

REJECTING "FEMININITY": SOME RESEARCH
NOTES ON GENDER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT
IN LESBIANS*

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Fifteen women who identify themselves as lesbians were interviewed about their own development of gender identity. All the women involved in the study indicated a rejection of the traditional feminine role. This was often manifested before they were even aware of same-sex attractions. However, they saw the traditional role for women as representing heterosexuality. To gain access to women, many even saw a need to achieve masculinity. Due to few or no visible lesbian role models and the rejection of the traditional female role, many, as children, chose the male role. This was reflected in: 1) taking the male role in play or fantasy, 2) being a "tomboy", and 3) rejecting items of dress and play associated with female children. While none, as adults, still wanted to portray a male role, each still rejected traditional femininity. Thus these lesbians had to come to their own conclusions about what it meant not only to be women, but lesbians as well.

Introduction

Woman feels inferior because, in fact, the requirements of femininity *do* belittle her. She spontaneously chooses to be a complete person, a subject and a free being with the world and the future open before her; if this choice has a virile cast, it is so to the extent that femininity today means mutilation. Various statements made by female inverts (or lesbians) clearly show that what outrages them, even in childhood, is to be regarded as feminine. (de Beauvoir 1952, p. 456)

Feminists have viewed lesbianism not only as a sexual preference for women, but as a political statement (Atkinson 1978; Eisenstein, 1983). A lesbian, according to Eisenstein (1983, p.51) is "someone who had withdrawn herself from traditional femininity." She would not fit into the role of a "true woman", meaning that she did not get her status from association with a male, but instead is a "woman-identified woman" (Radicalesbiand, 1970). It is the "highest treason" in a male dominated society (Johnson, 1987).

Some feminists felt that heterosexuality was culturally enforced to support the male domination (Bunch, 1975). Adrienne Rich (1980) proposed the concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" to explain that heterosexuality was

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an institution with penalties for its deviants. Homosexuality was one of its taboos (Johnson, 1987).

Perhaps the best work on lesbianism has been done by lesbian feminists about their own lives (Martin and Lyon, 1972; Millett, 1974; Millett, 1976; Johnson, 1987). Their accounts offer insight that much traditional social scientific research has lacked.

The majority of social science research on homosexuality has been on men (see Oberstone and Sukoneck, 1976). Most nonfeminist work on lesbians has been of a quantitative nature, attempting to study the issue of lesbianism numerically. It has not allowed the women's experience to be quoted directly but to be interpreted solely for the reader by the researcher.

This study allows women to speak about their own gender identity development. The difference between "sex" and "gender" should be emphasized since it is a crucial distinction made in this article. Kate Millett (1970, p. 39) wrote of the "overwhelmingly *cultural* character of gender." She, along with others (Stoller, 1968), was active in distinguishing gender from the term "sex", which refers to one's anatomy and physiology. Robert Stoller (1968, pp. viii-ix) wrote that:

gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are "male" and "female," the corresponding terms for gender are "masculine" and "feminine"; these latter may be quite independent of sex.

Conditioning, according to Millett (1970), is responsible for the cultural concepts of gender. It is a system for conditioning traditional roles which are aligned on the basis of a person's sex. Conditioning "runs in a circle of self-perpetuation." She wrote that:

The basic division of temperamental trait is marshalled along the line of "aggression is male" and "passivity is female." All other temperamental traits are somehow--- often with dexterous ingenuity--- aligning to correspond...The usual hope of such a line of reasoning is that "nature" by some impossible outside chance might still be depended upon to rationalize that patriarchal system. (p. 43)

Garfinkel (1967) also pointed out that people assume certain "facts" about gender. One of these is that there are two, and only two, genders. Everyone must then be considered to be a member of one or the other group and this membership is to be considered "natural."

For lesbians, the development of gender identity appears to be more difficult than for heterosexuals. Lewis (1979, p. 22) found that:

For many lesbians, the first manifestation that they do not fit the heterosexual pattern is a rejection of the female/feminine role to which they are geared from birth. This rejection is sometimes manifested in a preference for, or identification with, the only other visible to them --- the male role.

Methods and Sample

Martin and Lyon (1972) felt surveys may not even be likely to include the respondents' true feelings, thereby forcing the respondent to fit into a category she or he might not otherwise. They were critical of quantitative methods in the study of lesbianism when they wrote:

Experience indicates that the questions are made up generally by heterosexuals and asked of homosexuals who very often find them irrelevant to their particular lifestyle. The questions, for the most part, are un-answerable by the required "yes" or "no" or multiple choice, and their only virtue is that they are easily computerized into instant (misleading) statistics. (p. 2)

With feminist criticism of such studies in mind, a qualitative method, in-depth interviews, was chosen for this paper. It allows for respondents to create their own categories rather than merely try to fit into those preconceived by a researcher. The validity of the qualitative method relates directly to the validity of the women's experiences.

Lesbians were identified and contacted through friendship associations. Fifteen women agreed to participate. All respondents were assured confidentiality and assigned pseudonyms. The interviews were conducted and analyzed according to the procedure suggested by Schwartz and Jacobs (1979) and Lofland and Lofland (1984). Rather than utilizing the statistical analyses of quantitative methods, the interview data were examined for emergent patterns of responses and descriptions.

The ages of the respondents ranged from nineteen to thirty-eight, with the average age of 25.3 years. All of the women were born and reared in small towns and cities in the South and Midwest. All of them currently live in and around cities with a population of 50,000 or less in various towns in the central region of the United States.

Four of the women considered themselves to be feminists. The rest did not. One other woman had recently become involved with the gay rights movement. A few others expressed interest in the gay rights and feminist movements, but not from the standpoint of a participant.

Since the sample size of this study is small, no attempt will be made to say that this sample is reflective of all lesbians. However, this paper is an honest account of the experience of the women who did take part in this study.

Results

All of the women interviewed for this paper indicated a rejection of traditional femininity. Even as children, some even before they were consciously aware of same-sex attractions, had difficulty fitting into what they saw as the traditional female role. Apparently, even though these women might not have known what they wanted, they knew what they did *not* want. For them, it appears that the female gender role represented more than femaleness. It also represented heterosexuality:

That role is all sex-oriented. It's the dumb housewife image. If you really look at it, that's just the way it is. (Pat)

I remember as a very young child not identifying with the female role because it seemed like, and this was growing up in the sixties, that the female role was strongly attached to your role as a wife and mother and I knew I couldn't do that. So I felt more identified with the male role. When I was a kid, I would play the boy when we played house. And I wanted my mom to buy me "boy clothes". (Kate)

For Kate, this role rejection was directly linked, in her view, to her attraction to other girls. She was aware of this attraction at a very young age and she reported that she developed quite a "macho" image of herself by age seven. She explained it this way:

I used to think, as a kid, that you had to be masculine to get a woman. That women liked masculinity and men liked femininity. So I tried to convince every girl on the block that I was a boy. I even took a male name. And of course, it made perfect sense to me. I never understood when people's parents were flipping out.

The other women's responses fell into three categories: 1) taking the male role (like Kate's example), 2) being a "tomboy" and 3) rejecting items of dress and play associated with female children. These responses overlapped in all of the interviews.

Taking the male role was seen in both play and fantasy. Cindy said, "Kids would play house; and I was the one, when my cousins would come over, I'd play the boy. I'd always do the boy parts." This led her to believe that she might be gay. This also "concerned" her cousins, one of whom later said to her, "We was all worried about you, wondering about you because you always wanted to play the guy." Cindy said she wanted to respond by merely saying, "Take a hint." Anita's childhood fantasies often involved taking the male role. She described them by saying:

I might not have known what it was called when I was real young, I can remember going to see "James Bond" and like when... my imagination would run wild or I would have some kind of fantasy, I'd never fantasize as being one of the women. I was always "James Bond"... "Matt Dillon," you know.

Wolff (1971) found that many lesbians, as children, desired to be boys. She found lesbians were five times more likely to have expressed this desire than were heterosexual women. In a study by Fleener and reported by Lewis (1979), 82% of lesbians sampled had gone through a tomboy phase. In the sample for this paper, all fifteen women told of their "tomboy" experiences as children. Not only did they engage in sports, tree-climbing, etc., many of them chose to play with boys. Robin said, "I was the only girl in my neighborhood my age when we moved here, so that was a lot of fun to hang around with the boys... I used to be a tomboy really bad." Barbara enjoyed "getting out and playing baseball with my brothers or basketball, things like that." This led her to conclude after some period of time, "I knew I was different. I just couldn't put my finger on it."

Anita related to the guys so much that she had problems as a child understanding why *others* perceived her any differently. This created a lot of frustration for her:

I played with the guys. I didn't understand why I couldn't camp out with them and stuff because, you know, there was no difference. And I sure as hell wasn't going to let 'em touch me!

Carole, who is still very active in sports, told of her father who wanted a son:

When they showed me to him in the window, he said "It's not mine. I have a son." And when I'm the only one, he had a ball glove in one hand and a bowling ball in the other before I could walk. She added, "He got just what he wanted."

Lewis (1979, p. 23) called the "rebellion against what is seen as being female and restrictive" that coincides with the desire for "those elements of male identity that carry independence...the first rite of passage into lesbian selfhood." The third set of responses involved this "rebellion against what is seen as being female." Carole said that she would "rather take a beating than put a dress on." Barbara not only disliked the frilly dresses her mother bought for her, she also hated the Barbie dolls. "I wanted to burn the Barbie dolls!" she laughed.

During the childhood years, the rejection of the female role is relatively risk-free. This begins to change in adolescence. The world again becomes the dichotomized place of girl/femininity and boy/masculinity, now with an additional imperative: heterosexuality, complete with its emphasis, for girls, on attracting the boy who will become their future protectors of social responsibility (Lewis, 1979). Lewis found that girls then began to lose their desire to be boys. Only 2% of her subjects wished to be boys after puberty. Most accepted female identities. However, most did not succumb to tradition, but sought to personally redefine what it meant to be female. As teenagers, sports became an outlet for many of them. Nine of the fifteen women in this study played in sports. This was enough to cause rumors to start. Two women explained it this way:

I played basketball and stuff, and you know, when you're an athlete and a woman, there's a lot of stereotypes. You know, "she's real bullish!" Or "she can really shoot that hard for a woman." People would say something and my sister heard about it and she'd go home and tell my mom. She would say, "I heard Stella's gay." (Stella)

If you were in athletics at that point in time when I was in high school, you were automatically stereotyped that you were gay because you were a big athlete...You were automatically labeled. (Carole)

For Stella, these rumors were instigators of problems at home. The mere label of "lesbian" proved to be a threat to women. It was a warning that they were stepping outside the lines of acceptable gender behavior (Eisenstein, 1983). Carole felt a lot of pressure from peers to disprove the rumors. She said, "It bothered me to a degree... it did put a little more pressure on me as to trying to prove myself not being that way as far as dating and stuff like that."

As teenagers, and for some even into adulthood, a rejection of feminine clothing was also a pattern. This rejection ranged from not wearing overtly feminine apparel to dressing in a way that was considered to be "mannish."

I went through that stage when I had to play a Dyke. Yeah, I had to ride a motorcycle and wear men's pants, men's clothes and I didn't wear women's stuff at all. Men's underwear even, you know. You go through this phase and it's one of those things.
(Pat)

I don't know why I'm so butch, why I wear men's clothes. It's not that I want to be a man, because I don't. Because God knows, if I were a man, I wouldn't have been with some of the women that I've been with. (Anita)

For Pat, as with the rest of the women with the exception of Anita and Jennifer, it was just, as she said, a phase. Whether as a child, teenager, or adult, it did seem to serve, as previously stated by Lewis, as a "rite of passage." It is crucial to consider, as Anita articulated, that gay women do *not* want to be men. Instead, they had desired male privilege and access to women. They desired the freedom that men had; and *every* woman in the sample, whether or not she considered herself a feminist, found the female role restrictive.

Since adolescents undergo so much pressure concerning gender conformity, lesbian adolescents might experience confusion, frustration, and ridicule. Sasha Lewis (1979, p. 24) wrote, "The young lesbian realizes that she cannot be a boy, yet she realizes that she cannot be like her female peers and in many cases she feels a sense of intense isolation." Not understanding why such pressure to conform even exists, lesbians then must determine their own paths. For many, as Pat and Kate explained, the lack of role models dramatically increased their problems. The problem was not merely finding good or even adequate role models. It was finding *any* role models. The lack of visibility on the part of lesbians reinforced their fears of being "freaks."

In what they perceived as a way to escape the constraints of female roles, two of the women had expressed a youthful intention to enter the military. Two more eventually did. Although the army did not satisfy either in her search for identity, both felt their reason for joining involved this rejection of traditional roles. Pat explained:

Why did I join the army? Because it was not a female role. To prove that I was just as good as they (men) were. That I could do anything they could do.

The four women who were actively involved in the feminist movement were very aware of their rejection of the female role. They were more in favor of androgyny, on the part of both men and women. The others supported the concept of androgyny, in their own lives although not all had considered it a political or social issue.

Conclusion

While the issue of gender identity in lesbians calls for further research, this study does reveal some important points. Even at an early age, the women

in this study were rebels where gender behavior was concerned. Many of them described experiences as "tomboys." They, as children, indicated they had no problem with this behavior but were forced by others to "wear dresses" or "play with dolls." Some did these willingly but rejected traditional femininity when they saw it as representing heterosexuality. Most rejected the traditional female role, because even as children, they could not foresee themselves in the future portraying a heterosexual role. Some, in childhood fantasies, already perceived themselves in lives with women. Many of them saw a need to take the "male role" to achieve the relation to women that they desire. At the onset of adolescence, much more pressure existed from both peers and adults to abandon "tomboyish" behaviors.

In 1952, Simone de Beauvoir described women as "other." Suzanne Pharr (1988) wrote that homosexuals fit into the category of the "other" because

they are defined in relation to the norm and found lacking...If they are not a part of the norm, they are seen as abnormal, deviant, inferior, marginalized, not "right" even if they as a group (such as women) are a majority of the population. They are not considered fully human. (p. 58)

The place of the "other" in society is marginal at best. Anne Wilson Schaeff (1985) has described women, blacks, and other minorities as outsiders who must know much about the White Male System to survive. The White Male System, however, knows very little of women and minorities. Pharr wrote that:

By those identified as the Norm, the other is unknown, difficult to comprehend, whereas the Other always knows and understands those who hold power; one has to in order to survive. (1988, p.58)

The work of de Beauvoir, Schaeff and Pharr all illustrate the reluctance of society to allow the "other" prominent participation. The women in this study complained of a lack of role models. This lack of role models and the "invisibility" (Rich, 1980; Barrett, 1989) of known lesbians reinforced in these women their lack of worth in society. It left them grasping to find their places in a society that was not their own, that appeared unaccepting and disapproving of their whole existence. According to Pharr:

The other's existence, everyday life, and achievements are kept unknown through invisibility. When we do not see the differently abled, the aged, gay men, and lesbians, people of color on television, in movies, in educational books, etc., there is reinforcement of the idea that the Norm is the majority and others either do not exist or do not count. (1988, p. 58)

Harold Brown (1976) wrote of his own adolescence pondering a future as a homosexual. He, too, lamented about the lack of role models. He felt that:

people become, in a large part, what they perceive they can become --- a perception that depends on their knowledge of what others like them have become. And homosexuals have been a people almost totally without history. (p. 41)

If there could be a positive aspect to having to discover one's own path rather than merely following leaders, it may have been that it produced a sense of independence in these women. It could also be that the lack of a desire to meet the female role requirements might have actually made it easier for lesbians to enter professions that are traditionally male fields or live independent lifestyle.

What Vargo (1987) called "gender inappropriateness" can, in and of itself, be considered, in dramaturgical analysis, to be associated with a certain degree of stigma. Vargo wrote that lesbians, merely by their preference for other women, are also expressing gender inappropriate behavior. Moreover, gender inappropriate behavior may be seen, in the strictest sense, as any visible rejection of the traditional feminine role. This may be the lack of make-up, feminine hairstyle or dress, or any of the behaviors that might be associated with femininity. More blatantly, this might mean a manifestation of any characteristics traditionally thought of in a masculine nature. Only one woman in this study considered herself to be somewhat feminine. The rest did not consider masculinity or femininity to be an issue in their adult lives. Yet this lack of adherence to the role might be an aspect of being "discredited" whereas their lesbianism may be considered to be more hidden, thereby making them "discreditable" (Goffman, 1963). In the case of mere gender inappropriate behavior, omitting lesbianism, it could be said that these women bear "a stigma but do not seem to be impressed or repentant about doing so" (Goffman, p.6).

Vargo (1987) felt that a positive self-image for lesbians could not result from acquiring gender appropriateness but in a "positive value of gender inappropriateness if they are to value their lesbianism" (p. 163). Each of the women in this study, to some degree, went through a process of not only acceptance but of appreciation of nontraditional roles. A couple of women had these comments:

I can take any role I want. I'm not going to fit into society's role of what I should be. Whether I was gay or not, I'd never conform. They can stuff it. (Justine)

Who wants to be like that (traditional) whether you're gay or not? Who wants to be the "Beaver's" mom? (Pat)

It should be reiterated that the women in this study found the traditional female role to be restrictive and constraining. Beginning as children, they began a journey of self-discovery usually without the assistance of role models or appropriate guidance from those they considered authorities. As adults, each reached her own conclusion on what it meant to be a woman and what it meant to be a lesbian. Risking the labels of "deviants" or worse, these women have chosen roles for which there were no scripts. Consequently, many feminists would consider their androgynous approach to selfhood to be much more well-rounded than those straining to conform to rigidly limited roles. In their paper on the psychological adjustment of lesbians and heterosexual women, Oberstone and Sukoneck (1976) concluded their analysis on gay women with the following:

Are they really more "masculine" in their behavior than their "normal" heterosexual counterparts, or are they more free to develop both their feminine and masculine and, in fact, their human potential? It is possible that, rather than being "masculine", the lesbian woman, by virtue of being an outlaw, has had to develop personality qualities that have been traditionally the domain of the male, such as independence, self-determination, competence, and aggression. (p. 185)

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