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## Gay and Lesbian Body Images

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Discontentment with one's body is so common in women in the United States and other Western nations that this phenomenon has been called a "normative discontent." Yet it was not until the late 1980s that the first articles appeared about lesbians and body image. Sari Dworkin postulated that women in Western societies, regardless of sexual orientation, are told how to look and thus are preoccupied with weight and appearance. Laura Brown, on the other hand, drew a parallel between oppression of lesbians and oppression of fat women, arguing that lesbian communities are more accepting of body weight.

The impetus for studies of body image among gay men came from clinical observations in the United States and Europe that gay men were overrepresented among eating-disordered patients. Thus this literature has often focused on clinical samples. For example, although few patients in eating disorders clinics are male, one study found 30% of those few men were self-identified as gay. More recently, there has been discussion of how gay male communities accentuate appearance. For example, Lahti describes how gay male media and erotica highlight and exaggerate gay men's physical proportions, especially muscles and genitals. As a result, gay men are likely to be more dissatisfied with their bodies than heterosexual men.

Another way about thinking of sexual orientation in relation to body image is to include conceptions of both gender and sexual orientation. For example, it has been hypothesized that people sexually involved with men (heterosexual women and gay men) are more focused on appearance than are people sexually involved with women (heterosexual men and lesbians). The result is an interaction of gender and sexual orientation on body image concerns.

As of this writing, data on bisexuals' body image are lacking. This is an important area for future study. It is possible that bisexuals fall somewhere

in the middle on the continuum of body image concerns facing gay men, heterosexual women, lesbians, and heterosexual men. On the other hand, as bisexuals increasingly form their own communities and organizations, this group may develop unique body image issues. Because bisexuals are sexually attracted to, and may be involved with, both male and female partners (either simultaneously or sequentially), they could facilitate our study of how body and appearance issues differ for the same person when the sexual partner is male versus female. Taub's qualitative study of bisexual women indicated that bisexual women feel more pressure to conform to heterosexual beauty norms (e.g., dieting, shaving body hair, looking more feminine) when involved with men than with women.

### ATTITUDES HELD BY THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Twenty years before the first studies appeared on lesbians, gay men, and body image, social psychologists were studying attitudes about the appearance of lesbians and gay men held by society at large. Studies in the 1970s and 1980s found that college students rated lesbians as less attractive than heterosexual women. Lesbians described as "masculine" were rated as more unappealing, hostile, and disagreeable than were lesbians described as "feminine" or "neutral." College students liked descriptions of heterosexual feminine women the most, although even masculine heterosexual women were liked. Lesbians were liked most when their physical appearance conformed to heterosexual standards for women. Female students who were less tolerant of lesbians selected more unattractive photographs of women as lesbians. Male students, regardless of their tolerance for lesbians, chose unattractive women as lesbians. Female students selected the less attractive photos of men for people they thought to be gay. The general public often views gay men as effeminate and nonmasculine, in contrast to the "gay macho" look in vogue in many gay male communities.

Most lesbians and gay men grew up in households and attended colleges with people who held such attitudes. As a result, lesbians and gay men may internalize these negative attitudes about themselves. They may delay "coming out" to their families and friends or joining lesbian and gay communities in order to avoid negative stereotypes. Their own body image may be affected by these cultural views of the appearance of lesbians and gay men.

### SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND WEIGHT

Do lesbians actually weigh more than heterosexual women? Certainly weight is related to body image, given the extreme pressure to be thin in Western nations. Several studies have found lesbians to weigh significantly

more than heterosexual women. However, most of these studies recruited lesbians and gay men from community organizations and heterosexual students from colleges. One of the problems with this recruitment method is that noncollege group members tend to be older, and weight is correlated with age, particularly for women. This may explain why lesbians in these studies weighed more than heterosexual women. A recent study I conducted with lesbians and their heterosexual sisters as a control group still found lesbians to weigh significantly more than their sisters. By focusing on sisters, this study controlled for race, ethnicity, and economic factors, as well as for age cohort.

Why do lesbians weigh more than heterosexual women, including their sisters? One possibility is greater comfort with body appearance in the lesbian communities—that is, first a woman becomes a lesbian and, as a result, is more content with and less focused on her weight. We must also consider the opposite: that women who are heavier may become lesbians. For example, is it possible that heavier adolescent girls are less attractive to boys and thus postpone marriage and seek an education? Prior research has shown that girls who weigh more in adolescence are less likely to be married 10 years later. Longitudinal research is necessary to examine the direction of causality between weight and sexual orientation for both women and men.

What about the weight of gay men? In one of the few studies to report such data, gay men weighed less than heterosexual men, and lesbians weighed more than heterosexual women. In this study by Gettelman and Thompson, lesbians and gay men were recruited from college gay and lesbian student associations and friendship networks of these students, and heterosexuals were recruited from college courses.

## RESEARCH ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND BODY IMAGE

### Lesbians

In the 1990s a few studies investigated lesbian body image, with nearly every author citing the two theoretical positions by Dworkin mentioned earlier (lesbians do not differ from heterosexual women on body image) and by Brown (lesbians are more accepting of their bodies than are heterosexual women) as possible alternative outcomes.

In one of the earliest studies, Striegel-Moore, Tucker, and Hsu compared 30 lesbian college students recruited from lesbian/gay social gatherings and a lesbian support group, 25 heterosexual college women recruited from the women's studies department (presumed to be feminist), and 27 heterosexual college women from the psychology research subject pool. There were no differences among the three groups on body image satisfaction or disordered eating, but lesbians had higher self-esteem. Similarly, a qualitative study of 26 lesbian college students found them to place a high value on thinness as ideals for themselves and their partners.

Herzog and his colleagues studied 45 lesbians recruited via gay/lesbian organizations, bars, and advertisements in periodicals, and 64 heterosexual female college students. Lesbians were significantly heavier than heterosexual women, yet lesbians were less concerned with their appearance, were less driven by the thinness ideal, had higher ideal weights, and selected larger figures of women that they thought potential partners would find attractive. In Heffernan's study of 203 lesbians, body esteem was related to self-esteem but not to reported sexual attractiveness, physical condition, or weight concerns. Heavier lesbians were more dissatisfied with their weight and had poorer body esteem.

### **Gay Men**

There have been a few studies of gay men recruited from nonclinical samples. In one study by Herzog and his colleagues, 43 gay men were recruited from gay organizations, bars, and gay periodicals; 32 heterosexual men and 64 heterosexual women were recruited via friends of the authors and periodicals. Gay men were more likely to have an ideal weight below that on the life insurance charts for their height, whereas heterosexual men chose ideal weights above those on the charts.

In a larger study at Yale University by Lisa Silberstein and her colleagues, 71 heterosexual men reported more satisfaction with their upper-body strength and physical condition than did 71 gay men. In addition, the gay men showed a wider gap between actual and ideal bodies than did heterosexual men. Physical appearance was more important to the gay men's sense of self, whereas being physically active was of greater value to the heterosexual men. Similarly, gay men stated that they exercised to improve physical attractiveness, whereas heterosexual men exercised to improve fitness, health, and for enjoyment. There were no differences between groups on body size satisfaction, eating disorders, or self-esteem. Gay men who wanted to be thinner were more likely to diet; heterosexual men who wanted to be heavier had lower self-esteem.

### **Comparing Lesbians and Gay Men**

Susan Beren and her colleagues compared 58 male and 58 female heterosexual college students and 69 lesbians and 58 gay men recruited from gay organizations. Gay men expressed more body dissatisfaction, greater discrepancy between actual and ideal figures, more social pressure to diet, and more public self-consciousness than did the heterosexual men. Lesbians and heterosexual women did not differ on these measures.

In an age-controlled study I conducted with two colleagues, Pamela Brand and Laura Solomon, we compared lesbians at a lesbian music festival, gay men at a gay/lesbian conference, and heterosexual college students. Women were more likely than men to perceive themselves as overweight, as

heavier than their ideal weights, which were further, in a heavier direction, than the men's ideal estimates from life insurance recommendations. Women were also more likely than men to have dieted to lose weight. Men were more likely to state that another person's weight would affect their attraction to the person. This study found an interaction between gender and sexual orientation on one variable: Lesbians reported ideal weights that were closer to those on the life insurance charts than did heterosexual women, and gay men reported ideal weights that were lower and closer to the charts than did heterosexual men.

Gettelman and Thompson recruited 32 lesbians and 32 gay men from student organizations and friendship networks, plus 32 heterosexual women and 32 heterosexual men from undergraduate courses. Gay men and heterosexual women were more concerned with appearance, weight, dieting, and body image than were lesbians and heterosexual men. Similarly, Michael Siever conducted a study with 53 lesbians, 59 gay men, 62 heterosexual women, and 63 heterosexual men. He recruited all groups from the same university—a major methodological improvement over other studies. Relative to the other three groups, lesbians were less likely to feel that they or potential partners placed importance on various aspects of their own bodies. Lesbians also placed less importance on a partner's physical attractiveness than did heterosexual women.

In Siever's study, heterosexual men had the highest levels of body satisfaction and the lowest levels of body dissatisfaction and concerns about body shape. Heterosexual women had the highest levels of body dissatisfaction and concerns with body shape, and gay men had the lowest levels of body esteem. On measures of dieting, bulimia, and food preoccupation, heterosexual men scored the lowest and heterosexual women, the highest. This study is notable for finding a strong interaction between gender and sexual orientation on most measures. However, Siever mentions that the lesbian group had a significantly higher body mass index than the other groups, yet he did not control statistically for this difference. In short, lesbians were quite satisfied with their bodies despite weighing more than the other groups.

### **FACTORS MODERATING BODY IMAGES**

Recent research has focused on investigating factors that might buffer lesbians from the weight concerns that so preoccupy heterosexual women. Jeanine Cogan recruited 181 women at a summer gay pride fair; 88% self-identified as lesbian and 12% as bisexual. The women reported that as they "came out" as lesbian or bisexual, they changed aspects of their appearance—for example, wearing more masculine clothing, wearing more comfortable clothing, cutting hair short, giving up beauty rituals, and dressing for oneself rather than for others. Other researchers have found that lesbians

who were more involved in lesbian communities were less preoccupied with weight than lesbians who were more isolated. Nevertheless, there seems to be a discrepancy between what lesbians feel they are *supposed* to believe about body image acceptance and what they do feel. For example, Heffernan found lesbians to be more critical of traditional attitudes toward women than were heterosexual women, but this difference was not found for attitudes toward weight and appearance. Lesbians in this study viewed dieting as oppressive, yet about half the lesbians reported having dieted in the past 3 months, were dissatisfied with their weight, and had low body esteem. In the only study that included gay men as well as lesbians, Susan Beren and her colleagues found that affiliation with the gay community increased body dissatisfaction in men but was unrelated to lesbians' body satisfaction.

Interestingly, evidence that feminism serves as a buffer against negative body image has been mixed—lesbians who identify as feminist were found to be more satisfied with their bodies in one study but not in another. Another moderating variable for lesbians has been thought to be the emphasis on fitness. Bergeron and Senn found that physical condition and weight concerns were related to self-esteem in lesbians, whereas only weight concerns were related to self-esteem in heterosexual women. Jeanine Cogan found that the women in her sample reported exercising to maintain health and improve fitness rather than for weight control or to attract others.

### **MASCULINITY, FEMININITY, AND BODY IMAGE**

In the 1950s, lesbian communities divided women into "butches" and "femmes," complete with specific-gender roles. During the women's movement of the 1970s, wearing androgynous, comfortable clothing, having short hair, and using no makeup constituted standard appearance for lesbians. Now there is a reemergence of butch and femme roles among lesbians, though with more fluidity and flexibility than previously. Thus, lesbians of different age cohorts may have different norms about appropriate and desirable ways to look like a lesbian.

Ludwig and Brownell recruited 188 lesbian and bisexual women via the Internet. Women who were feminine in their appearance reported lower body satisfaction than women who were masculine or androgynous; feminine women also rated their friends as more accepting of them and reported a greater likelihood of using their body to attract others. Additionally, women whose friends shared their sexual orientation had greater body satisfaction than those whose friends had a different sexual orientation. This study suggests that lesbians and bisexual women who are feminine in appearance may be subject to similar pressures as heterosexual women.

More recently, Devendra Singh and her colleagues recruited 100 lesbi-

ans and 58 heterosexual women via social networks. Lesbians identifying as butch reported more gender-atypical childhood behaviors than did lesbians identifying as femme, with heterosexual women having the least gender-atypical childhood behaviors. Even when the researchers controlled for differences in age and body mass index, lesbians identifying as butch had a higher masculine waist-to-hip ratio than did femmes or heterosexual women. Much more research is needed to examine the relationship between the butch and femme roles and lesbian body image.

### **METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS**

It should be apparent that a major problem in most research on lesbian and gay male body image is the inconsistency in recruiting gay/lesbian versus heterosexual samples. Rarely are heterosexual and nonheterosexual samples recruited from the same sources. Even when both groups are recruited from the same college, students who join gay and lesbian groups may differ demographically from those who are part of the psychology subject pool, for example. Furthermore, sample sizes are often small, especially given the large numbers of dependent measures. I would urge researchers to use heterosexual brothers and sisters of gay men and lesbians, respectively, as comparison groups, in order to control for race/ethnicity, age, and parental socioeconomic status.

The lesbian and gay male communities have always had norms for physical appearance, and these norms have changed over time. Unlike members of other oppressed groups (e.g., Jews, African Americans) who may first become acculturated within their own group and only later are socialized (e.g., by schools, the media) into the dominant culture, lesbians and gay men are first socialized by the dominant culture and then need to find their communities. Physical appearance has been a major vehicle by which lesbians and gay men have identified "like others," and it continues to provide a sense of group cohesion and identity. In the case of the gay male communities, group identity may also be associated with body dissatisfaction and unrealistic standards of appearance.

This experience of biculturality may also explain the lack of consistent differences in body image satisfaction between lesbians and heterosexual women. The lesbian communities, at least in theory, frown on traditional standards of feminine beauty. Yet when it comes to thinness, lesbians are torn between their beliefs and their interactions with mainstream media, families of origin, and the work setting. More research on moderating factors in the lesbian communities is necessary to determine why some studies find lesbians more satisfied with their bodies and others do not. More focus on women who are in the process of coming out and affiliating with lesbian communities may help us understand the precise mechanisms that facilitate

body acceptance versus those that do not differ from the heterosexual macrosociety. Finally, better measures that are normed on lesbian and gay samples may help us understand body image issues that are unique to sexual minority communities.

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