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Lesbians and Physical Appearance *Which Model Applies?*

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Lesbians are women who wear comfortable shoes.
—Robin Williams in *Good Morning, Vietnam!*

Being female means being told how to look. The overwhelming majority of television and magazine advertisements are related to products that enhance the physical attractiveness of women (Dermer & Thiel, 1975; Downs & Harrison, 1985). Social psychologists have developed a large body of literature on physical attractiveness (see Berscheid & Walster, 1984, for a review). Feminist scholars have critically examined the relationship between gender and appearance (e.g., Brownmiller, 1984; Chapkis, 1986; Daly, 1978; Wolf, 1991).

There has been little emphasis on how lesbians are affected by society's emphasis on physical appearance for women. Given this lack of research, this chapter speculates on six ways in which appearance may affect lesbians. First, lesbians, as all women, grow up surrounded by institutions that value physical appearance. Second, lesbians are not in sexual relationships with men, and this may lessen the importance of standard appearance norms. Third, research on stereotypes indicates that the dominant culture has extremely negative attitudes about lesbians, including lesbians' appearance. Fourth, the process of identifying with the

lesbian culture may depend on the ability to recognize and be recognized by other lesbians, and thus on physical appearance. Fifth, lesbians who are also members of other minority groups may be invisible or may need to choose which group to identify with. Finally, the lesbian community itself has norms for physical appearance and these have changed over the course of the century.

The Value of Physical Appearance

Women are socialized to value their physical appearance, and lesbians are women. There is an enormous psychological literature on the effects of physical appearance. Berscheid and Walster (1984) introduced the phrase "what is beautiful is good" to describe the fact that people who are physically attractive are perceived as having a number of positive personality characteristics, occupations of greater prestige, and more fulfilling lives than are unattractive people. Berscheid and Walster also found physical attractiveness to be more important for women than for men. Appearance norms for women include most facial features (e.g., eyes, eyebrows, nose, lips, and cheeks), body parts (breasts, thighs, waist, and hips), weight, skin color, age, clothing, makeup, and posture (see Rothblum, in press, for a review of this literature). As Dworkin (1988) stated:

Women and men in our society undergo a different socialization process. From early childhood women are taught that their appearance is a crucial aspect of their lives whereas men are taught that their accomplishments are what counts. Not only is appearance important for a woman but the appearance must come as close as possible to whatever the current media image of women happens to be. Often that image can only be achieved by a minority of the population. The end result of this impossible quest is that most women are unhappy with their bodies and suffer from negative body image. (p. 27)

Lesbians, too, are socialized as girls and women to value physical attractiveness. Most lesbians work and socialize with heterosexual people and are influenced by appearance norms in the media. Dworkin (1988) described how lesbians' occupational roles are affected by the privilege that comes with an acceptable physical appearance. As lesbians work, relax, and live, their coworkers, supervisors, neighbors, biological relatives, teachers, and friends may be unaware of their sexual orienta-

tion. Thus lesbians may be as restricted by the appearance mandates for women as are heterosexual women. Brand, Rothblum, and Solomon (1992) found, for example, that both lesbians and heterosexual women were more likely to experience dissatisfaction with their bodies, greater concern with their weight, and more frequent dieting than did gay and heterosexual men. In that study, gender was more salient than sexual orientation.

Physical Appearance and Sexual Relationships

Women's physical appearance is important in sexual relationships with men, and lesbians are not in relationships with men. Lesbians differ from heterosexual women in the crucial fact that they are not involved in sexual relationships with men. This is true for all women who are exclusively lesbian, no matter how closeted they are and no matter how integrated they are into occupational and social roles with heterosexual people.

The research on physical attractiveness has found that the reason why physical attractiveness is important, particularly for women, is that it is related to social and sexual attractiveness. Physical attractiveness for women affects number of dates and overall popularity (see Rothblum, *in press*, for a review), and physically attractive women report having been in love more often and having had more sexual partners than do women who are not physically attractive (Berscheid & Walster, 1984). Men's social status often results more from the physical attractiveness of the women they are with than with their own attractiveness (Berscheid & Walster, 1984). When men were asked how much they liked their dates and how much they would like to date their partner again, the only variable determining these factors was the physical attractiveness of their dates (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966).

The fact that lesbians are sexually independent from men would argue that societal pressures regarding physical attractiveness may be less salient for lesbians. In this vein, Brown (1987) described lesbians' greater acceptance with body weight and with personal power. Brand et al. (1992) speculated that heterosexual women and gay men (two groups that are sexually involved with men) would be more concerned with their weight than lesbians and heterosexual men (two groups that are

not sexually involved with men). Their results provided some partial support for this hypothesis, with heterosexual women and gay men more preoccupied with their weight and reporting lower ideal weights than did lesbians or heterosexual men.

The idea that lesbians are less affected by physical appearance norms has also been borne out by studies of personal ads. A study by Deaux and Hanna (1984) examined 800 personal advertisements by lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual women and men. Gay men were more likely to seek physical attractiveness, other specified physical characteristics (e.g., height, weight, and hair color), and sexual characteristics. They were also more likely to offer financial assets, indicate their race or ethnicity, and describe their physical characteristics. Lesbians were more likely to describe and to seek specific personality traits (e.g., intelligent, sense of humor, loving, and caring), to seek sincerity, and to suggest the potential of a long-term relationship. Heterosexual women were most likely to offer physical attractiveness, and lesbians were least likely to do so. Heterosexual women were also least likely to indicate their age, and most likely to seek financial security and status, occupational information, and sincerity. Lesbians were least likely to ask for a photograph and also least likely to offer or ask for other physical characteristics. Gay men were most likely to offer and seek physical and sexual characteristics, and were second to heterosexual women in offers of physical attractiveness. It seems that heterosexual women and gay men are somewhat similar in that the group they are trying to attract (i.e., men) seems to demand more physical attractiveness and physical characteristics. Deaux and Hanna (1984) concluded:

In terms of general sex differences, our results suggest that men are more concerned with objective and physical characteristics, while women are more interested in the psychological aspects of a potential relationship. . . . We might suggest that the heterosexual relationship sets up certain expectations for women, and the woman who chooses a different (homosexual) type of relationship is free to define herself in different ways, responding to a lessened (or at least a different) set of role demands. (p. 374)

Webbink (1981) noted that lesbian images in photography often portray lesbians as assuming a relaxed and casual stance, with their hands in their pockets. This stance indicates that lesbians may be more comfortable with their bodies and themselves than are heterosexual women.

Attitudes About the Appearance of Lesbians

The dominant culture holds negative attitudes about the appearance of lesbians. Surveys indicate that society at large holds extremely negative attitudes toward lesbians. The majority of people in the United States consider homosexuals—including lesbians—to be immoral, unhappy, and harmful (see Rothblum, 1988, for a review). People who have the most favorable attitudes toward lesbians are college-educated, under age 30, and live in urban areas (Nyberg & Alston, 1976-1977).

The dominant society also holds negative stereotypes about the appearance of lesbians. Dew (1985) asked college students to rate the attractiveness of photographs of women. She then told the raters that half the women were lesbians and asked them to determine which ones were. Raters generally selected photographs of unattractive women as lesbians. They also tended to rate lesbians as less attractive than, not dressing as well as, not having as pretty a face as, not having as attractive a hair style as, and as not being as desirable to meet as heterosexual women.

Nyberg and Alston (1976-1977) found that lesbians who were described as masculine were more disliked by heterosexual college students than were lesbians described as feminine or neutral; in contrast, heterosexual women had more latitude so that even women described as masculine were liked. In this study, the group that received the highest ratings were heterosexual feminine women, who were often described as normal, agreeable, and nice. The group that received the lowest ratings were masculine lesbians, who were often described as unappealing, disagreeable, and hostile.

A study by Unger, Hilderbrand, and Madar (1982) asked college students to sort photographs of women and men into groups. Some of the students were told to sort the photographs into homosexuals versus heterosexuals. Generally, female and male college students chose the less attractive photographs of women for the homosexual group, whereas female students (but not males) chose the less attractive photographs of men for the homosexual group.

Dew's (1985) study found that female students with intolerant attitudes about homosexuality were more likely to select unattractive women as lesbians than were female students with tolerant attitudes. Male students, regardless of their tolerance for homosexuality, chose unattractive women as lesbians. Dew (1985) stated:

One explanation (for this gender difference) may lie in the observation that, unlike men, women have an organized social movement which brings both homosexual and heterosexual women together and encourages them to be more aware of certain social issues which affect all women. For those who become involved in, or at least aware of, this movement, the importance of differences in sexual orientation may be reduced. . . . Men may not currently have the same opportunity for contact with homosexual men or women. (p. 152)

Laner and Laner (1980) examined variables that seem to increase or decrease college students' liking of lesbians and gay men. They found that lesbians who were most liked were those whose physical appearance was most conventional, according to heterosexual standards; that is, they appeared moderately feminine. This increases the pressure for lesbians to fit in with heterosexual appearance norms.

Lesbians and Biculturality

Most lesbians function in two environments: the heterosexual macrostructure and the lesbian community. Lukes and Land (1990) have described how members of minority groups become bicultural within the majority and minority cultures. They point out that lesbians and gay men differ from members of other minority groups in this process. Most minority groups first become acculturated within their own group and then later are socialized (by schools, media, and church) within the dominant culture. Lesbians and gay men, however, are first socialized by the dominant culture and later identify with the minority culture. One of the factors that aids in bicultural socialization is physical appearance (de Anda, 1984; Lukes & Land, 1990). Again, unlike members of some minority groups (e.g., African-Americans and people with physical disabilities), lesbians and gay men are not identifiable as such. Lukes and Land (1990) state:

Those who do not fit the stereotype held by the majority culture may pass as heterosexual . . . and assume the advantages and privileges held by members of the dominant culture or other minority culture. 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. Those who display stereotypical traits become publicly visible, an act that exposes them to others who share similar values. (p. 159)

Whereas members of most minority groups need to adopt the physical appearance (e.g., clothing and mannerisms) of the dominant culture, lesbians and gay men need to learn how to look like and recognize members of their minority culture. De Anda (1984) identified the following roles as part of this learning process: cultural translators (people who have successfully undergone bicultural socialization and who promote and explain the new culture), mediators (people who provide information), and models (people who identify with the culture and serve as role models). Again, for lesbians and gay men, these roles will be held by people who need to be recognizable to newly out lesbians and gay men and who need to explain the minority, rather than the dominant, culture to lesbians and gay men.

Lesbians and Multiculturality

In the dominant white male culture, lesbians are members of two minority groups: They are women as well as sexual minorities. In addition, many lesbians are members of other minority groups, for example, African-Americans, Latinas, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, Jews, refugees, immigrants, women with disabilities, older women, and/or fat women. Lesbians who are polycultural (Espin, 1987) may be more visible as members of other minority groups (e.g., Vietnamese or women with spinal cord injuries) than as lesbians. They may have had more years and even decades of experience as members of these other minority groups than with being lesbians who are out.

People who identify as African-American differ widely in the color of their skin. Since the days of slavery, African-Americans whose skin was lighter and who had Caucasian features such as straight hair, narrow noses, thin lips, and light-colored eyes had greater societal privileges (Neal & Wilson, 1989). In the early half of this century, African-Americans of differing physical features, such as skin color, came from all different socioeconomic backgrounds, but those with light skin and Caucasian features were assumed to have higher status (Neal & Wilson, 1989). This status difference was particularly salient for African-American women,

whose light skin color was associated with desirability as a marital partner and with upward economic mobility. However, although light skin color was valued among African-Americans, appearing to be Caucasian was not.

After the civil rights movement of the 1960s, African-Americans began to define their own standards of beauty. Slogans such as "Black Is Beautiful" and "Black Pride" focused on the advantages of African-American heritage. The Afro hair style became a symbol of pride in African-American features, and Caucasians permed their hair to achieve a similar look (Neal & Wilson, 1989). Nevertheless, the media still portray African-Americans as models who appear nearly Caucasian. Thus, for example, Vanessa Williams, the first African-American woman to become Miss America (in 1983) had light skin, reddish hair, and green eyes (Neal & Wilson, 1989). The cosmetic industry continues to advertise products for lightening skin, straightening hair, and using tinted contact lenses to lighten eye color.

Brownmiller (1984) has speculated that men's darker skin color symbolizes men's greater freedom to be outdoors and to wear scantier clothing, whereas there is a mandate for women to be delicate and pale. It is possible that African-American lesbians have more flexibility regarding skin color than do heterosexual African-American women, due to their independence from men, but there has been no research on this. Similarly, there is little research on physical attractiveness norms affecting women of different ethnic groups other than African-Americans.

Estimates are that 1 in 10 Americans has a disability, and because some disabilities increase with age, women (who live longer than men) are disproportionately affected (Deegan & Brooks, 1985). Disabilities also affect women more than men, because women with disabilities fit neither the reproductive nor the sexualized role image of women in our society (Fine & Asch, 1985).

Women with disabilities are stereotyped as either happy, humble, and grateful or as embittered (Altman, 1985). As Thompson (1985) stated, "Our physical appearance, for example, does not fit any traditional standards: we fit neither 'mother' nor 'whore' images found in the straight world, and we are certainly a far cry from the strong, tough dyke model" (p. 80). In contrast to able-bodied women, who are objectified as sexual beings, women with disabilities are often desexualized to the degree that they are considered unmarriedable and "unfit to be mothers" (Connors, 1985, p. 104). They are ignored by the media, who perceive them as

bians were encouraged to wear feminine, professional clothing and not to appear lesbian. Faderman points out that the same message to blend in reemerged in 1989 with the publication of the book *After the Ball*. Consequently, it was poor and working-class lesbians who communicated through their appearance to the dominant culture that lesbians existed, who were portrayed in the media, and who paid for this by frequent police raids in bars and arrests.

Appearance norms in the lesbian culture remained constant in the 1960s even while the dominant culture underwent tremendous changes in dress and appearance (Faderman, 1991). In the 1970s, however, androgyny became the norm for lesbians (Loulan, 1990). Lesbian feminists wore flannel shirts, blue jeans, no jewelry, and no makeup. They wore their hair very short. To a large extent, heterosexual feminists dressed the same way (Loulan, 1990). Whereas in the past a lesbian couple often included one butch and one femme, both members of a lesbian couple in the 1970s looked alike. Loulan (1990) described a concept she referred to as "twinning" as follows:

Twins are lesbians who bond with other women who look and act very much like themselves. You might think of couples you know that would fit this description. Women who can and do enjoy wearing each other's clothes, not because they wear the same size but because they truly share each other's taste and style. Women who have the same energy, not who just adjust to each other's pace. (p. 154)

Lesbians who did not appear androgynous were termed politically incorrect. In particular, old-culture lesbians who still played butch or femme roles were criticized (Loulan, 1990, p. 41).

Loulan (1990) described lesbian archetypes as part of the lesbian "collective unconscious" (p. 17). She argued that the butch/femme role is one of the most common lesbian archetypes and one that was revolutionary for lesbians in previous decades, yet one that lesbians today prefer to deny or about which they are embarrassed. In her public lectures, she has found that fewer than 5% of lesbians have never rated themselves or been rated by others as butch or femme. Despite this near-universal experience, lesbians dismiss the butch/femme archetype. Interestingly, lesbians who practiced S-M (sadosomachism) in the 1980s reclaimed role-playing in their dress by wearing leather and other symbols indicating their preference for sadism or masochism (see Faderman, 1991, for a

review). Nevertheless, lesbian S-M became a major controversy in the 1980s, pitting lesbians who were politically correct against those who were sexually adventurous.

The 1970s introduced a number of terms in the lesbian community that referred to appearance. *Baby dykes* were young and newly out. *Downtown dykes* wore business suits and had executive jobs. *Earth mothers* were nurturant and spiritual. *Jocks* played on the local lesbian softball team. *Bad girls* shocked the lesbian community with their nonconformity in dress and behavior. And the *lesbian police* set standards for what was appropriate (Loulan, 1990). Lesbian communities and friendship circles coined their own terminology, as did the woman in Syracuse who referred to lesbians with strict rules as "lavnecks" (lavender rednecks) (Faderman, 1991, p. 231). Lesbians wore symbols of their culture (pink triangle, labyrinth, interlocking women's symbols) on their clothes, and the advertising, fashion, and publishing industries used these symbols (e.g., items in lavender or purple colors) to attract lesbian customers.

The 1980s reflected greater diversity in the lesbian communities, as multicultural lesbians became more visible or established their own lesbian organizations and neighborhoods. The lesbian baby boom resulted in pregnant lesbians and lesbians rearing children. The tolerance for lesbian and gay activities on college campuses in the 1970s resulted in educated lesbians with financial and occupational power, including the power to be out in their professions. A new term, *lipstick lesbian*, referred to lesbians who wore dresses and makeup. In their song "You Can't Tell the Girls From the Boys," the gay male performers Romanovsky and Phillips parody the old days when lesbians wore work shirts and gay men wore earrings; now, they state, lesbians wear dresses and even heterosexual men wear earrings.

Conclusion

In sum, lesbians may be affected by the appearance norms of the dominant culture to a similar, or lesser, degree than are heterosexual women. In addition, the appearance norms of the lesbian community may affect lesbians, particularly lesbians who are newly out and who are thus dependent on physical appearance to be recognized by and to recognize similar others. Multicultural lesbians may be additionally affected by appearance norms of other minority communities.

There has been little research that has investigated the influence of physical appearance on lesbians. This paucity of research is in stark contrast to the enormous literature on the factors of physical appearance among heterosexual women. There are a number of research questions that would be of interest to lesbian-affirmative psychologists and lesbian participants. First, how do lesbians perceive attractiveness? Is it important? Does it include physical attributes as well as personality characteristics (e.g., sense of humor and warmth)? How does physical attractiveness affect lesbians over the lifespan? How does it change for lesbians once they come out? How does it affect multicultural lesbians and lesbians from specific minority cultures? To what degree do lesbians change their physical appearance (e.g., clothing) when interacting with the dominant versus the lesbian cultures? This chapter presented six models that might explain the role of physical appearance among lesbians. Future research can determine the relative importance of these models in affecting physical appearance in the lesbian community.

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