I feel like the ways in which my butchness is compromised is towards a more effeminate rather than feminine - if that makes sense. It's also about the dynamic that I'm attracted to and that I like participating in is more the homosocial male dynamic rather than the butch/femme heterosexual dynamic.'

Terms are not meaningful

Women who did not identify with the terms butch or femme often felt the concepts were part of the past: 'I tend to think of them as a part of our history but not as anything very currently valuable. It's kind of limited...

binary' (Annie, white bisexual woman, 60s). 'These terms are very loaded for me. In a sense, when I hear them paired together, they remind me of a bygone era when lesbians lurked in shadows of alleys looking for sex' (Paige, white queer woman, 20s).

Other women avoided labels in general. As Maureen (white lesbian, 30s) said, 'I am not big on labels and feel people are so complex and change with differing situations that these labels are often useless to me.'

How important is butch/femme?

Participants also varied widely in how central or important these concepts were to them. Whereas 27 (42 per cent) specifically mentioned that these terms were important to them, eight women (12.5 per cent) said the terms were not important, and the rest (about half the sample) were not clear about this. Some indicated that their communities expected women to identify as either butch or femme. Other women used these terms in dating situations, or during sex, still others said that being butch or femme did not predict sexual activity.

Several women mentioned that butch and femme were useful words in conversation with others: 'Well, they're damn convenient. And I really think if we didn't have them, we'd have to make them up because... the discourse about people's experience of their gender identity and their gender representation is so – is such a paucity of language that thank goodness we have this little smidgen of language and we certainly need more' (Lee, white bisexual woman, 60s). Ziwa (white bisexual woman, 20s) stated: 'Labels are important for me in this context the same way that they are for me as a teacher. They help me find resources and find friends who are similar to me. If I had not embraced the term of femme, I would have never found other femmes, and then later realised that there was such a term as tomboy femme, and that I was not the only one who fit that.'

'Butch/femme identities have a major part in life because they dictate a lot of things that I judge on a person-by-person basis and it is how a lot of women in my community decide how to date whom they date' (Aisha, Black and Puerto Rican lesbian, 20s). 'Vastly valuable. Especially femme. Rather, they are equally important to me, but butch is something I have always been aware of, whereas femme was like a secret the world kept from me until my 20s, so it's been more of a revelation with the accompanying excitement' (Lance, white dyke, 20s). Margaret (white woman-identified-but, 50s) wrote, 'These terms are very valuable to me – without them I feel invisible.' Sarah (white lesbian, 60s) mourned the passing of these terms as follows: 'I've heard really heartfelt sorrow among butch women of my generation feeling like everybody's leaving them and feeling really peculiar about that.'

Women who did not perceive the terms butch or femme as meaningful or important often indicated that these terms were outdated, more common before the current feminist movement, or not true in their more rural setting. Lenn (African American lesbian, 50s) came out in the 1970s and said about her lover at the time 'We did not consider ourselves a butch/femme couple. Neither one of us claimed the identities because it was not PC [politically correct], not feminist.' Quinn (white lesbian, 30s) felt that 'butch/femme identities are denigrated by 'enlightened' lesbians as a 'shameful' part of lesbian herstory.' Rose (white queer/bisexual woman, 20s) stated: 'I think that a good portion of the lesbian/bi community sees butch and femme as a relic. They were roles that the queer women of the 1940s and 1950s hid behind to avoid persecution and pass as straight couples. However, many queer women still believe that butches need to date femmes, and that butch-but, or femme-femme relationships are fundamentally flawed. Personally, I disagree with this. I also perceive a lot more pressure on lesbian women to choose either butch or femme as a label for themselves and their gender presen-

tation. In the old days, queer women whose appearance was androgynous were labeled 'kiki' and shunned by the community. Bisexual women seem to have more freedom to be fluid and undefined due to the often fluid nature of their orientation, but we also face prejudice from some queer women who support a strict butch/femme duality.'

Some felt that the concepts were too binary and that they themselves were on a continuum, or in between, or that it depended on the situation or the identity of their lover. Bella (white bisexual woman, 30s) countered this argument as follows: 'I think that many lesbian who don't identify as butch or femme just don't get it. They view it as from the old days, a stereotype, or a light-hearted fashion or sexual exploration. Which is fine as long as there is not judgment or exclusion. But unfortunately there has been plenty of both.'

Demographics of butch/femme women

Based on sexual identity

Among the 22 women who identified as femme, only one identified as bisexual and one as queer/bisexual. Among the 21 women who identified as butch, only one identified as bisexual. The majority of bisexual women identified either as both butch and femme, or as neither, or as in between. This corresponds with prior research by Rust (1995) that bisexual women tend not to use categories or labels.

Interestingly, the perception among women in the current study was that bisexual women are femme. Ten participants (16 per cent), most of them lesbians, specifically stated that bisexual women were more likely to identify as femme. As Angel (Latina Mestiza lesbian, 40s) stated: 'I don't think I know a bisexual butch.' Similarly, Blue-stocking (white lesbian, 50s) said: 'I don't think I know any bisexual butches.' Terry (white lesbian in her 50s) emphasised that 'a bisexual woman for me is an honest femme. When she's with a woman, she definitely knows who she is.' What could account for this discrepancy? A number of lesbian

respondents indicated that they didn't know any bisexual women well (and, to some extent, bisexual women didn't know any lesbians well). So lesbians may be basing their perceptions on general appearance of bisexual women in the media, for example, rather than on conversations with bisexual friends or lovers.

Queer-identified people, too, avoid categories as socially constructed, and are inclusive of anyone who is not part of the heterosexual mainstream (e.g. Namaste, 1994; Rupp, 1999). Yet, unlike women who identified as bisexual in the present study, respondents who identified as queer were more likely to identify as butch or femme.

Among women who identified as lesbian, dyke, or gay, 16 identified as femme, 14 as butch, and eight as both, other or neither. In this regard, it is lesbians who are most likely to identify with butch/femme concepts.

When asked about how mainstream heterosexual society views butch/femme, most respondents agreed that femmes are more accepted; they are the 'good lesbians' in terms of appropriate appearance and gender roles. Yet femmes may 'pass' as heterosexual, making them invisible unless accompanied by a butch. In contrast, butches are feared, viewed as a threat, seen as deviant, and ostracised. Nearly everyone felt that butches were targeted for hate crimes. Annabelle (white lesbian, 50s) felt that she was viewed as butch by heterosexuals and femme by lesbians: 'Where I put myself and where people would put me is different. And it depends - I'm sure that I seem butch to my straight co-workers because I sit cross-legged during a meeting and I wear the same clothes all week and I don't wear make up - that sort of thing. Amongst lesbians who use that term, I think they have identified me as femme.' Belinda (Asian American bisexual woman, 50s) emphasised how some heterosexual women are more butch than lesbians; she went to college in the Midwest and found the farm women to look 'way more butch than a lot of the butches I knew.'

Based on age

Just as the whole sample was equally divided into those who identified as femme, butch or both/neither/other, the same was true among younger women (in their late teens, 20s or 30s) or older women (in their 40s and above). Yet older participants felt that younger women were less likely to use the concepts of butch and femme, especially if they identified as queer. Nick (African American lesbian, 50s) said: 'I think that role playing is beginning to go away, only because the new generation is more free, they don't have to hide. It's like everybody's whatever. When I was growing up, the only way people would know that we were even interested or even to be approached by another woman you had to carry yourself a certain way... But now it's like the younger people I see, they don't play roles. You might see two feminine looking women or two butch looking women together and it doesn't matter. But I think it's a generational thing, the butch and femme and I think it's going away.'

And younger women tended to view older women as influenced by more traditional conceptions of gender roles. Here is how Doreen (white queer woman, 20s) described butch/femme according to generational variables: 'How the greater lesbian/bisexual 'community' in America views butch and femme varies by generation and by individual communities. I think in many places now, the butch/femme dynamic is looked down on as a heterosexist crutch and as outdated. The idea is that in the past, queer women felt they had to conform to heterosexual gender stereotypes, that they had to be either butch or femme to fit into the queer community, and that it was socially unacceptable to choose to identify as neither butch nor femme. The community at large has thus rejected butch/femme as instruments of oppression. However, many older lesbians or bisexuals are comfortable with the dynamic because they became familiar with it before it became 'outdated,' and some younger lesbians or bisexuals are beginning to reclaim it as something that is

not heterosexualising our relationships but rather expressing something new and different that is true to who we are and distinctively queer, rather than forcing who we are into traditional straight boxes.'

Based on race or ethnicity

Participants tended to feel that butch/femme was more important in African American and Latina communities. Aisha (black and Puerto Rican lesbian, 20s) referred to butches in the African American community as 'stud/butch/ags.' She wrote: 'Also, in my culture, especially in the black gay community, there is a labeling that occurs that if you do not fit into the masculine or feminine roles you have to identify yourself as one or the other or in a category... which is a 'no-label' but that in itself is a label.' Paige (white queer woman, 20s) stated: 'I notice cross-culturally [labels] hold more weight in the African American communities than in white ones. My girlfriend, who is black, finds her butch identity to be strong and an impenetrable part of who she is, similar to 'stone butch'.' Megan (Latina and white lesbian, 50s) described the pressure on young butch girls to take testosterone: 'A lot of them call themselves studs, boys, aggressives (more of an East Coast term), I see them struggling, because their girlfriends are pressuring them, their friends are pressuring them... if they're young women of colour, there's real mixed feelings going on particularly if they are dark skinned and black, because black males are already not treated very well.'

Belinda (Asian American bisexual woman, 50s) wondered: 'So part of my questions now are, who decided? And why did we decide it was pants-wearing <to be butch>?... And when I started thinking about what constitutes male and female dress, I thought about other cultures. And because I'm Japanese-American, I mean my father used to wear a kimono at night. He would get out of his suit and wear, in essence what another household might call a dress. And it was comfortable.'

Sycamore (Native American two-spirit woman, 50s) said: 'You know, as a Native

American we don't have that distinction of 'I'm sorry this group is only for these people,' it's for all people who feel they belong... I knew about <two-spirits> as early as 13. You know, of that tradition being told to me by my grandmother, realising that tomboy thing wasn't going away. She talked to me about it, but I had no idea what she was talking about. She said, you know, some people are different like you, and they're called two-spirits, and maybe when you grow up you won't be one. But I just want you to know about this and that it's okay. And I had no idea what she was talking about, till I got a little older. I then met two-spirit people and thought, oh, she means that. Or that's me, that's a person that's like me. But I couldn't put my finger on what it was, other than outside appearances of there's a butch, a grown woman butch, and that's me.'

Conclusion

It is evident that butch and femme today are extremely diverse and complex concepts, and that women are embracing them in various ways. At one end of the continuum are lesbian, bisexual or queer women who perceive butch or femme to be core identities, equal in salience to gender, race, or sexuality, and who regard these concepts as extremely important. At the other end of continuum are women who find the terms outdated or meaningless, or who embrace the terms but find that both or neither fit them well, or who are creating their own terms and definitions. At the same time, many women in this study defined butch/femme using gendered concepts of appearance, clothing, performance, or personality characteristics, while at the same time there was disagreement and complexity about how butch and femme relate to masculinity or femininity, respectively. On the whole, butches had femme lovers and vice versa, yet women were divided about the connections between butch/femme and sexual activity. When it came to gendered division of housework and child-care, butch and femme hardly figured into the equation at all. Women who identified as

lesbian, and/or those who identified as African American and Latina, were more connected with butch/femme concepts, and so were queer-identified women to some extent. Bisexual women were less likely to focus on butch/femme concepts (despite beliefs by lesbians that bi women were femmes). Older women had perceptions about younger women, and vice versa, but in fact there was little relationship between age and the importance of butch/femme.

The results of this qualitative study indicate that psychological research to date has been extremely narrow in its conceptions of butch and femme, and there is need for further information about these complex concepts and how sexual minority women are understanding butch/femme in their own lives. It is clear that butch/femme are continuing to evolve at a time of changing sexual identities, gender roles, and communities.

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