

Contemporary Lesbian Genders: A Queer/Sociological Approach

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This thesis attempts to develop the insights of recent work on identity that has been influenced by poststructuralist theory, and in particular 'queer theory', through an empirical study of the social construction of lesbian genders. I examine sociological work on sexuality, queer theory and feminist work on butch/femme. Lesbian identities are constructed at the intersection of specific discourses, structures and conscious agency. There is a lack of sociological element in queer theory but I am interested in the potential for developing this despite the epistemological difficulties it raises. Queer theory has enabled a radically different way of theorising butch/femme as transgressive queer practice with the potential to reveal the constructed and contingent nature of all gender.

The study has involved semi-structured interviews with 31 women who have various degrees of identification with either 'butch' or 'femme'. I identify particular 'interpretative repertoires' in identity narratives and examine the ways in which these are socially located. These findings are used to contest the assertion that community understandings of identities differ radically from the constructionism that is the dominant theoretical paradigm. I outline the construction of specific contemporary butch and femme subject positions and the ways in which these are discursively located in relation to heteronormative discourses. Queer theory offers a way of understanding butch and femme as specific lesbian genders and I argue that the relationship between butch/femme and heterosexuality should be seen as interdependent rather than imitative. The ways in which dominant beauty discourses are negotiated and the possibility of constructing a specifically lesbian aesthetic is examined. I argue that lesbian genders can be subversive of the 'heterosexual imaginary' but that this is context dependent.

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## **Chapter 1: Queer Theory and the Politics of Identity.**

### **Introduction**

The focus of this thesis is a study of the social construction of lesbian genders, and in particular 'butch' and 'femme' as subject positions and embodied identities. Recent work on sexual and gender identities in queer theory has enabled a reconceptualisation of butch/femme roles and the construction of lesbian genders. I contrast this with feminist work on lesbians and butch/femme. The problematised status of identities, theorised as contingent, shifting and positioned by discursive structures rather than as fixed properties of the individual, has enabled butch/femme to be viewed as both structured by and exceeding normative heterosexuality. I examine the ways in which identities are constructed and articulated through an analysis of lesbian identity accounts, situating these in specific social and discursive locations.

While queer theoretical work has enabled analyses of the relationship between butch/femme and naturalised heterosexuality that trouble the way in which these have been figured as 'imitation' and 'original', this has mainly been at an abstract theoretical or discursive level. I draw on qualitative interpretative approaches to examine the ways in which lesbians negotiate and redeploy heteronormative discourses in the performance of gender in everyday life. This involves analysis of the way in which the participants describe this relationship and how these accounts are situated. Through this it is possible to examine the construction of two specific butch and femme subject positions.

The lesbian context of this cultural practice is already structured by class, race and access to the commercial 'scene', in ways that have enormous influence on the ways in which these gender identities are lived out and read. Queer theory tends to be attentive to the textual and discursive aspects of these structures, suggesting

ways in which subjectivities can be conceptualised as positioned and constituted by them. While this provides the initial framework for theorising gender and sexuality there is a lack of focus on the intersection of the structural and discursive with the concrete and specific, addressed here through the analysis of the ways in which lesbians engage with gender roles, norms and structures in their everyday lives. In particular I examine the issue of gender styles, embodied practices, lesbian aesthetics and the negotiation of beauty discourses. This focus on visibility, aesthetics and transgression is then linked to perceptions of the operation of power in everyday life and the subversive potential of non-normative gender performances. The intention was not to take a verificationist approach or hope to provide empirical answers to theoretical questions but rather to develop and enrich queer theory by using different interpretative methods and epistemological frameworks. This involves first identifying the strengths and weaknesses of sociological work on sexuality and queer theory. More specifically I examine feminist work on butch/femme.

### **Social constructionism and sexuality: the sociological approach**

Plummer (1992) offers an overview of lesbian and gay studies and argues that sociology has played a key role in its development. The work of sociologists such as McIntosh (1998), Gagnon and Simon (1974) and Plummer (1975), (1981) as well as the social historical work of Weeks (1977) and Foucault's enormously influential 'History of Sexuality' (1978) established social constructionism as the dominant paradigm in the study of sexuality in the social sciences and humanities. The key achievement was '...to shift focus from "the homosexual" as a type of person to a concern with social responses to homosexuality which lead to radically different responses to same-sex experiences' (Plummer 1992: 8). This contributed to a lengthy debate between constructionist and essentialist theorists in the 1980s. One strand of this work focussed on the way in which sexuality is constructed at a macro-level by wider social or discursive structures, and tended to be broad in scope and inter-disciplinary in nature. Work by Weeks (1977, 1985), Adam (1998), D'Emilio (1993), Nardi and Schneider (1998) and others has

theorised sexuality within a wider social and historical location. McIntosh (1998) influentially challenged the assumption that homosexuality is a condition, which some people have, and others do not, and the misguided focus in research on its aetiology as a consequence of this. For her, the concept of homosexuality as a condition becomes the object of study, and she outlines the historically specific emergence of the homosexual 'role'.

At the same time sociologists working within interpretivist traditions developed a constructionist approach through empirical studies of lesbian and gay subcultures and communities (Humphreys 1971, Newton 1972/1998, Ponse 1978). The value of these sociological accounts was their denaturalisation of sexuality and focus on the role of processes and scripts in the construction of identities. By applying the ideas of symbolic interactionism and labelling theory, it was possible to examine the ways in which sexual meanings arise through social interaction. This type of approach has been useful in examining the construction and maintenance of lesbian identities. Ponse's study shows the work involved in creating and sustaining a lesbian identity; the rationalisations involved and the retrospective reinterpretation of one's own personal biography (Ponse 1978). She finds a parallel between concepts of lesbianism in the heterosexual and lesbian worlds. Both paradigms contain a notion of lesbian essentialism. She examines the inadequacies of both in the light of the ways in which identity is actually experienced by women and develops her own typology from there. A 'principle of consistency' is identified in the heterosexual paradigm, the underlying assumption of which 'assumes that sex assignment, gender identity, gender role or sex role, sexual object choice, and sexual identity vary together' (Ponse 1978: 170). Butler makes a similar point in 'Gender Trouble', although in different terms and from a different theoretical perspective (Butler 1990).

Ethnomethodologists Kessler and McKenna (1978) similarly studied the process of gender attribution and began to look at the gender performances of transsexuals as a way of theorising the routine way that gender is constructed through interaction. The term 'social construction' is used in a reflexive way in work from

the interactionist paradigm. Social processes are seen as, '...constantly being constructed, modified, selected, checked, terminated and recommenced in everyday life. Such processes occur both in episodic encounters and in longer lasting socialisation processes over the life history' (Plummer 1975: 12-13). While these may be group processes as well as individual, and occur in a specific social location, the emphasis is upon subjective meaning that is variable and fluid. Gagnon and Simon were among the first to criticise the assumption, dominant in both radical and conservative discourses, that sexuality is a natural force emerging from the individual which society represses. They argue that nothing is sexual in itself and that any behaviour can be sexualised, since sexuality is 'subject to socio-cultural moulding to a degree surpassed by few other forms of behaviour' (1974:16). Their work uses a symbolic interactionist approach to examine the ways in which sexual subjectivity is formed through a process of interaction between the self and social scripts.

Our concern here is to understand sexual activities of all kinds [...] as the outcome of a complex psychosocial process of development, and it is only because they are embedded in social scripts that the physical acts themselves become possible. (Gagnon and Simon 1974: 9)

The focus upon labelling, and the way that definitions and meanings are socially constructed around acts and bodies that have no inherent meaning through people's everyday interactions means that all sexual categories are potentially open to investigation. Heterosexuality too, rather than being a fixed or natural given, can be seen as unstable and constantly being reconstituted through social processes. Subjectivity is theorised as a process, emerging from interaction and negotiation. The interactionist tradition in sociology offers a theoretical and methodological approach able to address subjectivity as a socially located process, rather than simply asserting its constructedness. However, for example, while Gagnon and Simon (1974) acknowledge that the available sexual scripts are gendered and see this as a key division, the concept of scripts is not clearly linked to a consideration of wider social structures and issues of power, so that the analysis remains one dimensional. This is a common weakness: interactionism offers an approach which allows room for individual and collective agency and

which explores sexual subjectivity, but it is an approach which developed as a reaction to and against structuralism, and so work based in this theoretical and methodological tradition is ill-equipped to consider the role of the social structures which frame the processes they focus on. The focus upon the individual agent as the source of explanatory power and meaning and the reluctance to generalise beyond the localised situation limits the range of interactionism. As Rahman (2000: 70) points out, Gagnon and Simon's stress on heterosexuality as a socially produced script does not attempt an explanation of the conditions of its reproduction and the impact of these conditions on subjectivity. While gender divisions, schools, the law and other institutions are mentioned as sources of these scripts, the relationship is not examined and the pressure to conform to these norms is not theorised.

One consequence of the reluctance to consider the power of structural elements is that within interactionist accounts, 'deviant sexual socialisation is so well accounted for that one can barely see the overall pressures towards conformity' (Barrett 1989: 61). They tend to invoke concept of the subject as overly active and unconstrained, negotiating and constructing meanings and defining the sexual, in contrast to the more negative view of subjectivity in Foucauldian and poststructuralist analyses where sexual discourses work to position and ensnare the subject ever more tightly within power relations. Epstein (1990) argues against essentialism but is also critical of constructionism for this reason, which he likens to the basic dualism of classical liberalism, vacillating between a voluntarist individualism and its Foucauldian opposite in the way that the 'individual' is pitted against 'society' so that, '...what is missing is any dynamic sense of how society comes to dwell within individuals or how individuality comes to be socially constituted' (Epstein 1990: 259). He argues that constructionism is unable to theorise determination, so that it stresses the variety of sexual identities, acts, scripts and their state of flux while overlooking the fact that 'only the tiniest fraction of these possibilities are realised' (1990: 259). On an individual level also, 'it is precisely [the] perceived non-voluntary component of identity that cannot be accounted for' (1990: 260). At the political level he argues that this is



dangerous, giving rise to 'folk constructionism' which denies the non-voluntary aspects of identity. The vulnerability to this interpretation that Epstein identifies was shown by Section 28 of the Local Government Bill, which seeks to prevent the 'promotion' of homosexuality. This in turn encourages lesbians and gay men to asserting the 'real' and 'natural' aspects of their identities, hence the high levels of acceptance within the (particularly male) communities of genetic aetiologies and other forms of essentialism.

Despite these criticisms the interactionist concept of the self as a process offers a valuable insight into theorising identities as ongoing and provisional, as well as a methodology attuned to the investigation of the processes of the 'identity work' necessary to sustain them and to an understanding and acceptance of the values of individuals, cultures, and societies. This suggests the need for attention to the creative aspects of interaction, and to see the construction of lesbian genders as part of a process of negotiation and creation of meaning at an everyday level. I argue that the insights of poststructuralist feminism and queer theory are necessary to supplement this work and to move away from the concept of subjectivity as self-aware agency. There are strategic elements to this everyday practice as lesbians negotiate the discursive structures of gender and sexuality, but I would argue that this is not all at a conscious and intentional level. The creative appropriation and resignification of gender is constrained by norms, sanctions and hegemonic readings in a heteronormative context. Lesbian gender styles are frequently misread in ways that are class, age and 'race' specific. The assumption within interactionism of a conscious, self-aware, self-defining and active subjectivity combines with the stress in social constructionism on the flexible and malleable self relative to discourse so that there is little sense of the entrenched, enduring and non-voluntary aspects of identities. At the same time this stress on the shifting and provisional nature of identities does offer a way of seeing interactionism as complementary rather than opposed to those theories that have come from a structuralist or poststructuralist tradition.

### **Voluntarism and Social Constructionism**

Social constructionist work which draws on interactionism often contains a voluntarist commitment to the conscious and strategic transformation of sexuality, and the use of sexual identity as a political category. This is related to lesbian feminist and gay liberation discourses. It is also possible to see a 'sex radical' element to this, particularly in the instrumental value attributed to 'coming out', by which sexual expression has liberatory consequences. In chapter 8 I will consider these issues in the context of the everyday experience of power, agency and transgression.

While the interactionist and poststructuralist approaches have differing concepts of 'the subject' and the possibilities of identity, in both the latter is contingent and is used to convey a closing off and fixing down of other alternatives. There is an unacknowledged essentialism within this type of constructionism (Fuss 1989). Epstein's (1990) intervention calls into question the neatly dichotomous framing of the debate as it was played out in the 1980s between essentialism and constructionism. Interactionism assumes an active, reflexive and self-conscious subjectivity. This offers the potential for a slippage into a form of voluntarism. The capacity for self-definition can be over-emphasised at the expense of a consideration of the non-voluntary aspects of identity and desire, and the wider context of their enactment. I argue that it is more appropriate to examine the ways in which discourses are negotiated and particular repertoires are used in a strategic way that can contain elements of reflexivity but are largely non-voluntary, taken-for-granted and operating within the logic of a particular discursive formation.

Sedgwick (1991) points out that the constructionist-essentialist debate resembles the more widely rehearsed nature-nurture debate in the humanities and social sciences, so that:

[...] it partakes of a tradition of viewing culture as malleable relative to nature: that is, culture, unlike nature, is assumed to be the thing that can be changed... This has certainly been the grounding of, for instance, the feminist formulation of the sex/gender system [...] whose implication is that the more fully gender inequality can be shown to inhere in human culture rather than in biological nature, the more amenable it must be to alteration and reform. I remember the buoyant enthusiasm with which feminist scholars used to greet

the finding that one or other brutal form of oppression was not biological but “only” cultural! I have often wondered what the basis was for our optimism about the malleability of culture by any one group or program. (Sedgwick 1991: 41)

While she acknowledges that cultural malleability offers the only available space for intervention by queer or lesbian and gay activists she is aware of the dangers of constructionism and the massive array of institutional forces operating against lesbians and gay men in the same arena. Given the enormous structural inequalities in power this could encourage a ‘therapeutic mandate for cultural manipulation’ whose logical conclusion is ‘...the overarching, hygienic Western fantasy of a world without any more homosexuals in it’ (1991: 42). Social and cultural processes may be historically specific but this does not make them any easier to reverse or transform, on a collective or individual level. Added to this is the realisation that ‘it is becoming increasingly problematic to assume that grounding an identity in biology or “essential nature” is a stable way of insulating it from societal interference’ (1991:42). Foucault’s refusal to take a position on the aetiology of homosexuality despite his insistence on the discursive construction of sexuality was precisely because of his recognition of these dangers and a refusal to speculate on what he saw as an illusory ‘truth’ of sexuality (Foucault 1978). The public discussion on the ‘causes’ of homosexuality rests on a privileging of heterosexuality, and the idea that homosexuality might be chosen is implicitly ruled out. Yet despite these dangers, work that shows the constructed nature and privileged status of sexuality, and the arbitrary status of the sex/gender divisions fundamental to western societies, is a necessary part of the deprivilging of heterosexuality.

### **Queer Theory: An Outline**

The term ‘queer theory’ covers a wide variety of work that is difficult to summarise. However, there has been an identifiable body of work on sexuality in the 1990s, based mainly in the humanities, which draws upon social constructionism and poststructuralist and postmodernist theory. This theoretical development is related to political changes within the lesbian and gay

communities and the adoption of 'queer' as part of the ongoing questioning and redefinition of identity politics. Stein and Plummer have usefully summarised what they see as the characteristics of queer theory as,

(1) a conceptualization of sexuality which sees sexual power embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and boundary divides; (2) the problematization of sexual and gender categories, and of identities in general. Identities are always on uncertain ground, entailing displacements of identification and knowing; (3) a rejection of civil-rights strategies in favour of a politics of carnival, transgression, and parody which leads to deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings, and an anti-assimilationist politics; (4) a willingness to interrogate areas which normally would not be seen as the terrain of sexuality, and to conduct queer "readings" of ostensibly heterosexual or non-sexualized texts. (Stein and Plummer 1996: 134)

It is possible to identify a number of recurring themes in queer theory and politics and these will structure the following overview: the deconstruction and historicisation of identities, the critique of equal rights based policies, the concept of aesthetics and visibility as political, transgression, and performativity. These themes will be drawn upon throughout.

Queer theory and politics has clearly defined itself in opposition to both identity politics and lesbian and gay theory, and so it is necessary to include a summary of these positions and to outline their historical and political contexts. I argue that the political and theoretical issues are closely related. 'Performativity' and the contrast between this and earlier work on butch/femme from a feminist perspective will be considered in more detail, as these are particularly relevant to the project.

### **The social and political location of 'queer' and 'lesbian and gay'**

Seidman (1996: 5-10) divides post-Stonewall gay intellectual culture in the US into three periods and I would argue that British gay/queer culture and theory can be similarly divided. As Engel (2001: 84) demonstrates, the 1970s were marked by the importation of the American model of collective politics as well as an Americanisation of gay culture. The first phase Seidman distinguishes is marked

by the growth of the liberation movement from 1968 to 1975, which was civil rights based and influenced by the black and women's movements. This also saw a break with the assimilationist politics of the homophile organisations, towards a liberationist and transformative politics. The celebration of difference and attempt to use the discourses of naturalisation was fundamental to the development of lesbian-separatism and ethnic models of sexual identity. In Britain the movement split in the early 1970s as many lesbians became disillusioned with what they saw as male domination of the Gay Liberation Front and gravitated towards the women's movement.

The second phase distinguished by Seidman is from the mid 1970s to mid-80s, during which time the ethnic model became dominant, through a process of community building and institutionalisation. This consisted of a (mostly male) commercial gay scene in the large cities in the US and Western Europe. Within the women's movement a less commercialised and more alternative community building took place. The political logic of this, Seidman argues, was the dominance of both separatist or liberal assimilationist politics and the further cementing of the idea of identity as natural, valorised and fixed.

The growth and consolidation of these communities spawned an intelligentsia, which increasingly was based in academia, while retaining links with the community. Constructionism became the dominant paradigm with writers such as Weeks (1977), D'Emilio (1993) and Faderman (1991) concentrating on tracing the development of the lesbian and gay community, in the process historicising the concept of gay identity. Seidman contrasts this with the folk-essentialism that dominated in the movement where there was still an attachment to identity politics and the concept of minoritization (Seidman 1997: 90). In chapter 4 I argue that identity accounts are more complex than this and draw on a variety of discursive resources that need to be understood in relation to their political and social location.

While social constructionism became the dominant paradigm, and these analyses were important in locating sexual identities socially, materially and culturally,

both constructionists and essentialists tended to focus upon homosexuality as an identity, leaving heterosexuality under-theorised and the distinction between the two intact. They both shared what Sedgwick (1991: 1) has called a minoritizing view, 'seeing homosexual/heterosexual definition...as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority'. This was able to co-exist alongside a universalising view of the existence of homoerotic behaviour, in that same-sex eroticism could be understood to be a feature of all societies.

The third phase Seidman identifies is from the mid-1980s to the present. The success of community building meant that by the mid-1980s there was a flourishing gay subculture in major cities in the United States and most Western countries. Mort draws attention to 'supra-national conversation', arguing that this productive dialogue,

[...] confirms that the history of modern sexuality can rarely be understood as a purely domestic scenario, comfortably bounded by national formations. It points to the existence of a well-established homosexual diaspora, crossing nation states and linking individuals and social constituencies, especially in the Western metropolitan centres. (Mort 1994: 202)

The growth in academic based work on sexuality contributed to a widening gap between the site of theory and everyday gay life and culture. This weakness and the difficulties in operationalising queer theory suggest the need for a queer sociological approach.

Differences around sexual ethics, politics and issues of race began to divide the community in the early to mid-eighties. In lesbian cultures this is often referred to as the 'sex wars'. The impact of AIDS and the politically radicalising effect of AIDS activism, as well as the anti-'gay' rhetoric and legislation of the right wing opened up a gulf between the assimilationist politics of the mainstream, criticised for its white, male, middle-class and normalising bias and a more radical and confrontational political current which began to use the term 'queer' (Smith 1997, Seidman 1996). The politics of minority rights was seen as inadequate in dealing with the hostile political climate of the AIDS crisis and of Section 28 in the UK.

## **Deconstruction and Historicisation of Identities**

For Foucault sexual identities are arbitrary, closing off erotic possibilities to create a 'type' (1978). Similarly Martin argues that 'The amount of work required to keep the category [lesbian] intact exposes its ultimate instability and its lack of fixed foundations' (1992: 99) This is shown by the lesbian 'sex wars' around issues of butch/femme, SM, pornography, penetrative sex and sex with men.

Whatever the intent of these efforts to render lesbianism internally coherent and stable, discipline and control are the effects. Unruly sexual fantasies, desires, pleasures and practices, but also more complex analyses of social realities, are sacrificed to investments in identity. (Martin 1992:99)

The contradictory elements of 'lesbian' as a sexual identity require an analysis that sees power as both constructive and exclusionary. Foucault (1978) was critical of identity politics as totalising. Butler summarises his position:

To take identity as a rallying point for liberation would be to subject oneself at the very moment one calls for release from subjectification... If identity imposes a fictive coherence and consistency on the body, or better, if identity is a regulatory principle that produces bodies in conformity with that principle, then it is no more liberatory to embrace an unproblematized gay identity than it is to embrace the diagnostic category of homosexuality devised by the juridico-medical regimes. (Butler 1992: 354-355)

The development of the 'homosexual' category as a product of the various scientific discourses and state policies can overlook the adoption of a homosexual identity which can, '...be attributed to the emancipatory needs, interests and innovative politics of homosexually interested people themselves' (Silverstope 1987: 206). However this process has taken a particular historical form that has to a large extent been defensive and reactive in relation to the dominant discourses. The classificatory move from 'sinful' acts to 'sick' individuals in the work of the sexologists makes possible the adoption of an identity, for Foucault as 'reverse discourse', which, while vulnerable to attempts to 'cure' them, shifts the terms of the moral debate. Weeks (1977) has observed that Havelock Ellis' distinction between the 'invert' who is born with an abnormal sexual attraction to people of the same sex, and the 'pervert' who is capable of heterosexual relationships but

pursues same sex activities, has had far-reaching effects. not least on lesbian and gay self-identification. This has profoundly shaped theories about butch and femme identities and given rise to a 'discourse of inversion' which, as this research shows, retains an influence. The argument that 'inversion' is innate provides the logic for the liberal Wolfenden Report and Sexual Offences Act of 1967. If homosexuals are seen as sick rather than sinful, this identity provides a basis from which to argue for civil rights and tolerance. However in different circumstances the adoption of identity can be more deliberately subversive rather than reactive, as in the shift from 'homosexual' to 'gay' identities. Watney argues that the category 'homosexual' is no more scientifically rigorous or accurate than the 'molly' or gay man, since all are contingent and all are strategic responses to the oppression of homosexuality.

[...] it is thus possible to chart the complex, overlapping chronology of British sexual identities founded in homosexual desire as a series of changing and advancing claims for social legitimacy and acceptance, in the face of fluctuating levels of legal and cultural persecution. Yet in the lives of individuals, sexual identity is often thought of as if it were a direct, unmediated product of homosexual desire itself. (Watney 1993: 15)

Queer theory problematises and deconstructs identity, taking its starting point as the routine way in which the privileging of heterosexuality, as a natural and homogenous category, socially, politically and ideologically excludes its 'outside', rather than starting from an assumed coherence of sexual identity which can be shown to be an ideological effect. Rather than taking the form of a 'reverse discourse' it steers clear of attempts to legitimise the terms 'lesbian' and 'gay' in the language of the dominant culture. It recognises the contingent nature of sexual identities, in theoretical and practical terms. Many lesbians find 'queer' an uncomfortable category and difficult to occupy for this reason. Particularly for older lesbians who may have invested years fighting for rights based on the recognition of identity, and who may have social support networks in place based on that identity, the queer critique offers little of the same reassurance.

Seidman (1997: 150) argues that queer theory enables an epistemological shift away from the identity of the individual, which provides the foundation for



lesbian and gay theory and politics, and which theorises the lesbian and gay community as a product of the mobilisation of those self-identical individuals. Queer theory focuses primarily on culture, so that its field of analysis is not individuals but discursive structures and their institutional settings. He argues that the hetero-homosexual opposition becomes central to the analysis rather than being assumed. Where constructionism had been limited to the analysis of the emergence of a minority, queer theory puts homosexuality at the centre of society and social analysis in a shift from studying personal identities to a cultural politics of knowledge.

Queer theory is less a matter of explaining the repression or expression of a homosexual minority than an analysis of the hetero/homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviors, and social institutions, and social relations- in a word, the constitution of the self and society. (Seidman 1997: 150)

Similarly for Gamson:

The ultimate challenge of queerness, however, is not just the questioning of the content of collective identities but the *questioning of the unity, stability, viability, and political utility of sexual identities*- even as they are used and assumed. The radical provocation from queer politics [...] is not to resolve that difficulty, not to take us out of flux, but to exaggerate and build on it. (Gamson 1996: 404)

Sedgwick argues that a basic tenet of queer theory is that, 'an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homosexual/heterosexual definition' (1991: 1). This shift from taking gay identities as the unproblematic starting point of analysis in order to call these identities into question and to develop a Foucauldian analysis of discourse, shares with one strand of social constructionism the structural level of analysis, but often without its attention to the material elements of this.

### **Equal Rights Based Policies and Identities**

Seidman (1997) argues that queer theory does not see homosexuality as the property of a group, whether its origins are natural or social, since such a view has

left the hetero-homosexual binary intact as the dominant framework. This binary leaves only two political alternatives for the lesbian and gay movement: either separatism based on a model of ethnic difference or a struggle for inclusion and assimilation. The latter move towards legitimisation for the homosexual minority which has been the dominant approach, '...does not challenge a social regime which perpetuates the production of subjects and social worlds organised and regulated by the heterosexual/homosexual binary' (1997: 148).

Lesbian and gay politics in the 1970s and 80s, in the United States in particular, had been strongly influenced by what Warner has called the 'default' 'ethnic model' of identity (Warner 1993: xvii, Epstein 1990: 255).

To be gay, then, became something like being Italian, black or Jewish. The 'politics of identity' have crystallized a notion of 'gayness' as a real, and not an arbitrary, difference. So while constructionist theorists have been preaching the gospel that the hetero/homosexual divide is a social fiction, gays and lesbians, in everyday life and in political action, have been busy hardening the categories. (Epstein 1990: 243)

'Queer' is at one level an attempt to acknowledge the indeterminacy of sexual identities. Drawing on the post-structuralist critique of identity and representation, queer theory argues against the assumption of a pre-given gay identity on the basis of which to claim rights, but suggests that on the contrary it is what Sinfield calls 'the discourse of ethnicity-and-rights' (1997: 196) which constitutes us as gay. For Patton, '...we are the paradigmatic case of the postmodern subject, constituted both through reading and as a rhetorical effect of reading' (1993: 174).

Coming-out rhetoric, in effect, articulates gay identity to civil rights practices, articulates homoerotic practices to the political concept of minority. The person who takes up a post-Stonewall gay identity feels compelled to act in a way that will constitute her or himself as a subject appropriate to civil rights discourse, and thus, deserving of the status accruing to successful claims to minority status. (Patton 1993: 173-4)

Sinfield argues for analysis based on the concept of subcultures rather than identities.

It is to protect my argument from the disadvantages of the ethnicity model that I have been insisting on 'subculture', as opposed to 'identity' or 'community'. I

envisage it as retaining a strong sense of diversity, of provisionality, of constructedness. (1997 :204)

Green (1997) is reluctant to use the terminology of subcultural theory in her study of London lesbian feminist communities and the 'sex wars' of the 1980s. Instead she emphasises that the boundaries between the lesbian feminist community she studied and what surrounds it are only ever temporary and partial, so that its key characteristic was being always and necessarily in a 'state of becoming'. She emphasises the similarities between the community she is looking at and the wider culture and city in which it exists. Local politics and economics as well as '... long-term social change in Britain, such as a prolonged political shift to the right, substantial changes in economic conditions, and changing attitudes towards gender, sexuality and identity, affected and were reflected in the lesbian feminist community'. (Green 1997: 2). Drawing on Foucault, she emphasises the need to see this community as a part of 'Euro-American' culture, since lesbian feminism draws on intellectual traditions, including feminism and ideas about sexual and gender identities which are culturally and historically specific (1997: 8). Similarly the debates around the nature of lesbianism contributed to a debate in the wider culture in which identities, including sexual identities, were increasingly seen as flexible and fluid, whereas lesbian feminism had rested on an essentialist concept of both woman and lesbian. This debate, which has become part of a wider public discourse regarding the nature of identities as culturally specific and reflexive, is a characteristic of late modernity according to theorists such as Giddens (1991). It is also reflected in contemporary butch-femme discourse, where there is evidence of a reflexivity and awareness of performativity that is in contrast to older accounts which are reliant on essentialist discourses.

Green is correct to stress the wider social and discursive location of the communities and debates she examines and to stress the continuities between lesbian feminism and the wider culture. However the strengths of the concept of 'subculture' are its sense of provisionality and fluidity, and it is this which makes it useful. While there are occasions when it makes sense to use lesbian and gay 'community' and 'culture' in general, there are loosely defined subcultures within

this. Within both it is possible to see distinctive styles, spaces and practices which are negotiated in relation to the dominant culture and which involve contesting and subverting their 'deviant' positioning and making alternative claims to status. Thornton develops Bourdieu's work on cultural capital to argue for a concept of 'subcultural capital' in relation to club culture (1997: 202). This knowledge and 'hipness' '...confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder.' (1997:202) I argue that this is applicable to lesbian and gay subcultures which involve particular knowledge and competencies. Butch/femme can be seen as a subcultural category within lesbianism. Several participants in this research point out that within the major urban centres with developed scenes it is possible to have very little contact with the straight world, underlining the usefulness in thinking in terms of subcultures.

### **Aesthetics, Politics and Transgression**

The use of the term 'queer' is not just an example of a reverse discourse, reclaiming and valorising an insulting term, but carries a defiant, transgressive connotation as well. Most importantly it ties in with the theoretical work on post-structuralism, identity and queer theory, since 'queer' attempts a forms of political activism whose premise is not based on identity as an unquestioned given and which opposes assimilationist strategies. The pamphlet 'Queer Power Now' announced, 'There are straight queers, bi-queers, tranny queers, lez queers, fag queers, SM queers, fisting queers in every single street in this apathetic country of ours' (cited in Smyth 1992: 17). Queer activism which was largely shaped by necessary alliances made around HIV/AIDS work, typically involves highly visible attempts to confront and subvert expectations, is often highly theatrical and transgressive, and bears little resemblance to traditional forms of political organisation (Berlant and Freeman 1993).

Queer politics aims to exploit internal difference rather than policing its boundaries, and deliberately uses an eclectic mixture of tactics. However Seidman is critical of the tendency within poststructuralist political strategies to privilege signification and '...reduce the disciplining force of identity constructions to

modes of domination' (1997: 136). In the celebration of transgressive performances of sexuality there is also the potential for a slippage between the radical constructivism which underlies theories of performativity and the critique of identity politics as essentialist, and a sex radical position that sees sexuality as a disruptive and liberatory force operating in opposition to a repressive concept of 'the social', thus reinscribing essentialism. This will be examined in relation to transgressive gender performances in Chapter 8.

### **Sex Wars**

It is necessary to discuss the particular impact of the 'sex wars' which divided lesbian and feminist subcultures and movements in the 1980s, as this still frames the discursive context of the accounts. The debates that became known as the 'sex wars' began in the US but were played out in similar ways in other countries. Sue-Ellen Case identifies 1981-82 as the beginning of 'the great divide,' primarily between anti-porn feminists and SM activists, as well as the political crisis stemming from state inattention to HIV and AIDS, to which a politics based on gender rather than sexuality seemed ill-equipped to respond (1997:215). She sees this as a conflict between two political generations. The political outlook of lesbian feminism had been shaped by dialogue with Marxism, while according to Case the dominance of poststructuralist theory and the political impact of HIV and AIDS produced a new 'queer dyke' towards the end of the 1980s who identified more with gay men than lesbians. This shift away from a collective ethical stance and class-consciousness, towards the commodification of a 'queer' lifestyle, was responsible for the widespread closing down of women-centered bars, bookstores, and cultural centers, many of which had been collectively owned and operated. She is critical of the celebratory and 'affluent, commodity fetishism' which some academics are complicit in and of a revisionist history that overlooks the value of lesbian feminist work and associates it with one prescriptive subset of lesbians (1997: 213).

While Case, Jackson (1999) and others are right to criticise the formation of a

revisionist version of lesbian feminism, my concern here is less with the textual and theoretical accuracy of this portrayal than with the ongoing impact of those lesbian feminist discourses as they operate within lesbian subcultures. For the participants those discourses had a currency and impact that stretched well beyond the confines of a minority of lesbian separatists and revolutionary feminists. A few of the women were quite closely involved in the 'sex wars', particularly those who had connections to the scene in London and, to a lesser degree, scenes in the other big cities. These debates are still ongoing in a low-key way, and are particularly relevant for women who identify as or are perceived as butch or femme as the arguments still frame the discussions. Small minorities of lesbians identify as either butch or femme. Feminist critical analyses of butch/femme provide an important discursive resource for other lesbians in interpreting butch/femme. One of the major consequences of this is the reinforcing of a repertoire of femme strength and parodic femininity which has been developed in order to justify femme identities against the hostility and suspicion of many lesbians, particularly those discourses drawing on feminist discourses (see Chapter 6.) A more general legacy of these debates is the continuing marginalisation of self-identified butch and femme women within mainstream lesbian culture as the arguments of lesbian feminism combine with the phallocentrism of hegemonic understandings of lesbianism to reinforce the misunderstanding of butch/femme identification as imitative of heterosexuality.

A number of writers have drawn attention to the way in which identity has operated as a disciplinary force in relation to lesbianism (Nestle 1992, Rubin 1993, Martin 1996, Roof 1998). This has taken the form of policing the boundaries of lesbianism as well as taking a strong moral stance over issues of sexual practice, self-presentation and attitudes towards gender. These discussions are taken up in relation to contemporary definitions of lesbianism in chapter 4.

An analysis of heterosexuality, influential in radical feminism with its emphasis on the personal as political, showed the way that even the most private and intimate areas of life were part of a wider system of power relations. The

examination of other 'private' areas such as sexual violence became part of an analysis that saw heterosexuality as an institutionalised form of oppression for women. The theoretical weakness of such an analysis is rooted in its use of a behaviourist theory of sexuality, which, as in other areas of gender inequality, saw it as learned conditioned behaviour. Coupled with an acceptance of the importance of a gendered sexuality as the core of identity taken from the prevailing ideology and the perception of sex with men as the archetypal moment of male supremacy, political lesbianism was developed as an ideology and an identity.

Political lesbianism contains an implicit voluntarism, in which if women could overcome their adverse conditioning and see other women as worthy of love then unleashing their sexuality could have a liberatory potential. This sexual energy would then be used in egalitarian and inherently subversive relationships with women rather than oppressive relationships with men. However the conflation of this with a naturalism that tended to see female sexuality as essentially good and positive, nurturing and loving in contrast to male sexuality, left no room for an analysis of sexuality able to make alliances with male homosexuality, while female heterosexuality can only be seen as a failure of courage or a result of false consciousness. Similarly femme identification was interpreted as conformity and butch with male identification.

Within modern feminism, sexuality has tended to be understood as part of the 'sex-gender system' (Rubin 1993). Rubin later criticises this failure to distinguish between gender and erotic desire, and the treatment of them as part of the same social process.

[...] lesbian feminist ideology has mostly analysed the oppression of lesbians in terms of the oppression of women. However, lesbians are also oppressed as queers and perverts, by the operation of sexual, not gender, stratification. Although it pains many lesbians to think it, the fact is that lesbians have shared many of the social penalties as have gay men, sadomasochists, transvestites and prostitutes. (Rubin 1993: 33)

This ran directly counter to lesbian feminist theory that had developed the idea of

woman-identification. Viewed primarily in terms of gender, this put gay men and women at opposite ends of a spectrum, with no common ground or interests. Rich's (1993) concept of a 'lesbian continuum' de-emphasised the sexual element of women loving women. This contributed to a form of social constructionism with an implicit voluntarism which co-existed alongside accounts which attempted to theorise the forces which produce a 'compulsory heterosexuality', so that there is a conflicting array of ideas employed in both lesbian theoretical work and individual accounts. This can be seen as a reaction to the way that medical and psychiatric discourses as well as the wider culture had defined lesbianism primarily in terms of sexual acts.

The focus on the political aspects of lesbianism and heterosexuality was epitomised by the concept of political lesbianism, defined by the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist group as a 'woman-identified woman who does not fuck men' (cited in Creith 1996: 8). Since heterosexuality was viewed as an institutionalised form of oppression for women, and lesbianism was increasingly being defined in terms of a rejection of sexual relationships with men, this led to lesbianism enjoying a positive status in the women's movement. However this only applied to a certain kind of lesbianism. Lesbian feminist critiques of heterosexuality were seen as:

... encourag(ing) a view of lesbian sex as the only politically acceptable sexual practice; lesbianism was the model for describing good sex for women. This evoked a particular representation of lesbian sex. It was sex that was reciprocal, non-oppressive, equal, less goal-orientated, not penetrative or genitally focussed. (Richardson 1996: 282)

The critique of heterosexuality and sex roles meant that 'role-playing' women were met with incomprehension and hostility, as they seemed to be aspiring to the very roles that feminists were fighting. The removal of a sexual element to the definition of lesbianism meant that it was primarily defined in opposition to heterosexuality, with profound implications for butch/femme identities which were seen to be imitative of this. The static and essentialist view of gender in lesbian feminism meant that it had no way of theorising butch/femme as anything



but an imitation of heterosexuality, and therefore as oppressive.

In making gender the primary culprit of women's and lesbian's oppression, especially in making the rejection of butch/femme 'roles' one of the linchpins on which lesbian liberation turned, lesbian feminism truncated a historically lesbian effort to reformulate women's gender roles. Under lesbian feminism analysis, butch/femme came to symbolise, simultaneously, the 'old' (sexual) construction of lesbianism, and the oppressive (genderized) heterosexuality that the 'new' lesbianism was supposed to cure. (MacCowan, 1992: 306)

In the early 1980s Hollibaugh and Moraga criticised the way in which feminism had itself become oppressive to women who did not conform to its prescriptive view of sexuality as an egalitarian exchange between an androgynous couple who rejected all forms of role-playing. This had the effect of alienating whole areas of lesbian tradition and communities, whose social identities were built around butch/femme.

### **Butch/femme, gender and feminist theory**

Feminist historical and constructionist work on sexuality has generally seen butch/femme as a more progressive phenomenon, suggesting that butch identities in particular may have served to challenge and undermine normative heterosexuality through their visibility and gender non-conformity (Smith-Rosenberg 1985, Faderman 1981, Newton 1984).

Throughout the 1980's Nestle's work challenged the view of butch/femme, arguing for the positive effects of role-playing with regard to lesbian identity. She argues that a butch identity should not be seen as imitative or wanting to be a man. A butch identity in the 1950s involved the making public and visible of the desire for other women, and a taking of erotic responsibility (1987: 89). She argues for the feminist significance of these women's struggle for social and sexual autonomy. She points out that while attention is often focussed on the butch woman, with her obvious transgression of gender roles and the bravery involved in this making her more readily recuperable for lesbian and gay theorists, the femme is ignored in feminist historical work. Femme women are often perceived as hiding their lesbianism through the attempt to pass as straight and

accepting the dominant construction of femininity. Their invisibility when alone, and not part of the butch/femme dyad, makes them politically suspect, and is seen only in terms of the benefits it accrues. In 'The Femme Question' (1992) she argues that the femme role is threatening to heterosexuality because it uses the signs of conventional femininity to signal desire for other women, disrupting the normal functioning of femininity. This also reveals the performative nature of roles, perhaps even more clearly than the butch identity does. For Nestle, femme is the way in which a biological female uses the signs of womanhood and femininity to make public her desire for women.

Femmes have drawn attention to the way in which their whole identity has tended to be erased in the absence of a butch, and on the streets femme visibility is only possible as part of the couple, since the rest of the time femmes can pass quite easily as heterosexual women. Within lesbian culture historically there has been a heroic side to being butch and hence visible, and theoretically the butch has been of interest for her gender transgression. Femme women, on the other hand, have been regarded as slightly suspect, as not 'real' lesbians, and as more likely to revert to the straight life from which they are assumed to have emerged (Harris and Crocker 1997). While butches push at the acceptable boundaries of gender performance, femmes are seen as having bought into the dominant ideology. Femme visibility has been a crucial issue for femmes.

In all these conversations I have been having with butches, they always talk about their role confusion: Are they a man or not a man? Why did they want to fuck women? But it seems they always had an image of themselves; they could always look at the movies and see the boy kissing the girl, and they were the boy. Well, you know, it occurs to me that the reason it is so hard to figure out why you are a femme is that there are really no images in the other direction. When I thought about kissing a man, I could only imagine a woman kissing a man, because I couldn't imagine what a woman would look like in that place, but I also knew I wanted to get kissed [...] I don't have any images of femmes [...] I know I am one; its not like gender dysfunction where I think I am a man. I am not straight. What am I? I don't get as oppressed on the street in the same way, but it makes me confused in terms of gender. Am I a real woman? (Davis, Hollibaugh, Nestle 1992: 255)

Nestle addresses the way in which femmes were misunderstood and

misrepresented by feminism, so that in the 1980s she recalls that younger lesbians regarded her as a throwback to a previous, unenlightened era, and a victim. She argues that butch/femme should not be understood as imitating the masculine and feminine roles in heterosexual relationships.

This labelling forgets two women who have developed their styles for specific erotic, emotional and social reasons. Butch/femme relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic and social statements, not phoney heterosexual replicas. They were filled with a deeply lesbian language of stance, dress, gesture, love, courage, and autonomy. (Nestle 1992: 138)

She describes butch/femme in terms of cultural warfare against colonisation, highlighting the contradiction involved in the need to, '... reflect the colonizer's image back at him yet at the same time to keep alive what is a deeper part of one's culture, even if it can be misunderstood by the oppressor, who omnipotently thinks he knows what he is seeing' (Nestle 1992: 141). Butch/femme, since it incorporates elements of the coloniser's style, may be rejected on those grounds by lesbian feminism, but she argues for its validity on the grounds of its historical use as resistance by women.

A butch lesbian wearing men's clothes in the 1950s was not a man wearing men's clothes; she was a woman who created an original style to signal to other women what she was capable of doing- taking erotic responsibility. (Nestle 1992: 141)

The problem for femmes is that to dress as they like, to feel strong and comfortable, and to signal their desire to butch women, which involves actively asserting and expressing their sexuality, involves a performance of femininity that can be misinterpreted as capitulating to patriarchy or passing. As styles become more androgynous, among straight women as well as lesbians, femmes resemble anti-feminist women, producing 'a terrible misreading of self-presentation that turns a language of liberated desire into the silence of collaboration' (Nestle 1992: 142). She points out that in earlier decades the ability of the femme to pass as straight as an individual was important economically, since it made her more able to work in mainstream occupations and hence support both women, enabling the butch to look the way she wanted to. On the street as a couple, though, the

opposite was true, since the more femme she looked, the more clearly marked the couple were as lesbians.

Kennedy and Davis (1993) focus on the meaning of butch/femme roles in a particular U.S. community. Prior to Stonewall and a political lesbian and gay movement, they argue that gender-role transgression was a powerful way to resist the dominant and hostile straight culture, and showed the constructed nature of gender and sex roles. They argue that the only culturally intelligible way of signalling desire for women is through the adoption of the male role, so that for butch lesbians this became the only way of expressing who they were as women. At the same time as showing the constructed nature of sex and gender roles, butch women were also able to suggest ways in which the roles may be done differently, pointing out the many ways there are of 'being' masculine.

Kennedy and Davis are interested in the lack of camp around the butch role in this period; the 'aura of solemnity' surrounding the butch identity. They argue that,

Butch-fem roles were a deeply felt expression of individual identity and a personal code guiding appearance and sexual behavior; they were a system for organizing social relationships delineating which members of the community could have relationships with whom; furthermore, they were working-class lesbians' only means of expressing resistance to the heterosexual world in this prepolitical era of gay and lesbian history. (1992: 62)

They argue that butch masculinity is necessarily ambiguous, and distinguish between butches and passing women. Many of their informants speak of being butch as 'not denying' who they were, so that the role comes from a deeply felt sense of gender identity. At the same time butch had a social dimension, since it made lesbianism visible and involved great personal risks. Throughout the 50s the butch role became more exaggerated, centred on the bar scene but shaped by increasing violence and hostility on the streets, so that the role became tougher and more aggressive. They argue that, 'The pressure on butches and studs to not deny who they were and to defend themselves generated an extraordinarily complex and confusing relationship to masculinity' (1992: 70). These butches may have been very masculine and thought in terms of conventional gender dynamics

but were still women, and thought of themselves as acquiring masculine characteristics rather than being male. In contrast to camp as used by gay men, they did not use masculine names for one another (although the use of unisex names was common). Kennedy and Davis reflect on the ambiguous relationship between masculinity and 'queerness', which they suggest has been misunderstood by more recent theorists. Most of the time their use of a masculine style of clothing and mannerisms identified these women as queer. The same clothes could also enable them to pass temporarily, acting as a kind of cover. Thus practices such as taping the breasts down were related to practical purposes rather than signifying a denial of femaleness. One of their informants says simply, 'It was easier to walk down the street if at first glance people thought you were a man' (1992 :71). They observe that gender was to an extent used strategically, so that women would emphasise their femininity in encounters with the law. In their dealings with straight men, they typically demanded respect, but *as women*. Kennedy and Davis summarise that,

The absolute seriousness of these butches' relation to masculinity is striking. The only times this lesbian bar culture played with masculine and feminine identities (other than in the courts) were on rare occasions when butches would go out dressed in extremely feminine garb. Such masquerading, however, did not throw the meaning of masculine identity for women into question but rather reinforced its "rightness"; the fun and humour came from the dissonance caused by known butches' taking on of a feminine appearance. Other gay and lesbian bar patrons treated them as if they were in drag. (Kennedy and Davis 1992: 72)

Similarly the relationship between butch and masculine sexuality is not straightforward. The butch was expected to take the sexual initiative and be physically active, paralleling the male role, but at the same time her objective, taken to an extreme in the example of the untouchable stone butch, was the pleasure of her partner. They argue that the butch/femme erotic system needs to be understood as both imitating and transforming heterosexuality.

They are interested to compare the cultures surrounding butches and queens, since they both used gender-inverted appearance to signal their identity, and to signal erotic interest based on a vision of sexuality based on sexual difference. Although

butch identity was based on artifice, on performing masculinity rather than being male, there was no accompanying camp culture, and very little theatrical tradition of male impersonators. They suggest that an understanding of male supremacy is crucial in explaining the differences between the two cultures.

Gay male camp is based not simply on the incongruous juxtaposition of femininity and maleness, but also on the reordering of particular power relationships inherent in our society's version of masculinity and femininity. The most obvious cause for the minimum development of camp among lesbians was that masculinity was not and still isn't as incongruous as femininity in twentieth-century American culture and therefore not as easily used as a basis for humour. (Kennedy and Davis 1992: 76)

They contrast the use of camp by a queen, and his ability to play with male privilege, with that of the lesbian confronted by an authority, on the streets and in the bars, that was always male.

Our analysis of the social meaning of the butch appearance and sexuality leads us to hypothesize that the extreme seriousness of masculinity for butches is based in their usurping of male privilege, their assertion of women's sexual autonomy, and their defending of a space in which women could love women [...] In this woman-hating society, and in the dangerous environment of the bars, the butch had to be able to assert and defend herself. Seeing the butch role develop in the actual context of the community clarifies that the butch role differed from that of a queen in that it carried the burden of twentieth-century women's struggle for the right to function independently in the world. (Kennedy and Davis 1992: 76)

Studies of other cities show the role of the butch in maintaining a safe space and protecting lesbians from the unwanted attentions of heterosexual men (Thorpe, 1997). While writers such as Faderman (1991) would agree with this analysis of the historical importance of butch/femme roles, the criticisms made by feminists in the 70s of butch/femme as imitative of heterosexuality are still influential and mean that post-Stonewall butches and femmes were less sympathetically received portrayed until the late 1980s. Until then very little work was done on contemporary butch/femme, and attention was focussed on uncovering hidden community histories from the era prior to the gay liberation movement. The few examples of work on butch femme in the 1980s make apparent the courage required at that time to challenge the feminist orthodoxy. Numerous contributors

to Nestle's anthology testify to the hostility they encountered on a personal level in the women's movement. Many participants in this study told similar stories of hostility and misunderstanding.

Lesbian subcultures have a contradictory relationship to butch/femme, simultaneously valuing and criticising butch style for its visibility and gender non-conformity while disparaging femme style as insufficiently readable as lesbian. The focus on heterosexual intercourse as the site of male power in some versions of feminism, and the redefinition of lesbianism as woman-identification that excluded heterosexual sex rather than included lesbian sex, hindered the ability of many feminists to positively evaluate butch/femme practices.

### **Conclusion**

Prior to the influence of queer theory, studies of sexuality had tended to take for granted the lesbian and gay, or butch and femme, identities they examined. While some constructionist work has been more Foucauldian and orientated towards the study of discourse and structure, providing the basis of what has become known as 'queer theory', the more empirically based sociological studies in particular have taken questions of identity for granted. Queer theorists tend to see identities as shifting and unstable, focussing on the production of subject positions. Sociological approaches are also concerned with process, examining the ways in which identities are constructed and lived out. Despite the epistemological differences between the approaches there is significant common ground, and the potential for developing a 'queer sociology' will be explored in Chapter 2.

## Chapter 2: Queer Sociology and Lesbian Gender

There has been a fundamental difference in the approaches to sexuality of sociology and queer theory, even as both claim to be a form of social constructionism. Sociological work has tended to start from the level of the individual, assuming rather than troubling the homo-hetero distinction, and examining the ways in which, through social interaction and the development of scripts, sexual meanings are produced and sexuality is organised. Typically this has involved the study of identities and the production of typologies (Ponse 1978, Troiden 1998). Queer theory, on the other hand, has been concerned to analyse the production of subject positions. I examine queer work on butch/femme and lesbian gender. The objects of analyses have tended to be texts and the readings they suggest. This involves a different view of power, agency and subjectivity. Where Foucault's work is influential this is especially so, as his view of resistance has been criticised as a pessimistic one (Lash 1990, Fraser 1989, Dews 1987). This has also led to the material sense of the body being overlooked in favour of the study of discursive analysis. Both, though, are concerned with the subjective aspects of sexuality. I argue that there are ways in which the two approaches can be brought together. The work of both Butler (1990, 1993a) and Bourdieu (1990) proposes ways of transcending the structure-agency binary in ways that are suggestive for a queer sociology. At the same time this intersection of agency, subjectivity and structure is precisely my area of interest. The concept of 'habitus' is a useful way of conceptualising the way that the structural and subjective are linked. I argue for a limited concept of reflexive agency while stressing the dispositional, discursive and social constraints on this.

### Poststructuralism, performativity and butch/femme

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (Butler 1990: 33)

Judith Butler's work offers a highly influential rethinking of the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality, and attempts to deconstruct the categories



presumed to be central to feminist and lesbian and gay theory and politics. By presenting a thorough critique of identity categories as foundationalist, and arguing that their ontological status should be rethought in terms of a theory of gender as signification, she opens up provocative ways of rethinking sexual identities.

Butler uses a concept of power that is heavily influenced by Foucault (1978). In this account, power is diffuse and dispersed, without a cause or origin, but is also productive of subjectivities. This leads her to interrogate the foundationalist assumptions at the heart of identity politics, and the assumption in feminism of the ontological integrity of the subject 'woman', existing before the law and awaiting representation. Feminist accounts, in order to dispute biological justifications of sexism, made a distinction between sex and gender, with gender understood to be a cultural construction on a biologically given bipolarity. For Butler,

If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. (Butler 1990: 6)

Butler questions the naturalness of 'sex' as a category, arguing that it, too, is discursively produced.

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. (Butler 1990: 7)

She analyses the way in which the notion of 'proper' gender operates, arguing that it is the effect of a compulsory system, rather than the cultural property of one sex or the other. Heterosexuality naturalises itself by installing the 'illusions of continuity' between sex, gender and desire, and this is unchallenged by feminist theories which reproduce what Butler calls 'expressive models of gender', which do the work of normalisation. In these theories, any dissonance in features, acts or desires can be referred back to a gendered core, to which they are secondary. For

Butler, ‘There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (1990: 25). Gender becomes congealed, reified and provisionally fixed through its repeated compulsory performance, giving it the appearance of naturalness. This also reveals its inherent instability.

[...] the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect. In this sense, the ‘reality’ of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and ground of all imitations. In other words, heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmic idealization of itself – *and failing*. (Butler 1993b 313)

In her later work Butler develops this theory of gender as performative but non-voluntaristic through a concept of ‘citationality’, as part of the circular operation of power, through which heterosexuality operates as a compulsory symbolic law. She is clear that there is no volitional subject prior to gender performance, and that ‘[...] the very possibility of becoming a viable subject requires that a certain gender mime be already underway’ (1993b: 314). The punitive aspect of this regulatory regime is also stressed.

[...] gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express. It is a *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions. (Butler 1993b: 314)

Foucault’s (1978) reconceptualisation of power and resistance has been enormously influential. Generally within social theory seen as repressive and as a property held by a dominant group or class, Foucault suggests a reading of power as relational and complex, inescapable and dispersed throughout a web of social relations, dominating but simultaneously producing resistances. However this conception of resistance is not well articulated and although suggestive is not operationalised in his work. He states that:

There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more

real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power [...]. (Foucault 1980: 142)

The concept of 'reverse discourse' is useful in understanding identity politics, whereby those produced as deviant subjects make claims for legitimacy by redeploying the same discourses and knowledges that have positioned them. This is true of the discourse of homophile groups, gay liberationists and those using 'ethnic' arguments and arguing for equality on the basis of human rights.

Butler uses the Foucauldian concept of power as constitutive of society. Culturally intelligible subjects are produced through the operation of a discursive regime. There is no 'outside' of discourse from which resistance can be launched. The site of and potential for resistance is located within this same discursive formation. The heterosexual regime compels us to repeat or cite its norms, but the very act of repeating helps establish the chain of binding conventions that compels us. It is the instability of this process that is the site for its own subversion. As there is no 'proper' gender, as the property of one sex or the other, and gender identity is only produced through the compulsory repeated performance of that gender, then this repetition offers the possibility of slippage. Any citation or representation will involve a *difference* from every other citation, they are non-identical, and so if identity is understood as the product of signifying practice it is always vulnerable to resignification. The performance is an imitation of a fantasised ideal, rather than an expression of underlying gender or a copy of some 'original', and, for Butler, is bound to fail, hence the necessity to repeat.

If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e. new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible (Butler 1990: 145).

### **Subversion and Agency in Butler**

The emphasis upon the possibilities of resignification leads Butler to privilege the practices of drag and butch and femme as revealing all gender performance as

imitative and contingent. Drag is not seen as a parody of an original, but as a parody 'of the very notion of an original' (1990: 138). If Butler is proposing these practices as a strategy for undermining compulsory heterosexuality as a regime then this is an overestimation of the subversive potential of queer cultural practices and the ease with which the dominant culture is able to neutralise and accommodate the marginal and transgressive. Elsewhere she seems more cautious, aware of how her work has been misinterpreted, and notes that the film 'Paris is Burning', '...calls into question whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalisation of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms' (1993a: 126). Butler is critical of the underdeveloped concept of subversion in the work of Kristeva and Foucault and yet, as Deutscher argues, at no point does she outline her version of what may constitute subversion (1997: 30). At the same time the term is used to frame the structure of her argument, and in association with passages dealing with transgressive gendered practices, so that the voluntaristic misreadings of performativity are unsurprising. Deutscher concludes that for Butler, 'subversion' and 'constitutive instability' are closely linked and used almost interchangeably. This is part of Butler's development of an anti-utopian argument in which there is no outside of gender from which to criticise normative heterosexuality, and which theorises hegemonic gender as constituted through instability. This instability is simultaneously part of the power of gender and its potential weakness. Emphasis on the latter has been influential in readings of Butler, whereas Deutscher shows that her focus on 'constitutive instability' could have led to a quite different interpretation of her work as focussing on the constitution rather than subversion of gender (1997: 32).

Nevertheless while Butler's concern to 'trouble' the naturalised status of gender did not lead her to conclude that its instability necessarily left it vulnerable to subversion through wilful transgressive practices, her focus on the constitutive instability of gender does suggest subversive possibilities. Her article 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' (1993b) pursues similar themes and uses a similar vocabulary of subversion. This will be considered in relation to everyday gender

performance in Chapter 8.

### **Butler and Butch/Femme**

Butler's deconstructive approach offers a useful way of analysing lesbian identities, particularly butch and femme. She differs from Wittig (1992) in recognising that the lesbian body cannot be constructed outside the heterosexual regime it would seek to subvert, so while recognising the ways in which heterosexual norms appear in gay identities and may in part structure them, she claims that they do not determine them. Nor, contrary to both Wittig's and lesbian feminist theory, is it necessary to oppose this as the intrusion of the 'straight mind' or male values, examples of heteronormativity that must be opposed. Her deconstruction of the supposedly causal relationship between the bipolar sexual subject, gender bipolarity and heterosexuality as the product of a power/knowledge regime enables her to analyse butch and femme in their specificity. For Butler, while butch identity may involve an 'identification' with masculinity it does not represent the assimilation of lesbianism back into the terms of heterosexuality. 'As one lesbian femme explained, she likes her boys to be girls, meaning that "being a girl" contextualizes and resignifies "masculinity" in a butch identity' (1990: 123). The juxtaposition of the sign 'masculinity' and a culturally intelligible female body constitute the object of desire in a way that is a recognisable part of a specifically lesbian erotic culture. Butler points to the fact that it is equally possible for a heterosexual woman to prefer her girls to be boys. Importantly, her analysis goes beyond simply asserting the specificity of butch and femme against homophobic charges of imitation, as historians of lesbian communities such as Nestle (1987) have done. She asks:

Is it not possible that lesbian sexuality is a process which reinscribes the power domains that it resists, that it is constituted in part from the very heterosexual matrix that it seeks to displace, and that its specificity is to be established, not *outside* or *beyond* that reinscription or reiteration, but in the very modality and effects of that reinscription. (Butler 1990: 310)

Butler seeks to use her analysis to problematise heterosexuality, seeing it too as derivative rather than originary. Where homophobic discourse regards butch and

femme as copies of a heterosexual 'real' or 'original', she examines the way in which this relationship can be inverted. Logically the notion of an 'original' relies upon the notion of a 'copy' to confirm its status. The relationship between the two terms is unstable.

[...] if gay identities are implicated in heterosexuality, that is not the same as claiming that they are determined or derived from heterosexuality, and it is not the same as claiming that heterosexuality is the only cultural network in which they are implicated. These are, quite literally, *inverted* imitations, ones which, in the process, expose the fundamental dependency of 'the origin' on that which it claims to produce as its secondary effect. (Butler 1993b: 313)

Lesbian and gay politics have largely been based on precisely the kind of foundationalist principles which Butler's work disrupts. Her understanding of identity as the product of repeated signifying practices challenges the ontological status of the category 'lesbian' which the political movement seeks to represent. Representation is politically important, but fraught with difficulty given her deconstruction of the categories of identity. She acknowledges that the arguments of activists who insist upon lesbian and gay identities more than ever in the face of renewed homophobic threats of erasure, but argues that such threats should not be allowed to dictate the terms of the resistance to them. 'Is it not a sign of despair over public politics when identity becomes its own policy, bringing with it those who would "police" it from various sides?' (1993b: 311). Any attempt to define 'lesbian' functions as a type of boundary control, and attempts to stabilise and control the category become a disciplinary act. Butler argues that whilst it may be necessary to use the sign, it is important to try to safeguard its openness and acknowledge its contingency.

Butler's work has been subject to two contradictory criticisms. On one hand gender is understood as performance and the lack of focus on structural constraints on this is criticised, so that the focus on performativity is read as transgressive and utopian. This understanding of gender performativity can be summarised as the notion that cross-gender impersonation is parodic and liberatory insofar as it reveals the imitative and performative nature of all genders. Both Lovell (2000) and Rahman (2000) offer readings of Butler as postmodernist,

emphasising performativity as voluntaristic and agent-centred. In chapter 8 I argue against readings of queer performance whose claims to be subversive rest upon authorial intention and argue for an attention to the specific social and discursive context of a given performance. On the contrary, the weakness in Butler's work is the lack of an adequate theorisation of agency and subversion. I agree with McNay that it offers only a partial theorisation of agency and is subject to the weaknesses of the 'negative paradigm of identity formation' characteristic of poststructuralist thought (2000: 2).

### **Butch/femme and Queer Theory**

The use of poststructuralist theory in examining gender and sexuality has enabled a number of queer theorists to follow up these arguments, and suggest that lesbian role-play should not only be re-examined and reclaimed as subversive of heterosexuality, but has the potential to destabilise all gender categories.

Case was among the first to argue for the progressive potential of the performative nature of butch/femme role-play. She is critical of the feminist incorporation of poststructuralism, arguing that this tends to produce a concept of female subject so firmly situated within the dominant ideology that it becomes difficult to account for agency and change. She argues instead, with de Lauretis (1987), for the concept of a feminist subject, situated at once both inside and outside ideology, and capable of change. Previous work on the female subject assumes an unacknowledged heterosexual context, leaving her entrapped. She argues that the butch/femme couple offers an alternative subject position for feminism.

Focusing on the feminist subject, endowed with the agency for political change, located among women, outside the ideology of sexual difference, and thus the social institution of heterosexuality, it would appear that the lesbian roles of butch and femme, as a dynamic duo, offer precisely the strong subject position the movement requires. (Case 1993: 295)

She argues that the dominant ideology relies upon the status of woman as object, and that a critique of sexual difference is made possible since '... the butch/femme

couple inhabit the subject position together' (Case 1993: 295). Using psychoanalytic theory, she suggests that butch/femme should be seen as masquerade.

[...] the butch is the lesbian woman who proudly displays the possession of the penis, while the femme takes on the compensatory masquerade of womanliness. The femme, however, foregrounds her masquerade by playing to a butch, another woman in a role; likewise, the butch exhibits her penis to a woman who is playing the role of compensatory castration. (Case 1993: 300)

Her emphasis is on the camping-up of penis envy and castration, and the knowledge of their status as psychoanalytic fictions. In the bars where the culture arose, the roles were always acknowledged as such.

In other words, these penis-related posturings were always acknowledged as roles, not biological birthrights, nor any other essentialist poses. The lesbian roles are underscored as two optional functions for women on the phallocracy, while the heterosexual woman's role collapses them into one compensatory charade. From a theatrical point of view, the butch/femme roles take on the quality of something more like a character construction and have a more active quality than what Riviere calls a reaction-formation. Thus, these roles qua roles lend agency and self-determination to the historically passive subject, providing her with at least two options for gender identification and with the aid of camp, an irony that allows her perception to be constructed from outside ideology, with a gender role that makes her appear as if she is inside of it. (Case 1993: 300-301)

De Lauretis argues that feminist definitions of gender as sexual difference rest upon a concept of maleness as the norm, as that which women differ from, leaving gender as a male category within a heterosexual framework.

It thus appears that 'sexual difference' is the term of a conceptual paradox corresponding to what is in effect a real contradiction in women's lives: the term, at once, of a sexual *difference* (women are, or want, something different from men) and of a sexual *indifference* (women are, or want, the same as men). (De Lauretis 1993: 142)

She argues that within psychoanalytic theory, which she characterises as one of 'sexual indifference' since it locates the feminine within a male dominated model, female desire for another female cannot be recognised. As a form of phallogentric thinking, desire is theorised as male desire for 'the other'. Female homosexuality can only be theorised through the prism of masculine desire ('homosexuality').



so that lesbians are assumed to have masculine characteristics.

Discussing Newton's work on Radclyffe Hall (1984), she suggests that, '... the figure of the mannish female invert continues to stand as the representation of lesbian desire against both the discourse of homosexuality and the feminist account of lesbianism as woman identification.' (De Lauretis, 1993: 146)

Gender reversal in the mannish lesbian, then, was not merely a claim to male social privilege or a sad pretense to male sexual behavior, but represented what may be called, in Foucault's phrase, a 'reverse discourse': an assertion of sexual agency and feelings, but autonomous from men, a reclaiming of erotic drives directed toward women, of a desire for women that is not to be confused with woman identification. (De Lauretis, 1993:146)

Rubin (1992) attempts to clarify some of the misconceptions around the term 'butch', arguing that while it may be commonly understood to mean a lesbian with masculine characteristics, this can lead to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of butch experience. She argues for an examination of 'butch' from the point of view of gender. She acknowledges the historical work that has shown the complex ways in which butch/femme roles have functioned, but argues for a more simple definition of 'butch'.

Butch is most usefully understood as a category of lesbian gender that is constituted through the deployment and manipulation of masculine gender codes and symbols. Butch and femme are ways of coding identities and behaviors that are both connected to and distinct from standard societal roles for men and women. (Rubin 1992: 467)

She observes that in common lesbian usage of 'butch', the term encompasses a variety of different ways of and motivations for using masculine gender codes, from gender 'dysphoria', to women who are not interested in male gender identities but who use masculine signs to communicate lesbian desire, to those who simply prefer the clothing. She argues that despite the wide range of lesbian gender variance, it remains undertheorised. The term 'butch' itself is one of few terms available to refer to a whole spectrum of masculine gender preferences, '...and it carries a heavy, undifferentiated load' (Rubin 1992: 468).

While butch includes female-to-male transsexuals, most butches do not want to be

men but enjoy the combination of masculine signs with a female anatomy. Rubin sees butch and masculinity as performative roles, unlinking them from biological sex. This enables her to explore butch as lesbian gender. She distinguishes her position from that of Case (1993), arguing that there is nothing inherently subversive in butch/femme. Case's argument that the butch/femme couple can provide feminism with the agency it lacks may stand in direct opposition to lesbian feminist accounts which would condemn role-play, but Rubin is right to point out that both invest lesbianism with enormous and unwarranted political significance.

Like lesbianism itself, butch and femme are structured within dominant gender systems. Like lesbianism, butch and femme can be vehicles for resisting and transforming those systems. And nothing- not 'mutual, equalitarian lesbianism' and not butch/femme- escapes those systems completely. Butch and femme need no justification other than their presence among lesbians; they should not be judged, justified, evaluated, held accountable, or rejected on the basis of such attributions of significance. (Rubin 1992: 479)

There is a tendency within Case's work to see butch/femme as inherently subversive that is almost a complete reversal of the view of lesbian-feminist theorists like Jeffreys (1990) who see butch/femme as inherently oppressive. Both views remain trapped within the discourse of sexuality, privileging its role, as Foucault observed. Rather than being inherently politically progressive or oppressive the significance of butch/femme is, for Butler, its ability to expose the fraudulence of claims to genuine gender identity and move away from an analysis of sexual identity that remains tied to an expressive model of gender.

This emphasis on the performative status of gender, and the rejection of the idea of gender as expressive of some inner core, is used by Rubin to look at the variety of ways in which to 'do' butch. The most recognisable styles are young, white, working-class models of masculinity, derived from 1950s icons such as Dean and Brando. However, just as there are many ways for men to be masculine, and degrees of masculinity, Rubin argues that women have all these and more, since the very process of a woman 'doing' masculinity produces different meanings. This view of butch as gender enables her to re-examine butch sexuality, so that

while butches are often sexually interested in femmes, and may take the initiative in sexual encounters, to assume that this is always true is to perpetuate a stereotype and miss the variety of butch sexual experience. This assumption remains tied to a heteronormative logic. Historically, the butch and male roles were more fixed, as part of an inflexible system of relationships between gender role, sexual orientation and erotic behavior (Rubin 1992, Kraus 1996, Kennedy and Davis 1993). Just as in the wider culture there have been changes in how women's sexuality is expressed and perceived, among lesbians there are many combinations of genders, roles and desires.

Every conceivable combination of butch, femme, intermediate, top, bottom, and switch exists, even though some are rarely acknowledged. There are butch tops and butch bottoms, femme tops and femme bottoms. There are butch/femme couples, femme-femme partners, and butch-butcht pairs. (Rubin 1992: 471)

Butch and femme are so often considered in relation to one another, as part of a unity, that butch-butcht eroticism is overlooked. Rubin notes that there are few models within lesbian culture for this, so that butches often look to gay men's culture for their language and imagery, and patterns of behaviour. For example, gay men have developed role models and styles for men wishing to be subordinate in sexual encounters without being any less masculine.

The tendency to consider butch/femme together is not just a theoretical one. Nestle's recent work goes over the issue of butch/femme and visibility once more in the context of queer theory (Nestle and Cruikshank 1997). Recent moves towards rethinking butch/femme by lesbians mean that she feels less need to be defensive with regard to transgender issues and butch masculinity. Instead of asserting that she had never known a butch who wanted to be a man, she acknowledges that the reality is more complex, and that there is an increasing overlap in lesbian communities between butches and female-to-male transsexuals. However where most work on gender performance and butch/femme concentrates on the relationship between butch and masculinity, she is interested in the relationship between woman and femme.

Nestle (1997) makes a distinction between her woman self and femme self. The former is socially constructed and functional, enabling her to go out into the world and earn a living. She describes her femme self in terms of play and eroticism, but also as a more unguarded and vulnerable self. It is a kind of sexual persona, and so is unrelated to domesticity. The political concerns that flow from this are more to do with making alliances with others with whom the term 'queer' is connected and with whom there are real historical connections, such as sex workers, who fall outside the boundaries of heteronormativity, than with heterosexual women's concerns. In this respect her work has been influenced by Wittig's distinction between women and lesbians (Wittig, 1992). While she is uncomfortable with the terminology of poststructuralism such as 'gender performance', she is concerned with the relationship between sex and gender, so that where feminism essentialises femininity, she argues that there are many ways of performing femininity. While her femme identity may feel very natural, she acknowledges the artifice built into desire, and argues that part of the experience of being queer is an awareness of self-construction and performance. In Chapter 5 I examine a similar division in the ways in which femme as gender and as sexual identity are distinctively articulated.

The image of the prostitute as a femme 'bad girl' role model runs through Nestle's work, and is a common self-image for femmes. There are strong historical links between working-class lesbians and prostitutes, and a common ground that was alien to the middle-class feminist community. Nestle argues that femme femininity should not be equated with normative femininity because it is often an overtly sexual style, and can be cheap and trashy rather than respectable (see Chapter 7). Given the absence of femme imagery, the figure of the prostitute as an independent sexual agent and sexual outlaw may appeal to femmes, since the desires of both fall outside the confines of proper femininity (Harris and Crocker 1997: 101). In chapter 6 I examine the way in which a particular femme subject position is constructed in contemporary femme narratives, and argue that this offers a the potential for a powerful sexual agency.

### **Post-structuralism and the possibility of a queer sociology**

A number of sociologists working in the field of sexuality have pointed out similarities in the social constructionist approach first developed by sociologists in the 1960s and 70s, and more recent work in lesbian and gay studies and queer theory. (Epstein 1997, Stein and Plummer 1997) These earlier theorists developed theories of sexuality as constructed through social practices, and were concerned to interrogate common-sense meanings and linguistic formations.

Sociologists have long been aware [...] that there is no essential pre-social self, that language is not a transparent medium of communication, that meanings shift as they are contested and re-negotiated, that knowledge is a social construct rather than a revelation of absolute truth. (Jackson 1999: 22)

However, the work which came from the interactionist tradition within sociology was marked by a tendency to privilege the individual and their capacity to construct sexuality. Queer theorists, in contrast, have stressed the ways in which discourses and texts shape sexuality, stressing subject positions as the product of reading practices, to the extent that individual agency is questioned and 'real' queer life remains unexamined (Stein & Plummer 1996: 137). Plummer argues that there is no automatic affinity between queer theory and sociology, and that there has been little engagement between the two (Plummer, 1998: 610). Queer theory, he argues has tended to be far too focussed on the text, at the expense of research into the everyday lives of lesbians and gay men. At the same time it borrows in an unacknowledged way from sociology, which has a long tradition of social constructionist work. He argues that the fashionable focus on deconstruction overlooks the fact that sociologists began this project prior to the lesbian and gay movement, and that McIntosh influentially deconstructed homosexuality as far back as 1967. Similarly he sees Butler's work on performativity as indebted to dramaturgical work in sociology (1998: 609).

Plummer's own recent work on a sociology of stories attempts to combine insights from the interactionist and discursive traditions. Focussing on 'the

personal experience narratives of the intimate', he distinguishes his approach from the 'narrative turn' within sociology which focuses primarily on narrative structures by arguing for a focus on 'the social role of stories: the ways they are produced, the ways they are read, the work they perform in the wider social order, how they change, their role in the wider political process' (Plummer 1995: 19). My analytic strategy is based on the similar approaches to the same problematic developed by critical discourse analysts.

In general interactionism and poststructuralism are distinguished in terms of the agency-structure opposition, as humanist and anti-humanist in approach, and in terms of methodology. Where interactionist sociology favours qualitative and empirically grounded work in which participants' viewpoints are privileged as the source of meaning, poststructuralist and queer theorists have favoured general theory and/or textual analysis. Queer theory has been much more influential in the field of literary and visual theory and criticism than it has been in the social sciences. However while the focus on the subjective meaning of sexuality does provide common ground both are weakened by a lack of focus on social and material location.

A number of theorists are developing work which proposes a 'material-discursive' approach to the analysis of sexuality, arguing for a need to recognise the strengths of and interaction between the two approaches (Ussher 1997). In her own work, Ussher argues that this approach involves acknowledging that, '... we cannot separate out material and discursive factors in any analysis of sexuality, as the two levels are irrevocably linked and cannot be conceptualised separately' (1997: 146). Importantly, she observes that many people who identify as lesbian and gay themselves draw on both. Using Butler's observations on the interplay between the psychological and performative aspects of sexuality, she observes through a series of interviews with young lesbians the continuous process of negotiation between the two in the process of being or doing 'lesbian'.

[...] to acknowledge and explore the relationship between the material and the discursive is to move forwards towards a more comprehensive level of

analysis, and one which appears to be a more meaningful reflection of the experiences of those who take up the position of 'lesbian' or 'gay'. (Ussher 1997: 155)

She argues that being a woman involves mastering and internalising the rules of how to 'do' femininity and negotiate gendered roles, so that heterosexual women move between various subject positions, either doing 'girl' properly, or else resisting or subverting it. However, 'doing lesbian' necessarily brings one into conflict with the boundaries of the acceptably feminine, since this is structured by normative heterosexuality. Hence lesbians have an awareness of the performative status of gender roles and the pressures to conform to them in a way that heterosexual women tend not. This makes lesbians an important resource. Her interviewees make clear that for them 'doing' lesbian is a 'multiple shifting performance' (Ussher 1997:151). The emphasis on style and appearance is at once about a material and symbolic reality. Similarly, she shows how lesbian sex is both a material and discursive act, a physical reality to which various meanings are attributed.

### **Agency and Structure**

The tendency towards voluntarism in interactionist sociology and lesbian feminist theory overlooks the complex nature of desire as it intersects with issues of power, dominance and submission, and the level of inaccessibility of the erotic to conscious control and change. This is why Butler's use of psychoanalytic theory is useful (1990). She sees sexuality as constructed but not as the construction of a subject existing prior to this process, suggesting a way between seeing sexual identity as arbitrary and open to wilful intervention and overdetermined or fixed. As O'Connell puts this, 'It is vitally important to recognize that precisely because the subject is constituted through the injunction to assume a sex, the subject cannot purely and simply be identified with the sexed identity; there is an instability at the heart of gender identity that refuses to surrender the possibility of contestation' (1999: 66).

McNay highlights feminist work on embodiment as attempts to escape the

determinism/voluntarism dualism. This work theorises the body as dynamic, where lived experience is incorporated and where gender is inscribed, but argues that this process is never complete.

A fluid relation to gendered identity is implied where gender norms are understood as entrenched but not unsurpassable boundaries. Embodiment expresses a moment of indeterminacy whereby the embodied subject is constituted through dominant norms but is not reducible to them. (McNay 2000: 33)

At the same time continuing attachment within lesbian and gay communities to an essentialist concept of identity, even as this may co-exist alongside constructionist ideas, should not be taken as confirmation of the 'truth' of essentialist categories. The identity accounts I have analysed do draw attention to the experience of continuity and the investment involved in claiming an identity, particularly one so marginalised. While the accounts have to be respected, at the same time they can be seen as arising from the continuing discursive production of the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' and the routine exclusion of these from the category of the 'general population', itself a discursive formation which rests on the inability to countenance diversity within a discrete homogenised 'heterosexuality' and the social discrimination which accompanies these. This recognition distinguishes a newer 'queer' lesbian theory from lesbian feminism.

And here, at the margins, is where the lesbians are, among others. Yet there's an imaginary quality to this lesbian location, perhaps because we are invisible perverts- society isn't looking at us, so our game of 'acting-like' is about experiment and arousal, not social power. New configurations become possible. (Roy 1993: 9-10)

This is lesbian defined as subject position rather than based on properties of the individual. It offers a way out of the self-policing role of the lesbian community, for 'every definition has placed some lesbians in the blessed inner circle and some outside it' (Whisman 1993: 53). Among the participants, the reluctance to engage with the debates about the definition of lesbianism and to rely upon repertoires which were based in essentialist concepts was mainly rooted in their hostility towards the ways in which lesbian feminism had been experienced as oppressive during the 1980s, even among women who had not experienced this



first-hand. A smaller number of women had actively engaged with queer politics and theory, and articulated their gender in terms of performance. This involved irony and playfulness in gender presentation, and drew upon ideas about parody and subversion. This is distinct from a more widely used repertoire of performativity which was identified and which will be examined in more detail in chapter 6.

A central thesis of Butler's has been the performative status of gender (1990, 1993b). On many occasions in the interviews the lesbians I spoke to showed an awareness of this, down to an awareness of the details of 'correct' gender performance. The women were able to go into detail on how to perform femininity adequately in order to cope with a job interview successfully, as well as to reflect in a sophisticated manner on the details of their own gender presentation, which involves not just clothes, hair and style but also movement, mannerisms, stance and poses.

Interestingly this awareness of performativity/performance coexists alongside and is interwoven with what I have called a 'repertoire of authenticity' and an unreflexive attitude towards one's own practices. This 'being true to oneself' is a characteristic of Western liberalism and individualism in general, and is exemplified in the rhetoric of 'coming out', but at the same time this assumption of a pre-given identity can be interpreted as part of a retrospective process of building a narrative to account for how one came to take up a particular subject position. This contributes to an essentialist discourse that exists in tension with an awareness of performativity, and can be seen as defensive in relation to the dominant heteronormative discourses. Lesbians in general and butch and femme women in particular have typically been portrayed as inauthentic, involved in a misguided attempt to copy heterosexuality or, at best, as role playing. In this context the language of performance and play is dangerous, inviting further dismissal and ridicule.

The pressure to conform is constantly reiterated and exists in constant tension with the particular gender performance. However my approach is not to view

gender as an external structure to be forcibly imposed from outside, but with McNay (2000) to see it as a set of norms which are lived and transformed in the embodied practices of men and women. I have argued that a weakness in queer theory in general and Butler's work in particular has been the underdeveloped concept of agency. Butler's work and the poststructuralist decentring of subjectivity raises the question of agency, so that a central question in her work and various readings of it is whether performativity implies a volitional subject. For Butler (1990, 1993a), gender is not made up of performances, identities and styles but is the discursive framework that regulates and gives meaning to these. Gender is seen as the symbolic scheme that regulates bodies, desire and bodily practices. She attempts to escape the structure-agency problematic through her concept of performativity, arguing that the necessity of repeated gender performances simultaneously produces reinscription and the possibility of resignification. At the same time gender and sexual orientation are conceived as sets of discursive practices, productive of subjectivities. Most of us experience ourselves as gendered beings at core with fairly specific sexual orientations, so that we become implicated in the construction of ourselves as gendered and sexual. Our own identity work is necessary to achieve what may only be an ascribed status, so that ultimately we are complicit in our own construction. In this respect Bourdieu's work on embodiment and habitus is useful.

### **Queer Theory and Embodiment**

Bourdieu's work on embodiment has been useful in suggesting ways of enriching work on performativity with a focus on the active processes and strategies of everyday practices. The concept of habitus attempts to capture the way in which norms are taken on and lived through in an active process that is structured but not determined, so that performativity is seen as more generative (McNay 2000). Particular styles, movements, preferences, and desires become embodied through bodily comportment, clothing etc as part of everyday practices. That embodiment is real and while culturally arbitrary is not performative in a dramaturgical sense. McNay (2000) suggests that this approach may be better equipped to account for

continuity in the embodiment of gender across time and context while still allowing for agency and change. It represents an attempt to escape the dichotomies of structure and agency, determinism and voluntarism. Gender identities are socially constructed but real and authentic and not malleable because internalised, yet this is an ongoing process rather than a once and for all imposition. This suggests a useful approach to the theorising of lesbian genders. Despite the adoption of a repertoire of performance that emphasises play and subversion and draws on queer theory, it is important to be able to theorise gender as performative without suggesting that it is voluntaristic, optional and wilful, or imitative, merely playing roles. Though there clearly is an element of play this is only one layer of a multi-layered phenomenon and performativity should not be reduced to this. Martin suggests the following way of conceptualising gender,

Neither gender nor psychic life as a whole are states; they are open processes that gestalt in ways that remain consistent over time without becoming closed or completely insular. Gender operates then at many finely differentiated levels and ought not to be conceived as one solid kernel. In addition to the performative dimension of what comes to seem essential, or relatively stable and lasting, namely, the enfoldings of an outside that become embodied as they become psyche, there are also unconscious gender-performative aspects of our defenses and resistances as well as of our pleasures. (Martin 1996,47-48)

The concept of habitus is useful here, as part of an attempt to theorise the way in which norms are internalised and lived through in everyday practices. The theorisation of lesbian genders requires an attention to issues of embodiment and expanding the scope of the discursive to include the body as signification. The focus on embodiment enables an analysis of gender performativity that is spatialised and temporalised. For Munt;

Butch/femme produces a way of looking and being looked at; it is visual, tactile, and oral, it is a scent, maybe even a taste, and it is about being open to listen, to recognise and receive. Butch/femme is lesbian gender experienced from the inside, it is a mode of articulation *and* a living movement, it is the way our bodies speak our desires. In short, butch/femme is a way we can inhabit lesbian desire, a habitus. (1998: 2)

Hegemonic culture inscribes itself upon the body through discursive structures

including gender and sexuality. Lesbian genders may be consciously performed but may also be experienced as deeply felt gendered cores. There may be conflict and tension between gendered style and comfort, and the terminology of butch/femme.

Butch/femme is a tangible articulation, a form of lesbian desire which rubs up against us and becomes us, in our daily practices, in our mannerisms, in our deportment, in our sexual responses, in the diaphanous but ordinary dispositions of our days. (Munt 1998: 3)

## **Conclusion**

A number of different approaches have contributed to the development of perspectives on sexuality in the last three decades. While these are grounded in sometimes conflicting epistemologies I am arguing that their particular strengths can contribute to a queer sociology. In particular queer theory and interactionist sociology share a concern with sexuality and subjectivity which are reflected in the analytic strategy I will outline. There are basic epistemological differences between the two approaches. Sociological work has tended to start from the level of the individual, examining the ways in which, through social interaction and the development of scripts, sexual meanings are produced and sexuality is organised. Queer theory, on the other hand, has been concerned to analyse the production of subject positions. The objects of analyses have tended to be texts, discourses and the readings they suggest. This involves a different view of power and agency. In general my interest is in how macro structures are reconfigured at the micro level, and a close study of identities as multiple processes in everyday life can offer an insight into this. The focus in general is on the way in which particular subject positions are taken up, and interviewing enables an exploration of this. My particular focus in examining these issues is the intersection discourses of sex and gender in lesbian genders, through looking at the concepts of 'butch' and 'femme'. Whereas these had previously tended to be characterised simply in terms of a copy of heterosexuality, following Butler (1990) recent work has sought to develop a more sophisticated theorisation of the relationships between

heterosexuality and homosexuality, originality and imitation, and assimilation and subversion. The study of power, identity and marginalisation has been developed by Dunne (1997), through an examination of lesbian lifestyles in relation to employment. However she is dismissive of the value of Butler's work in informing empirical studies, and the difficulties in operationalising queer theory has meant that it has come in for increased criticism from social scientists in recent years. (Sandfort et. al. 2000) My work draws upon the concept of gender as performative in investigating the ways in which lesbians construct and negotiate gender categories and the relationship between these and issues of inclusion or exclusion from the category 'lesbian' and the dominant culture.

## Chapter 3: Methods

### The poststructuralist critique of realism

While my focus is on queer theory and the everyday practices of lesbian gender, this is part of a wider debate about the relationship between poststructuralism and social research. Denzin and Lincoln refer to the 'crisis of representation' in qualitative sociology and anthropology in the mid-eighties and the critique of the positivist underpinnings of interpretative research methods (1998:19). The position of the research interview as a privileged access to reality has been subject to extensive critique. This has led to attention to the reflexive role of the researcher and the situated status of the knowledge produced, undermining the possibility and desirability of the role of the researcher as a detached and neutral outsider. With regard to this research, my positioning with regard to examining lesbian gender was an important part of the data collection and interpretation. This had an impact on my access to the data, since the participants frequently made (unsolicited) mention of the fact that they were more comfortable in talking to another lesbian than they would have been talking to an outsider. This has implications for shared knowledge and understandings, as well as respect. As a white woman this presented similar issues around 'race' since black lesbians may be reluctant to be interviewed by white researchers. Participants read my own gender presentation in different ways. Androgynous lesbian assumed that we shared that identification, and distinguished between both of butch/femme women and 'us'. Women who identified as butch and femme were more likely to see me as butch; again assuming shared understandings and experiences. This was underlined by the fact that they would sometimes use aspects of my gendered style to illustrate points they were making.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) argue that the current situation is one of a double crisis of representation and legitimisation. Central to this is the recognition of the

constitutive role of language and discourse, which undermines the claim that qualitative research can directly capture lived experience. This undermines traditional criteria for the evaluation of research and forces a re-examination of the underpinnings of concepts of validity, generalizability and reliability (1998: 21). Traditional interpretative methods, including grounded theory, have been based on the assumption that interviewing and transcription provides a fixed text with given meanings, the interpretation of which is technical issue of applying rigorous techniques of textual analysis. Denzin (1997) argues that this is based on a naïve transmission model of communication that does not allow for the indeterminacy of language and the presumption of a unified, self-aware subject.

Virtually all social science at some level rests on realist assumptions, which are the very assumptions challenged by poststructuralist theory (Scheurich 1997: 30). In recent years in sociology, realism as an unquestioned 'given' has been challenged to some extent, but still provides the underpinning of most paradigms. Scheurich argues that while poststructuralism has challenged the assumption of an autonomous, conscious and reasoning subjectivity, sociological work relying on interviews as a method of data generation has continued to rest on just such a basis. If sociology has taken on board the poststructuralist critique, it has tended to focus only on the question of representational practices, interrogating the reflexive role of the researcher, and undermining the idea that interviews/coding/analysis provide valid and trustworthy access to an external reality (Scheurich, 1997: 162). He does not argue that an anti-realist sociology is necessary or even possible, but highlights the fact that most sociological research is concerned with interpretations and constructions of 'reality'. He calls for the development of methodologies that would begin from a decentred sense of subjectivity. Recent critiques of overly textual nature of queer theory risk privileging the status of sociological accounts, asserting their access to truth and, as Halberstam notes, reinvesting in a clear difference between the real and the textual (1998a: 12). My approach therefore was to take elements of the interview accounts dealing with simple factual information at face value, while the narratives themselves were subject to discursive analysis.

## **Data sources and generation**

The focus of the thesis on the intersection of discourses with everyday practices and the ways in which discourses are actively negotiated favoured the use of interviewing, despite the epistemological issues this raises. In addition, lesbians are themselves a valuable and under-used data source. Since 'our' daily life often involves a constant and routine negotiation of gender discourses, lesbians tend to be aware of the performative aspects of identity and common-sense understanding of the issues of self-presentation and identity are relatively sophisticated. Similarly Whisman notes that '[...] ours is not the unquestioned, the unmarked, the center. The very fact that lesbians and gay men usually do take a position on the etiology of our sexualities is a measure of our stigmatization' (1996: 7).

I carried out 31 semi-structured interviews of between and one and two hours in length. In-depth interviews have allowed an exploration of the complexity of the intersection between the discursive and the material in concrete social practices. I am arguing for an approach that sees identities as performative and constantly constructed but always in a specific social and discursive context. Interviewing only gives access to one side of this interaction, to the accounts that these women give of their identifications and practices. The use of interviews in my work is precisely in order to access the interpretations of women who identify as and 'do' lesbian. They use the terms 'butch' and 'femme' as meaningful ways of describing the ways in which they inhabit a particular subject position and negotiate gendered discourses. These accounts were analysed in the light of queer and poststructuralist theory, rather than privileging subjectivity and by implication these accounts, as giving an unproblematised access to what is 'really' going on. The adoption of interviewing and a focus on everyday practices is intended to complement the wealth of queer theoretical work on discourses by examining the way in which these structure subjectivities through the analysis of the accounts, and seeing how they are transformed and transgressed or internalised and naturalised. The set of research questions which have structured the interview schedule have been designed to try to examine issues raised in queer theoretical



work. The intention is not to use empirical work on butch femme to test queer theory but rather to utilise the ways the latter opens up ways of thinking about lesbian gender by disaggregating biological sex, gender and desire to explore issues of identity and desire. Plummer argues that the value of 'critical humanism' lies in its attention to subjectivity and 'concrete human experiences' (2001: 14). Qualitative sociological methodologies have generally been developed to develop understandings of social action from the point of view of participants. My analysis takes these accounts as a starting point, seeing them as texts that are situated in specific material and discursive locations rather than assuming that they directly represent an underlying 'reality'.

### **Sampling and Selection Strategies**

The difficulties in defining lesbianism and the issues around disclosure mean that attempting accurately to represent a cross-section of the population is an unrealistic aim. If identities are conceptualised as provisional and fluid rather than as fixed properties of individuals then conventional sampling strategies become inappropriate. The particular demographics of a highly mobile sexual subculture present additional challenges. For instance lesbians and gay men are disproportionately based in large cities (Creith 1996: 86). They construct particular 'scenes', which may have a commercial and visible focus or may be based in friendship networks that are difficult to trace and access. Homophobia and the existence of 'the closet' make it difficult to contact women who do not openly identify as lesbians.

If the status of 'lesbian' as an identity category is problematic (Kitzinger 1987: 68) then defining butch and femme is even more difficult. Loulan found that within lesbian populations in the US there is a widespread reluctance to identify as either 'butch' or 'femme' (1990: 206). However this reluctance exists alongside an acknowledgement that the concepts are widely used and meaningful within the culture. I examine the ways in which 'butch/femme' is meaningful for lesbians who may refuse the labels and still consciously manipulate gender codes, as well as for those who self-identify as either butch or femme. I was reluctant to define

'lesbian' while generating the sample. I used a combination of 'snowball' sampling which began with friendship networks as well as placing appeals for participants in a national lesbian magazine and a local publication specifically designed as part of an outreach initiative to reach 'non-scene' lesbians.' The adverts were aimed at women who clearly identified as 'butch' or 'femme' as well as those who felt that the terms were relevant to them, so the sample includes a range of feminine, masculine and androgynous women. The aim was to examine the construction of lesbian genders and the complexities in negotiating discourses of gender and sexuality without limiting the scope to 'butch' and 'femme'. These are clearly minority identities within lesbian subcultures. The research process and the frequent discussions that the research has generated with other lesbians has reinforced this fact and shown the reluctance of many lesbians to think in these terms or acknowledge butch/femme as anything other than an embarrassing anachronism. This contributes to a reluctance to identify as butch and femme among lesbians who recognise their own masculinity and femininity. Appendix 1 gives information about the sample including the ways in which the participants rated themselves on butch/femme continua, one of which required them to position themselves between butch and femme, while the other enabled the two identities to be considered independently (Loulan 1990). Throughout the study I use the terms 'lesbian', 'butch' and 'femme' in a general way to refer to those women who use the terms about themselves. One of the women identified as a bisexual femme rather than as a lesbian, using the terms gay and queer to describe herself. I distinguish between 'feminine lesbian' and 'femme' in line with the participants' own identifications. However the sections in chapters 6 and 7 discuss this distinction in a more general way, bringing in different viewpoints. I use the terms 'androgynous' and 'androgynous/masculine' and 'androgynous/feminine' to refer to those women who do not identify as either butch or femme, adding their gendered style where relevant. Thirteen women identified as butch and ten as femme. Six considered themselves androgynous, and of these three considered themselves masculine or boyish while one saw herself as more feminine. Two women rejected any categorisation in gendered terms, insisting that they were

equally masculine and feminine. A further two lesbians identified as feminine in their gendered style but rejected the term 'femme'.

My sampling strategy was based on 'theoretical sampling' with regard to 'race', class, age, education and access to a lesbian community (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Mason describes this as sampling across a 'relevant range' of the wider population without attempting to directly represent it, but without being ad hoc (1996: 92). There was no attempt to generate empirically representative samples but the sample did cover this range. Theoretical sampling involves selecting a range of units which may well occur infrequently in the wider population but which are known to exist, '...with the aim of making key comparisons and testing and developing theoretical propositions' (Mason 1996: 93). The aim of the sample is to develop an understanding of particular processes and interactions rather than to statistically represent the population. Conventional sampling strategies rely upon normative epistemologies, focussing on the average rather than the marginal and ignoring what Psathas (1995: 50) calls the method of instances, treating each instance of a phenomenon as an occurrence that evidences the operation of a set of cultural understandings currently available for use by cultural members.

My preliminary reading around the subject suggested that the community and politics that women initially came out into would be significant, and so the sample included butches and femmes from a variety of age groups. One of the key features of my sampling strategy was to talk to women who had come into contact with different types of lesbian communities before, during and after this period. This is not in order to make strong claims about the significance of this as a variable, but in order to explore a range of discourses and experiences across the communities. A key factor was the type of 'scene' or subculture women had come out into (regardless of their age) and their positioning with regard to the 'sex wars', as well as their association with 'political generations' (Schneider 1988, Whittier 1995, Stein 1997). Most of the participants came out as young adults but six of the women (four femmes and two butches) had come out relatively late in life after having been married and had children, or having identified as

heterosexual for a number of years. First contacts with lesbian communities and cultures varies then by both age and date.

The sample shares with others a tendency to overrepresent women in their 20s and 30s since they dominate the 'scene', and in spite of efforts to contact other lesbians (Kitzinger 1987: 89). Three of the women were in their teens, eight in their 20s, twelve in their 30s, five in their 40s, two in their 50s and one woman was in her 60s. At the time of the interviews, which were carried out in 1999 and 2000, seven lived in London, twelve in Manchester, Liverpool or Newcastle where there are sizeable lesbian populations and scenes, and the remaining twelve lived in small towns throughout the north-west of England where there is no commercial scene. The latter tended to be involved in local community or youth groups and had some contact with the commercial scene in Manchester.

I had anticipated class and education being important factors in lesbian identity formation, and without looking to establish causal connections between these factors wanted to ensure a range of experiences was covered. While the class background of respondents was mixed, the majority of the lesbians were educated to above average levels and held professional positions. This supports suggestions that while lesbians may be relatively low-earners in relation to their level of education, the latter is disproportionately high due to the necessity to be financially independent (Dunne 1997). Several participants explicitly linked their 'escapes' from conventional working-class femininity to their sexuality.

I was only able to interview four black lesbians and one Jewish lesbian, and while these produced interesting data and are representative in terms of my sample size, this is a weakness in the sample. Specific efforts to contact black participants risk being seen as tokenistic and had limited success. At the same time issues of masculinity, femininity, butch/femme and visibility differ according to specific discourses of 'race' so that lesbians of African descent are seen as butch, aggressive and physical while lesbians of Asian descent are stereotyped as femme according to negative feminine attributes such as weakness and passivity (Mason-John and Okorowa, 1995: 88). The intersection of 'race', ethnicity and lesbian

gender is clearly an area for further research.

### **Ethics**

The issues of informed consent and confidentiality are central ethical considerations in a study of this kind. An awareness of the reality of homophobia and the importance of protecting the anonymity of the participants has been incorporated into the writing style. The subject matter is of a personal and sensitive nature, and the consequences of the interview and its reporting for the participant have been taken into account despite the lack of concern expressed by the majority of participants. Personal data enabling the participant to be identified has not been reported and pseudonyms used throughout, a fact stressed both in the initial contact and immediately before the interview takes place. My interest was in the themes and explanations given by the participants rather than in a close reading of the text, and I considered it appropriate to edit and convert into a written style at the transcription stage rather than producing a verbatim account including pauses, repetitions and asides. As Kvale suggests, as long as this is done in harmony with their general modes of expression, this may actually produce an account that does more justice to the participants than a word by word representation of their oral style (1996: 170).

The need to develop a critical analysis of the participants' accounts raises the ethical issue of how deep this criticism can go. O'Connell (1999) suggests an approach which attempts to respect the accounts of participants' claims to identity while allowing for analysis of the processes of misrecognition in identification. He challenges the assumption that those identifying as lesbian and gay must be resistant to the idea of identity as socially constructed. He uses Ricoeur's account of personal identity as a narrative formation, linking this to Butler's work. Approaching the accounts in this way enables them to be seen as legitimate but open to the necessary work of critical contestation. He argues for the need to look at what is at stake in identity claims, drawing on the concept of ideology to theorise the gap between claim and belief. Identity claims are used for legitimisation, integration, disclosure, and distortion, he argues, so that 'it

becomes possible to see gender identity as constructed and as making claims to truth, and perhaps even [...] to legitimacy?' (O'Connell 1999: 64) Similarly Whisman (1996) critically examines the accounts of her participants which emphasise the way in which their identities are experienced as chosen or innate. She argues that these accounts need to be respected, that respect does not preclude analysis, 'beginning with the recognition that lesbians and gay men experience their sexualities in heterosexist and homophobic context', so that identity accounts 'are devices which individuals select and use because of what they can do for one in the negotiation of a hostile world'. At the same time these accounts are the products of social movements which 'sought to politicize sexuality and mobilize individuals', minimising inconsistencies in the accounts (Stein 1997: 202). This context privileges independence, consciousness and subversion.

### **Interview design**

The research builds a picture of how butch/femme and lesbian gender are understood in lesbian culture, not in an abstract way but at the point at which gender structures are negotiated in everyday life. The use of repertoire analysis to try to develop a picture of this is precisely because of the way that these negotiations take place within wider discursive formations.

The interview questions were arrived at by going through a process of identifying broad areas of theory, breaking this down into key concepts, and identifying research questions from this. A basic set of practical interview questions were derived from these (Mason 1996: 48). However abstract theoretical questions, even when condensed down into research questions, will not be directly 'answered' by empirical research questions. Halberstam (1998a: 242) refers to her frustration in trying to move away from textual analysis towards ethnography, which she believes is essential if theory is to be based in the reality of the communities. Her work on female masculinity and drag king culture uses research carried out in the drag king scene, but she observes that, 'interviews can be a frustrating obstacle to knowledge' since,

[...] many performers are not necessarily that interested in the theoretical import of their acts or even in identifying a larger context. Many of the drag kings gave superficial answers to questions such as 'Why do you like to dress up in drag?' They might answer, 'Just for fun', or, 'It seemed like a crazy thing to do', or 'I didn't really think about it'. Obviously, such answers do not really convey any interesting or useful information about drag and its motivations, nor do they get to the 'truth' of the drag king scene.' (Halberstam 1998a: 242-4)

The semi-structured nature of the interviews and the use of NUD\*IST and techniques characteristic of grounded theory in the process of coding and analysis allowed issues and themes to arise from the data rather than being tied directly to the theoretical concerns.

I also used a range of photographs to facilitate discussion, particularly with regard to gendered styles and images. These were issues which were identified as important by the participants but difficult to articulate. The images were taken from a number of lesbian publications, particularly the British magazine 'Diva', in order to represent a range of archetypal lesbian styles. Participants were asked to respond to these by comparing them to their own gendered styles, by whether they found them sexually attractive, and by ordering them on a butch/femme continuum.

### **Operationalising poststructuralism: discourse analysis**

The basic research questions are derived from queer theory and ask how lesbian genders are constructed and performed, what is distinctive about these, how the terms 'butch' and 'femme' are meaningful in contemporary British lesbian subcultures, how gender performance is managed and whether performativity implies a volitional subject. I investigate the ways in which identities are articulated and how these shift over time or may be actively fashioned. These processes are linked to power and resistance, hegemonic discourses of gender and their conscious parody and subversion.

Ethnomethodologists have long pointed to the centrality of gender attribution as a social process (Garfinkel 1967, Kessler and McKenna, 1978). However the use of

interviews as a method of data generation in the interactionist tradition in sociology has tended to focus on individual agency, strategies, and the creation of meaning as a social accomplishment. While wanting to use interviews to focus on the ways in which gender is actively performed in everyday life, as Stein warns, interviewing can confirm tenets of symbolic interactionism, as the process itself tends to produce an overemphasis on conscious strategies. (Stein, 1997: 202). However despite this focus on individual agency I encountered some unwillingness and inability to reflect on own gendered practices, and identified the way in which common themes were emerging, as the women were drawing on the same range of discursive resources. With this in mind I have approached the interview texts focussing on how particular subject positions are constructed and resisted, and how gendered discourses are negotiated through the production of narratives in identity work. The stress is on enactments rather than individual stories and intentions. As women inhabit particular subject positions they draw upon particular interpretative repertoires in reflecting on their practices, a process which can be both strategic and unreflexive.

The analysis of the interview data shares with queer theory the poststructuralist attention to the constitutive role of discourse in thinking about identities. However I share McNay's concern that Butler's theory is elaborated within the confines of a 'negative paradigm of subjectification' (McNay 2000: 33). The emphasis is on constraint and determination despite the cultural arbitrariness of gender implicit in the concept of performativity and the potential for her work to be read as voluntaristic. It is also weakened by the failure to connect the symbolic construction of the body to other material relations in which this process takes place.

I was not concerned with producing a detailed discourse analysis for each of the transcripts, but wanted to stay focussed on these wider issues while seeing the production of discourse as an active achievement, and seeing my interviewees as active, meaning producing agents. This concern is reflected in the two strategies of my research. The emphasis on particular personal accounts grounds my



analysis in the specific social context of the narratives and attempts to bring out an understanding of particular choices and strategies. At the same time I have wanted to identify the cultural resources and discourses available. The approach I am using is based on Potter and Wetherall's (1987) work on 'interpretative repertoires'. They define these as '...recurrently used systems of terms used for characterising and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena' (1987: 149). This is grounded in poststructuralist theory and builds up an analysis of the available discursive resources from these 'systems of terms'. However the concept of the subject is as both a position at the intersection of particular discourses and as an active creator of meaning and user of discourse. They question the view of language as representational and see discourse as strategic and negotiated practice. I have examined the way in which identities are formed and reformed through the negotiation of discourses, while at the same time keeping a sense of the material context in which this is situated. In this sense the work shares the concerns of Plummer's 'sociology of stories' (1996) and Whisman's empirical work on sexual identities as 'chosen' or 'determined', in its attention to 'narrative itself, rather than the reality it represents, as the unit of analysis' (1998: 8). Experiences are interpreted and refracted through particular historically specific narrative or discursive resources. Similarly Esterberg's work on lesbian and bisexual women's identities concludes that:

In the end, the underlying nature of sexual identity- whether an underlying sexual orientation exists, whether identities are simply made up, or whether there is no underlying identity at all- is not the important question [...] Far more important are the varied accounts women tell about who they are and how they came to be that way- and the implications of these accounts for the building of social networks and political alliances. (Esterberg 1997: 29)

Weston (1998) distinguishes between 'straight theorizing' of the established academic kind and 'street theorizing', which is the ideas, knowledge and logics drawn upon in everyday life. She uses the example of the old saying 'Butch on the streets, femme in the sheets' to show that notions identities as fluid, situated and unstable are not confined to queer theory. 'Postmodern before its time, the adage takes issue with the belief that individuals are gendered and sexualized in one-

dimensional ways that they play out with perfect consistency' (1998: 145). She argues that queer theory has pursued 'straight theorizing' at the expense of 'street theorizing'. In fact queer theory has often been criticised for its lack of political engagement. She argues for work that bridges the two and is able to integrate material from interviews with 'straight theory'.

The point is not to treat street theorizing as "raw data" that remains TBE- to be explained- but to approach street theorizing as a wellspring of explanatory devices and rhetorical strategies in it's own right. (Weston 1998: 145)

*The interviews were semi-structured and not directly tied to the research questions so room for evidence of this everyday theorising and understanding to emerge while the analysis locates the accounts with regard to the available discourses.*

### **Interpretative repertoires**

The emphasis is on discourse as a social practice determined by social structures. Discourse is viewed as actively produced and useful in specific social settings rather than as a reflection of 'reality'. The influence of the work of Austin suggests a link between Butler's work and discourse analysis despite the different philosophical grounding of each (Potter and Wetherell 1987). His work on speech acts as performative provides the basis of her work on gender performativity, but as Potter and Wetherell outline, his recognition that language is a human practice and socially functional rather than abstract has been important in the development of discourse analysis. Their interest is in language use and ... 'the distinctions participants actually make in their interactions and which have important implications for their practice' (1987: 170). Discourse analysis then is not concerned with an underlying reality which it is taken to represent but in participants' articulations of this and the way that discourse is used. Interpretative repertoires, they argue, are routinely used to evaluate and characterise phenomena, and are often organised around a limited range of terms. Critical discourse analysis stresses the importance of seeing these interpretative repertoires in a social and discursive context rather than being limited by the

orientation of conversation analysis and ethnomethodology towards analysis from the point of view of the participants (Wetherell 1998, Billig 1996).

The interview data was analysed initially to summarise and identify particular themes from which particular related and systematic ways of talking about butch/femme and lesbian gender were reconstructed and identified as 'interpretative repertoires'. These are seen as particular cultural resources or shared cultural capital which changes over time. Unlike a position, which is seen as being more fixed and coherent, individual accounts may draw on several and competing repertoires depending on cultural capital and situation. Repertoires are seen as functional and drawn upon to legitimate, explain and communicate effectively in particular circumstances.

While repertoire analysis is associated with microanalysis it is grounded in post-structuralist theory. It differs from other sorts of discourse analysis in that the social subject is not only seen as constituted at the intersection of discursive structures but as an active and creative language user. The emphasis is upon the active negotiation of discourse, allowing for creativity within the confines of the available discursive resources. I argue that for lesbians this range of repertoires is relatively narrow due to their location within a wider heteronormative context. The range of repertoires within lesbian culture is always subject to readings structured by dominant discourses. At the same time this means that there is a lot at stake in accounts which are required to justify a sense of self, identity and practices in the face of hostility and misunderstanding from other lesbians as well as heterosexuals.

This study combines use of repertoire analysis with a wider focus on discourse. Repertoires are more localised, contingent and shifting than discourse in its Foucauldian sense which is related to practices, knowledges, institutions and wider issues of power. Edley (2001) distinguishes between the provisional and strategic nature of repertoires and wider discursive structures which can be traced in and which shape repertoires. In particular I wished to distinguish between the subcultural, fragmentary and localised status of the repertoires relating to lesbian

genders and the wider discourses that frame them. This is related to the concept of 'ideological dilemmas' which in critical discourse analysis refers to the contradictory aspects of common sense (Edley 2001, Billig 1996). Potter and Wetherell (1987:170) stress the need for sensitivity to contradictions between the discursive resources which make up an account. Edley (2001: 204) argues that participants will often switch back and forth between positions within an argument and that this is often a sign of an ideological dilemma. Ideology then is not seen as fixed but shifting and contested.

Interpretative repertoires are linked to the social construction of subjectivity through the concept of subject positions. While the concept of interpretative repertoires is designed to allow for the theorisation of an active negotiation of discourses we do not encounter these pre-formed but are re-constituted in the moment of their consumption (Holloway, 1984; Davies and Harre, 1990).

## **Conclusion**

The specific findings of my study will be related back to what I see as the central problematic in current work on sexuality, which concerns the relationship between structure and agency. The dominant trend in recent work has been to problematise identities, theorising them as contingent, shifting, and positioned by discursive structures rather than as fixed properties of the individual. This approach contrasts with the constructionist tradition within sociology, which has tended to take an unproblematised concept of the subject as its starting point, and looked at the active process by which this individual engages with the social. This tradition of work suggests ways of accessing lesbians' own accounts of their negotiation of gender. By drawing on some of the concepts of developed in critical discourse analysis it is possible to relate the focus on agency and creativity to discursive formations and social locations.

## **Chapter 4: Lesbian Identities and Interpretative Repertoires**

### **Introduction**

A great deal of recent critical work on identities argues that they can work as a form of policing and control, as well as a source of strength. I wish to address some of the issues that frame theoretical discussions on identities in relation to the accounts of the participants. This involves a consideration of their social positioning as lesbians and how this is experienced and articulated. I argue that it is necessary to look at available discursive resources and social, political and geographical locations. Schneider (1988), Whittier (1995) and Stein (1997) point to the collective nature of the formation of feminist discourses and the need to identify particular political cohorts. This would suggest with regard to sexual identity that not only are lesbians of a particular political generation exposed to similar ideas and debates but also that they will have particular and varying political interests. For example I argue that the 'repertoires of authenticity' I have identified, which are often contain essentialist elements, offer a stronger defence of identity in the face of Section 28 and homophobia than identity accounts which emphasise choice and performance. At the same time the former can contribute to a definition of lesbian identity as constraining. These are not abstract debates, and the accounts draw attention to, and are analysed with regard to, specific social and spatial locations. The content of theoretical debates on identities is expressed in lesbians' self-understandings and attitudes towards others.

### **Identities**

There is a recognition in social constructionism and queer theory that the adoption of a sexual identity may be a necessary fiction and politically necessary (Weeks 1991: 98). The work on the social construction of sexuality is useful in showing culturally specific nature of our identity categories and problematising the nature of lesbian identity, even as that may continue to be strategically embraced. In the theoretical and political debates around essentialism and constructionism within

lesbian and gay studies and queer theory, a contrast is commonly drawn between the constructionism which has become the dominant academic paradigm and the 'folk essentialism' that often characterises the repertoires of lesbian and gay individuals referring to their identities (see Chapter 1). It is important not to overstate the contrast between the use of the two discourses. I argue that lesbians in reflecting upon their identities combine different and sometimes opposing interpretative repertoires. Whisman (1996) suggests the need to see narratives of essentialism and construction as strategic, and looks at the difficulties for individuals in adhering to a constructionist narrative that seems counter-intuitive and may offer a weaker defence of identity in a heteronormative context.

The contrast is more apparent, I would argue, when comparing queer theory with the discourse of sexual orientation that is typical of gay men's repertoires in the US. Identity politics and the 'ethnic model' are particularly strong there, and the commercialised scenes more firmly established. Second wave feminism may have had strong elements of essentialism but also has drawn upon constructionist theory when problematising gender identity. It has also contained a voluntarist element in the concept of the lesbian continuum and in the argument that feminists can and should become lesbians for political reasons and that sexual practices and desires are amenable to conscious and politically motivated intervention. Discourses of constructionism of various kinds, then, are familiar to many lesbians and comfortably incorporated into their accounts. There is also in the wider culture a significant discourse of reflexivity which emphasises personal change and individual agency with regard to identity and which features in contemporary identity narratives.<sup>ii</sup>

Burr (1998: 23) argues that in debates about realism and relativism, 'reality' and its contrast term have at least three different meanings that tend to be used interchangeably. These, she suggests, can be summarised as reality (truth) v falsehood, reality (materiality) v illusion and reality (essence) v construction. She suggests that social constructionist arguments which incorporate elements of relativism are often rejected because the third of these dimensions is confused

with the first two, so that construction is understood to imply ‘illusion and/or falsehood. There is therefore a tendency to talk about things being either real or “merely constructed”’. A false dichotomy is set up between realism and constructionism so that the latter is taken to deny materiality. Burr argues for a position where we can describe things as both socially constructed and real. Ussher’s (1997) material-discursive position addresses the same dichotomy. She argues that in their accounts the young lesbians she interviewed routinely draw on material and discursive resources in talking about their sexual identities. Esterberg (1996) argues that the gap between academic and community understandings of identity has been somewhat overstated. Based on her empirical research she argues that some lesbians do have a sense of their own identities as constructed. She draws a contrast between those who see their identities as playful and transgressive, and self-consciously use queer concepts, and those who see their sexual identities as fixed, not playful and not constructed (1996: 260). She concludes that ‘...ordinary lesbians insert themselves into the debates about lesbian identity and lesbian visibility at varying points’ (1996: 261). I would argue that the distinction is not as clear cut as this and that the same individual accounts may contain elements of both essentialist and constructionist discourses. This goes back to the concept of ideological dilemmas, the contradictory nature of common sense and the need to examine the work that particular repertoires carry out. Performativity in this context is interwoven with a materialist and realist understanding of social structures and locations, so that accounts may draw on concepts of both performance and authenticity, the ‘constructed’ and the ‘real’, often interweaving or switching between the two. The repertoire of performance I identify in Chapter 6 combines conscious subversion and parody, playfulness and a sense of the provisional, situated and non-voluntary aspects of identities.

### **Authenticity and Essentialism in Context**

Lesbian and gay identity accounts often emphasise the authenticity and fixed nature of identity (Epstein 1990, Warner 1993). The question of identity takes a particular significance for those marginalised, whose personal identity works in

response to a shared experience of prejudice, so that to claim a lesbian identity, '...is to make a statement about belonging and about a specific stance in relationship to the dominant sexual codes. It is also to privilege sexuality over other identities...' (Weeks 1991: 68). This can have a consciously political element, so that sexual identity becomes a political signifier. For Plummer, identity formation may be part of a process of control but also offers '...comfort, security and assuredness' (Plummer 1981). In a culture where a heterosexual identity is both assumed and unnamed, the reluctance to claim a lesbian or gay identity leaves one 'closeted' and is associated with various negative effects in terms of self-esteem and mental health (Ussher and Mooney-Sommers 2000: 196). The adoption of discursive resources emphasising the fixed and authentic nature of sexual identity need to be viewed in the context of a culture based on this homo-hetero divide and the pressures to identify in relation to this.

Constructionist work on lesbian and gay identity formation has emphasised the way in which identity accounts construct a retrospective narrative consistency (Ponse 1978, Plummer 1995, Stein 1997). O'Connell (1999) and McNay (2000) each suggest approaches which are able to respect these accounts while developing critiques of the misrecognition of the contingency of identity that they contain, through stressing the temporal dimension of identity. The process of the formation of a consistent identity narrative combines with the constitutive role of dispositions and habits to give the self a sense of permanence. The temporal dimension of this theory enables a way of seeing the way that habits and dispositions are acquired over time, so that there is both change and permanence. At the same time norms and values are taken on so that the social is internalised. '...it becomes possible to recognize the legitimacy of a claim to a given gender identity without bowing to essentialism or dismissing the person's testimony as misguided. This is indeed who the person has become' (O'Connell 1999: 71)

Ambivalence towards the claiming of identities was shown in the accounts. While insisting on the positive aspects of community and identification, this was in tension with a suspicion of identity categories in general and essentialist



definitions of 'lesbian' in particular. For the younger women this took the form of a reluctance to tie themselves to any categorisation and rested on discourses of individualism. For the overwhelming majority of the other participants this was borne of some degree of awareness of the previous debates within lesbian cultures and in particular the 'sex wars' of the 1980s.

### **Location and Scenes**

Identity accounts also need to be located with regard to lesbian and gay space and subcultures. The proliferation, since the 1970s, of bars, clubs, cafes and other small businesses, alongside the impact of lesbians and gay men in music, fashion and club culture in general has provided both the social space for a diversification in identities and styles, and increased visibility and legitimacy, as shown by mainstream media interest in 'lesbian chic' and the visibility of the 'lipstick lesbian' ('Lipstick on her Collar' Sunday Times, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1994).

Such identities thus provide a level of social belongingness which is unavailable elsewhere. A gay man will feel 'safe' in a gay bar with other gay men, in ways that have no real parallel for heterosexual men. This is why perceived challenges to the authenticity of authority of given, existing sexual identities are likely to be met with strong resistance on the part of individuals who may feel personally threatened (Watney 1993: 17).

While the sense of community engendered by a 'scene' is seen as a source of strength in the accounts, it can also have the effect of reinforcing the boundaries between definitions of 'straight' and 'gay', particularly in the larger city-based scenes where many heterosexuals 'intrude' on this space. Access to the 'scene' was varied, with some of the women living in major cities, and some being part of much smaller scenes, networks and communities while having varying degrees of access to a larger commercial scene. Operating alongside a more general loosening of traditional family ties, D'Emilio (1992) argues that as a 'lifestyle' choice in an increasingly commodified arena of sexuality, homosexuality increasingly comes to resemble heterosexuality, and vice versa. To the extent to which participation in this commercialism is possible, in the urban centres at least, the rigid identity categories begin to splinter or break down. This is shown by the

widespread use of a 'lesbian aesthetic' as well as male homoerotic imagery in mainstream advertising (Clarke, 1993) and the crossover between gay male and club cultures. Giddens (1991) makes similar claims in relation to detraditionalization, arguing that late modernity increasingly undermines the traditional comfort and reassurance of identity categories and demands a 'reflexive self'. Butch/femme roles have begun to be readopted and reclaimed in these new circumstances. Stein (1992: 434) contrasts the fixed nature of roles in the 1950s which 'were often proud statements of lesbian resistance, but [...] were also the expression of an oppressed minority faced with a paucity of alternatives', with the often transient and more experimental use of these roles, and other forms of erotic expression, by the 'new lesbianism'. The impact of queer culture is relevant here as the language of performance and subversion has combined with a playfulness with regard to identities and has influenced the ways in which lesbians reflect upon their own gendered practices.

The 'scene' is defined commonly as lesbian public space, which can be commercial, based around women's organising or informal friendship networks. For women who have come out in the last decade the 'scene' has been a primarily commercial one, however small, and often shared with gay men, rather than being divided between a commercial 'bar' scene and a political scene as in the 1970s and 80s, or a more underground and clearly butch-femme scene in the decades immediately before that. There is a clear retrospective perception of a class-based split mirroring the bar scene- feminist scene division, with the political scene being perceived as more middle-class and college-based, centring on benefits and socials for local community groups, while the bar-scene was seen as more working-class and butch-femme. In the big cities in particular the nature of the commercial scene changed in the 1990s, having grown from socials and a few traditional gay bars and pubs, with occasional gay nights at straight clubs, to a more mixed scene in terms of both gender and sexuality with a proliferation of gay venues. These have tended to be more high profile, visible and up-market with strong links to the wider club scene and culture.

The women I spoke to expressed a sense of frustration and anger at the loss of 'safe' space. While open in principle to space being 'mixed', lesbians were resentful of the way that their space was filled by straight women and the straight men that then follow them, with all the threat of violence this involves. Butch, masculine and androgynous lesbians talked about being made to feel uncomfortable in toilets as heterosexual women regard them with open hostility or disdain while their use of that space becomes part of the production and performance of normative femininity. Lesbian culture and community space is one of the few areas where female masculinity is accepted and may be the object of desire rather than ridicule, misrecognition or disgust, and so for many women the intrusion is strongly resented. This can change the character of a particular venue so that lesbian space is literally taken over and lost. Participants talked about feeling unwelcome in particular venues and even of being refused admission by doorstaff. Jay talked about how a club, 'became really full of straight girls and fag-hags so we don't bother.' The issue of recognition was repeatedly mentioned, so that for butch lesbians attracted to feminine women it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish lesbians and heterosexual women. Femmes and feminine lesbians found this equally frustrating as the presence of straight women in clubs made them increasingly invisible as lesbians. The resentment at intrusion on space, and the desire to be able to distinguish through visibility can be seen as part of an essentialist discourse. The self-policing nature of the lesbian community is based on a defensive position of exclusion from the dominant culture, and often produces a desire for boundaries and distinction, which promote a policing of who is a lesbian, and also who is a woman. This can take a spatial form with the gatekeeping role of policies designed to carve out and protect lesbian and/or women-only space through dress-codes, statements about welcoming 'born women' and so on. At the same time the identity accounts complicate this picture. There is also a resistance to identity categories as constraining and a use of repertoires of choice and performance.

### **Lesbian Identity as Constraint**

Whether butch, femme or androgynous, the experience of the 'sex wars' and of [lesbian] feminism as constraining was very widespread and strongly resented by those women who had been involved in lesbian scenes in the 1980s and into the 90s. Many of the women who came out after this positioned themselves similarly in relation to their knowledge of the debates.

Nancy remembered coming out at a northern university in the late 70s as well as being involved in the Irish lesbian scene in the 1980s.

Nancy: It was almost like you had to join a certain set of values in order to acknowledge your sexuality. It was very Greenham Common, brown rice... I have been frowned on for not being politically correct... they were very 'wimmin that only liked wimmin', and I didn't fit totally into that conception. I had straight friends for one thing [...] I'm not politically correct, I just can't do it, and I probably just wasn't very hot on the right terms. [...] I mean one of these women used to change man sized tissues to women sized tissues, and history/herstory, and I just either took the piss or I just dismissed it, but it didn't go down very well.

For femmes the 'androgynous imperative' had been an alienating experience. The dominant gendered style in lesbian culture combined with stereotypical images in the wider culture of lesbians as mannish and unattractive so that the gender and sexual identities were conflated. This was particularly difficult for feminine lesbians who felt that in order to be a 'proper' lesbian they would have to adopt an androgynous or masculine gendered style.

Maria: This is one of my problems about identifying as a lesbian because apart from when I was quite a young teenager I always liked dressing up and looking quite girly [...] and that was so much at odds with my stereotyped idea of what a lesbian was that it clearly meant that I couldn't really be a lesbian- it's laughable now but it was actually quite a powerful thing- there was only one way of being a lesbian - and that was what femme meant to me in the beginning- discovering this whole - I started coming across writers who were writing about being femme and I realised that's me, that's what I'm like and it's ok as an identity, you're allowed to be like that.

One of the women talked about 'rediscovering' the femininity she had felt she had to leave behind when she came out. She came out into an environment where

'butch and femme was very wrong', '...[it] is about aping heterosexuality, and wearing heels was frowned on and wearing skirts was frowned on, and lipstick was absolutely not ok.' She felt under pressure to adopt an androgynous style. This pressure was commonly reported and needs to be seen as part of a process of identity work. In a culture which condemns lesbianism, and butch/femme identities in particular, to inauthenticity, the process of identifying oneself as lesbian and the attendant insecurity and flux this brings can involve a desire to fix and secure one's new identification. Commonly this involved anxiety about not being a 'proper lesbian'. 'Doing' lesbian is expressed in terms of competencies, knowledge and practices. The suspicion and hostility towards lesbian femininity meant that femmes had commonly returned to and reclaimed femininity or 'femme' only after years of androgynous style.

Jan: In the late 70s and early 80s people were rabid about lesbians who wore lipstick or lesbians who wore skirts, or had handbags- you weren't a proper lesbian if you did things like that, you had to have big shoes, a big watch, and short hair. You weren't a lesbian unless you had those things.

Sexual practices were also perceived to be under scrutiny, so expressing particular desires was seen as suspect and male identified.

Nicky: I remember when I first came out (in the mid 90s), realising that politics had a lot to do with sex, and that some people would shape their sexual practices to fit their politics. I remember talking about how some people would be appalled by any sort of penetrative sex. And use of a dildo would just be absolute fucking hangable offence for a lesbian. I was quite a young impressionable dyke at the time, just taking on board all this stuff [...]. It was never talked about, sex, never spoken about.

Jan: It was there wasn't it- I mean, penetration- that was the big no-no for a long long time. It was seen as something that lesbians did not do [...] so I think an awful lot of people lied about their sex-lives. Language- I think it was all much blander in that you would say you slept with someone, rather than that you shagged or you fucked or whatever [...] I don't think anybody really admitted to using sex-toys, unless you were out there being an s-m dyke.

She explicitly links these pressures with a feminist, woman-centred culture which was based on essentialist ideas about valuing female virtues and 'being in touch with our wombs'.

This also has a class element, with working class women reporting feeling uncomfortable and judged by their 'inappropriate' sexual language in middle-class feminist environments. One working class butch woman talked about lesbian feminists being 'freaked out' by her language and this, combined with her masculine style and the femininity of her partners, had caused problems for her at Greenham and women's communes. She also talked about the way that her femme partner had been openly insulted at these gatherings. Assumptions were made about her sexual practices on the basis of her appearance. In addition many butch women reported being seen as 'male-identified'.

Annie: I've been ostracised because of perceived sexual practices – people haven't even known the truth about it, but follow on that you look like that therefore you will do this.

Healey (1996) notes that butch/femme and SM are commonly conflated. She argues that our collective embarrassment at butch/femme and role playing in lesbian history has led to contemporary discussions of butch /femme concentrating on role-playing as sexual practice rather than as a historically important identity and a key part of lesbian communities. She argues that the attempts to reclaim butch/femme in the late 1980s tended to divorce discussions of the identities from their historical location and gave rise to the conflation with SM. In addition to this I would argue that the way in which lesbian feminism defined lesbianism as the opposite of heterosexuality and drew a tight line around 'lesbian practices' excluded many women from the category and contributed to confusion around identities and practices. Some of the participants had experienced their sexual practices being construed as male-identified, oppressive and/or SM.

A widespread femme experience is the accusation that they are not 'real lesbians', 'passing lesbians' and negative judgements from other lesbians because of their invisibility to heterosexual onlookers (see Chapter 7). Several femmes talked about their experience of what they saw as sexism from other lesbians in the association of femininity with weakness and passivity. This was shown in the comments of one of the butch women who talked about the fact that many of the

femmes she had been out with had spoken of their relief at finding their femininity accepted and valued by her.

Gabby: The amount of women I've been out with who've said 'God it's such a relief to find someone who really likes me to dress up and wear make up, and really appreciates it, because I've been with so many people who didn't want me to wear make up or dress up' and I just think it's a real put down of femininity. [...] Feminists have spent years saying 'you can be a woman and be strong, and being a woman doesn't mean that you can't take charge' and then when someone says I'm going to be really a woman it's like 'you're weak'- they're contradicting themselves- femininity does not equal weakness.

Lesbian identification has been experienced as constraining for women who identify as butch and femme. This can be distinguished from liberal and individualistic rejection of label as constraining. These women have been clear to name and make visible their desires.

### **Egalitarian repertoires**

While there is still a strong feeling among all but the very youngest and oldest participants about the sex wars and the negative role of lesbian feminism in policing identities, at the same time it is important to note the level of involvement these women have had with a women's movement that was frequently unwelcoming. Many of these women still identified as feminists in some way and apart from the two ends of the age scale had nearly all been involved in a feminist political scene to some degree. The accounts, even of those women who do not consider themselves to be feminists, readily draw upon feminist discourses.

It was possible to identify in the accounts an egalitarian repertoire which clearly is based in feminist discourses in its critical attitude towards gender stereotypes and gender roles, and which contributes to the distinction between 'old' and 'new' butch/femme which will be examined in the next chapter. These accounts draw on feminist discourses in identifying themselves as non-oppressive, pre-figurative, and seeing the personal as political. For androgynous women the association of butch/femme with stereotypes from the wider culture and lesbian historical studies

and fiction based in 1950s America contributes to their unease with identifying as butch or femme, while for butch and femme women this is the basis of the hostility they struggle against. The latter see this as a misunderstanding of butch-femme. At the same time they are critical of the way that the emphasis on equality becomes a denial of gender and sexual difference and promotion of 'sameness' within lesbianism, producing conformity and similarity within couples. For example Emma talked about her experimentation with femininity and femme styles as arising out of the desire to create a visual distinction between herself and her butch partner. The sexual dynamic and distinction was very clear to them but she came to realise that to other lesbians and certainly to heterosexual onlookers they were read as visually very similar.

Nestle has pointed to the bitter irony in the way that femme style is often read as anti-feminist (1992: 138). Femme identity accounts often stressed that 'femme' was an identity they came back to after having been through feminism and having critically examined gender roles and ideologies of femininity. They stress the difference between heterosexual femininity and the femininity of femmes in terms of awareness, intentionality and play, in a repertoire of femme consciousness, which will be outlined in Chapter 6.

Contemporary butch and femme identifications are made in the context of different lesbian subcultures. Wider social changes mean that contemporary gender relationships and family forms position a butch/femme subculture that is associated with 1950s America as anachronistic. Healy's chapter on butch and femme, in which she considers the 'collective lesbian embarrassment about our role-playing foremothers' (1996: 61) is titled 'Before we knew any better', which nicely captures the way in which many lesbians see this. Attitudes have changed in the wider culture, largely because of the impact of feminism, and yet for many lesbians it seems to be butches and femmes who are maintaining outdated gender stereotypes and oppressive gender roles. Butch-femme is understood to be about personal style too, but gender roles take precedence and are organised conventionally. As one woman put it, 'The butch goes out to work and mends the



car and the femme likes to wear make-up and - well, no one likes to do the ironing but, you know.' For Nicky, an androgynous lesbian, one of the positive things about lesbian relationships is the emphasis on equality between two women.

Nicky: The concept of a butch-femme relationship fills me with, well not horror but it's sort of distasteful in a way. Because I think it denotes power and stuff. And I've never been into that sort of thing. I find that in lesbian relationships things are a lot more equal and even- well that's my experience.

At the same time butch and femme lesbians to counter accusations that their relationships are oppressive or imitative of heterosexuality frequently draw upon an egalitarian repertoire.

### **Sense of Community**

Even among women who feel themselves on the margins of mainstream lesbian culture because of their sense of identification as either butch or femme there seems to be an awareness and sense of community cited as one of the positive aspects of being a lesbian. This was often expressed in gendered terms, drawing on feminist discourses of female solidarity and shared identification. Only among the younger women was this primarily about a mixed gender commercial scene. Beth is typical in seeing the positive thing about being a lesbian as, 'Company of women. Friendships, community, not having men around.' Lesbianism for many women is valued as women-centred and a significant source of strength.

Maria: Really the sex just works better and I think the relationships I've had with women just work on a deeper level- there's no comparison between the level of interaction you can get with another woman and - I'm not a separatist but having to have less to do with men was a major bonus.

Nancy: It's the place that 's most comfortable for me.

Similarly Emma talks about enjoying '... feeling like we've got this history and culture as well, ways of behaving- that fascinates me, I love that, it's a kind of belonging that I didn't ever have.' This is not necessarily the case for black and/or working-class women who may feel part of more than one community, or may feel rejected or ambivalent towards the communities they were brought up in, but they too still talk about valuing a sense of lesbian community. There was frequent

mention of the value of women's friendships. This non-sexual emphasis on commonality, friendship and community is interesting given the criticism in recent years of Rich's concept of a 'lesbian continuum' and the way that the debate has tended to position butch-femme lesbians as the polar opposite of this, defined primarily as an overtly and explicitly sexual style. While this is certainly one aspect of butch/femme, in many respects their sexual identity accounts are indistinguishable from those of the lesbian mainstream.

The references to community included but went beyond the commercial scene and cultural products specifically marketed at lesbians and gay men. The scene for many women was based around informal friendship networks. Work by queer geographers such as Peake (1993), Valentine (1995) and Rothenberg (1995) looks at the influence of an informal 'lesbian grapevine', concluding that lesbian space is often not marked by commercial bars or businesses but nevertheless is visible for those who know where to look (cited in Bell and Valentine 1995) Rothenberg (1995) sees it as a mistake to equate the concept of a lesbian community with a neighbourhood, as previous work on lesbian and gay geography has done, and argues that Anderson's work on 'imagined communities' as discursive entities is more appropriate.

Some of the women saw lesbian feminism as having been dominated by middle-class women who put their feminism before their lesbianism, whereas now the two are more separate. Feminism is associated for some of the younger working-class women with older middle-class lesbians, and is seen a quite dull and respectable. They are unfamiliar with feminist discourse around femininity and beauty practices, and do not regard feminism as relevant to their lives.

Older lesbians drew a contrast between an older sense of community when the scene was much smaller and butch-femme divisions more clearly drawn:

Jean: [...] years ago when we were in Didsbury there used to be one pub that on a Sunday lunch was gay, and everybody in Manchester went to this pub on a Sunday- it was great.

The crossover between the gay men's and women's scenes was much greater than

it has been since, and there was no reason for the scene to be popular with heterosexuals, so that femmes were more easily recognisable as lesbians.

Jean: [...] it used to be there were just two pubs and two clubs and you knew everybody where you were going, male and female mixed together quite happily, we had some really good nights with gay men and - it's not like that any more.

### **How are lesbian identities defined?**

In Ponse's study of a 1970s lesbian community she distinguishes between what she calls 'primary' and 'elective' lesbians. (1978) The former express their identities as deeply felt and fixed over time, whereas the latter express a greater degree of choice and fluidity. She distinguishes further between the two types of lesbian in terms of the age at which they came out and their accounts of their identities. This typology is useful and is relevant to some of the commonly used distinctions within contemporary lesbian communities. Many women referred to the existence of lesbians who maintain that they were born lesbians, or 'borners' as a few women put this. Similarly there is recognition of conscious choice in the accounts of other lesbians, although this would be more applicable to 'political lesbianism' and the period that Ponse was investigating. Rather than think in terms of types of lesbian I would argue that it is more useful to look at the types of accounts that are used, often in combination, and the positions that these offer.

It is possible to identify a 'repertoire of authenticity' containing essentialist elements in the majority of the accounts. This is typified by the rhetoric of 'coming out' and is consistent with Western discourses of liberalism and individualism (Plummer 1995). Sexual identity is conceived here as a truth waiting to be uncovered and a core element of identity. There is a tendency in the literature to contrast constructionism with a perceived essentialism within the movement but in the accounts there was a marked tendency to avoid or qualify essentialist repertoires, using them in combination with constructionist and performative discourses. This is in spite of the deep investment in claiming a

marginalised identity which is simultaneously evident.

I am arguing that essentialist repertoires are drawn upon in particular situations because they offer a strong and effective defence of lesbian identity in a heteronormative context. Particular examples of this are found in the following accounts of lesbians, both butch and femme, who came out in mid-life after having been married and had children. Jan, a femme in her 50s, draws upon this repertoire of authenticity in describing her sexual identity. Having survived a life-threatening illness in her 30s she re-evaluated her life.

Jan: I made the decision that I was no longer going to live a lie- well not even a lie, I was no longer going to pretend I was something I wasn't. I came out as a dyke then. Left my home and marriage and big house behind me and went off to be a lesbian and a student.

*Do you think you'll always be a lesbian?*

Yes. Absolutely. I have no question about that at all, I would not go back to being heterosexual, I am identified as a dyke and that's what I am.

The 'authentic' repertoire draws upon mainstream discourses of liberal individualism and freedom, and values 'being true to oneself'. These have been core themes in the rhetoric of coming out and as well as in lesbian and gay literature. The accounts draw upon dominant discourses with a ready currency within the culture. These have been key resources in validating lesbian identities in the face of homophobia and charges of inauthenticity, for example when sexual orientation is seen as 'just a phase' and when butch/femme practices are taken as confirmation of phallogentrism, and as imitative. Similarly Joan asserts, 'I don't really bother what people say, you know. It's like what you are and what you say is totally personal and up to you.' Maria stresses the process of discovery which is characteristic of much of the literature around coming out.

Maria: As a teenager I experimented with women [in secret]. I was married for 10 years and had kids and in that time I pretty effectively repressed that and lived a straight life but I always had an underlying notion that [...] even when I married I remember saying that if I had another relationship it would be with a woman [...] but then when my relationship started to fail, which was a long slow process, it became clear to me that I was gay, so it was a process of unravelling. I came out when I left my husband- I was 32- I'd been talking to

friends about it for a couple of years.

*Do you think you'll always be a lesbian?*

Oh yes, I couldn't go back to having sex with men- it was always an uneasy and boring compromise.

At the same time as she stresses this process of self discovery or unravelling there is a clear sense of change, not only in her sexual identity but also in her gendered style. She now uses a much more flamboyant and sexual femme style.

Maria: I think it's related to my sexuality- during the time when I was married if I look at photographs of myself I dressed in a dowdy- I feel as if I've had different lives- a mummy image and I was very big, and I wore drab clothes and definitely coming out, part of that was being able to express myself.

She talks about her definition of femme, distinguishing between the femininity of femmes and heterosexual women.

Maria: What is it in the end? It's how you are in your clothes; it's not your clothes. So what makes you feel sexy or how you want to present yourself when you're out on the prowl. It's hard to define but I think a lot of it is what I said about femme women being very strong and powerful because they've had to go against the norm a bit.

The distinction between femininity and femme, as well as repertoires of femme strength and subversion will be discussed in Chapter 6. In this statement Maria brings in the issue of conscious and chosen non-conformity. Interestingly this was a common feature of identity narratives in a lesbian and gay or feminist context, contrasting with the essentialism present in narratives given in a more heteronormative context. There are different elements within these brief accounts, such as an awareness of power and the pressure to conform, a recognition of the fluidity of identities and also an essentialist 'coming-out' element, where Maria talks about being able to 'express herself'. The rhetoric of 'coming out' from 1970s liberationist discourses still has a wide currency, although less so among the younger and older women.

This 'repertoire of authenticity' was often drawn upon in a more clearly heteronormative context. Paula, a young androgynous lesbian, is quite clear on how she identifies and this seems to be quite fixed although she had sex with a

man as recently as a couple of months before the interview, this does not affect how she sees herself. Possibly because of her vulnerable situation, as a 16 year-old woman still living at home in a small town, she needs to be more unambiguous about this. She says that she has identified as a lesbian since she was 13 and has no doubts that she will always identify as gay. Although in contact with other lesbian and gay young people, she positions herself as a lesbian through the use of discursive resources readily recognisable in an often hostile heteronormative environment. On the issue of butch and femme and lesbian gender she uses a repertoire of individualism which is quite typical among the younger lesbians: 'I'm neither- I'm just one on my own and I'm happy with that, I like being on my own, I like being me.' She goes on to explain that although she sees herself as masculine and boyish, if she were to adopt a more butch style this would simply confirm the stereotypes of her family and peers about lesbians.

Jean, one of the older lesbians offers a stricter definition of lesbianism. This is the lesbian as a type of person, distinct from heterosexuals, and yet at the same time even within this account there are elements of an account of identity as practice, as provisional and liable to slippage: 'I have a friend who was in show business, she's nearly 70 now, she was a male impersonator, and she always used to say there's only us two that are true lesbians, everybody else has been with a man.' Some women showed a suspicion of women such as political lesbians who claimed that their sexuality was a choice. Arising as reaction against the policing of the category 'lesbian' associated with lesbian-feminism and scepticism at the type of 'desire-work' necessary to align desires, identities and politics, this type of statement repeats the same manoeuvres, defining who the 'real' lesbians are.

Gabby: I've always been a bit wary of those women who became lesbians because of feminism. Not that they had any burning sexual desire for other women [...] I think that's really weird. How can you force yourself to be a sexuality that you're not?

In some cases this essentialism is taken explicitly from feminism. Annie is clear that her initial identification with feminism was a basic gender essentialism that she still feels passionately about so that central to her lesbian identity is female

solidarity and friendship.

Annie: I feel that from when I was small before I heard of feminist politics I always thought that women were great and superior, and it's a fundamentalist extreme view, but the older I get the more reinforced it becomes. Superior emotionally and intellectually and practically and so for me I want the best for me. [...] I can't be arsed arguing with blokes in pubs over lesbianism or anything, I just want to go forward and create something new.

There is a pre-figurative dimension to this. She is aware of post-modernist and anti-essentialist arguments but uses essentialist arguments herself, saying that the theoretical critiques make her feel 'physically sick'. She sees lesbians as fundamentally different to heterosexual women and sees this difference as positive.

Annie: I don't like when gay clubs become mixed, I think our identity or my identity is different, and I understand all this stuff about essentialism and lah lah, but I say yes, I am different, because I think differently and I behave differently. I can see that in lots of ways it's really reactionary to say that you're different, but all the evidence to me suggests that I am and lots of lesbians are. I think it's a good thing, we need people who think differently...and want to create a different sort of society... Well intellectually when I read about postmodernism, there's something that happens in my stomach that makes me want to throw up. All I can really say is that I always wanted to dress in my brother's clothes and the first woman I saw, she was undeniably very feminine. That's been a pattern in my life but I didn't see myself as butch.'

In a culture marked by gender inequality, where heterosexuality is the default assumption, the majority of lesbians not only has had heterosexual experiences but also will often have spent significant periods of their lives identifying as heterosexual. Alongside a repertoire of authenticity that uses the language of essentialism and truth to think in terms of a core self, there is a sense of fluidity and an acknowledgement of change, and the ongoing possibility of further change, in one's identity. The process of coming out to oneself and/or others means that those who identify as lesbian and gay, whether publicly or not, have already been through a profound adaptation to change in their own sense of self. The role of the 'coming out story' in gay culture means that we are familiar with hearing others' accounts of this process. The 'coming out story' can be seen to

play a role in fixing that identity, since it is commonly a narrative developed in retrospect which reinterprets and reorientates one's own history towards the moment of self-revelation as gay. At the same time it is a testimony to the degree of change lesbians will have assimilated themselves and observed in those around them. This undermines the sense of a taken for granted core identity. The process of identification as lesbian or gay does involve a choice and a naming of a subjectivity that heterosexuals do not have to consciously experience. As Plummer outlines, this can involve stages and degrees of identification (1981). Lesbian identity accounts are made up of ideas about oneself and one's own future expressed as practices and in performative terms; in terms of desiring women, liking women's company and friendship. They incorporate change and choice, and have had to accommodate the fact that lesbians have already, and continue to, contradict the expectations of those around them and frequently themselves. While some lesbians talk about having always 'felt different', heterosexuality is the default assumption.

### **Repertoires of Choice and Fluidity**

Like many of the women Liz, 30, who identifies as a boy-dyke, had a period of heterosexual identification as a young adult and a period of experimentation with women while being reluctant to use the lesbian label. After the end of her first affair with a woman she recalls, 'I thought, ok, I could go either way, but I kind of knew which way I hoped it would go'. This account is quite typical in the way that it draws on a mixture of repertoires of choice and essentialism. There is a widespread recognition of the fact that the claiming of a lesbian identity is part of a reflexive process and ultimately involves making a choice. There is a stress on change and fluidity particularly in the butch narratives with regard to sexual identity.

Throughout the narratives the use of a repertoire of authenticity was also combined with and tempered by a stress on fluidity and uncertainty, with a troubling and questioning of categories and a widespread reluctance to rule out sleeping with men either within their definition of lesbianism or through changing



this identification. Even those who could not imagine doing this personally still wanted to allow for the possibility in their accounts, so that a typical comment was 'you never know what might happen'. Carmen, a butch, is clear that she has always seen herself as a lesbian and definitely always will.

Carmen: It's not just that you feel sexually attracted to women, I think there's a lot more to it, and I don't feel attracted to men. Even if I wasn't a dyke I don't think I would have fitted in.

As a black woman she is aware of exclusion and being an outsider on grounds of 'race' as well as sexuality, so that fitting in has never been an option. She sees the positive side of identifying as lesbian as 'Being true to yourself, being comfortable about what you are, dressing how you want to dress, not having to fit into pigeon-holes, not having to behave a certain way when boys are around.' At the same time she has had relationships with men, adding, 'Yeah I think you have to just to try things out, you're always up against it and so you've got to know. You always question it.' Many lesbian identity accounts were characterised by this openness and readiness to question one's identity, even as this goes against a deeply felt sense of difference which is simultaneously honoured. There is a distinction between identity and practice that refuses the tendency within discourses of identification to essentialize and 'close things off'. Many women who did not imagine and had never had sex with men were reluctant to rule it out and were clear that their definition of lesbianism allowed for that possibility.

An important factor in this sense of fluidity and instability in identity accounts was recognition of the situated nature of identities and their involuntary aspects. While the process of claiming a lesbian identity involves reflexivity and choice, it is maintained through interaction with others and can be imposed by others.

Nicky: [...] even if I end up having a relationship with a man I think I would always see myself as a dyke because I think if [...] I think it's got a lot to do with how other people see me as well, and how they judge my actions and the way I conduct myself, and the way I dress, and stuff like that. My identity I think is seen not only by myself but by the outside, as being a dyke I think.

Nicky was positioned as different as a teenager prior to her identification as

lesbian. Even when in relationships with young men she remembers being called 'lesbian'.

Nicky: And I think when I was straight; I was always different, and never acted in the way that my peers and my friends acted. [...] they knew I wasn't like everybody else, and I knew I wasn't like everybody else [...] I wasn't offended by it, and I didn't think oh maybe I am, because at that time I wasn't attracted to women.

This was more common in relationship to gender identity, with boyish girls being labelled as tomboys by their families. Again the development of a sense of gender identity arises from an interplay of conscious choice and wider gender structures.

The 'repertoire of performance' encompasses a number of different elements (see Chapter 6). The experience of identifying oneself as lesbian or bisexual tends to produce an awareness of heteronormativity and the performative aspects of gender identity. This can range from an awareness of the details of 'correct' gender performance and discomfort at one's inability to achieve this, to a consciously subversive attempt to parody and disrupt gender norms. However, a key element is social location. The recognition of the situated and provisional nature of sexual identities is based in the everyday experience of heteronormativity and inequality. There are material and social pressures encountered in inhabiting and maintaining a non-heterosexual subjectivity and identification.

## **Conclusion**

Identity accounts can be seen to perform particular types of work. I argue that the contradiction between the folk essentialism of community politics and constructionist theory has been overplayed and show how everyday accounts draw on both sets of ideas in particular ways. The role of the 'sex wars' is important, as the basic positions staked out in this period still shape arguments and understandings of sexual identities within contemporary British lesbian communities. The interpretative repertoires I identify are marked by their interaction with feminist discourses in both positive and negative ways, and this influence extends beyond the boundaries of those who would or have considered

themselves to be feminists. The essentialism that underpinned feminist theory in general prior to the poststructuralist critique is reflected in the accounts, while at the same time this research suggests that this contributed to a policing of identities from which butch and femme lesbians wish to distance themselves. At the same time feminist discourse and culture has contributed to a sense of women's community and empowerment which continues to be an important part of lesbian identification. It is important, too, to recognise the constructionist elements that have constituted feminist theory both at an academic level and as this has contributed to everyday understandings. Sexuality is seen as socially constructed and located, implicated within issues of power and with elements of fluidity. While I am critical of the tendency towards voluntarism that this contains, this goes beyond the simple essentialism that is so often criticised.

The identity accounts articulated by participants in this research show a marked reluctance generally to use essentialist arguments. While I argue that a repertoire of authenticity, with essentialist underpinnings is one of the key and most effective discursive resources available, this is rarely used in an unqualified way. Some of the repertoires I have analysed contain significant elements of essentialism. However in common with the findings of Esterberg (1996) I argue that participants are in general resistant to essentialist repertoires and show that where these are drawn upon they are often qualified by an emphasis on choice, reflexivity, fluidity and performance as well as an awareness of one's own sexuality as fluid and situational.

## Chapter 5: Desire and Identification

### Introduction

Butler suggests that the theorisation of gender as performative disrupts the perceived and ideologically maintained continuity between sexed bodies, gender and sexuality (1990). In this chapter I argue that butch and femme identities tend to disrupt this continuity at different points. Femmes link sex and gender in a conventional way but challenge the link between gender and sexual orientation by being attracted to women (although where this is or is understood to be for masculinity it can also be recuperated by the heterosexual imaginary). Butches disrupt the link between sex and gender, but as masculine their attraction to women can be seen as conventional, particularly when it is for feminine women. In addition to this I wish to draw attention to the positioning of repertoires of authenticity which assert the 'real' and fixed nature of identities. In the previous chapter I argued that there was a reluctance to use these alone or in an unqualified way, but that they may be used to offer a stronger defence of identity than is contained in alternative repertoires. I now wish to focus in more detail on some of the complex ways in which these are used and positioned in the accounts. These should not be seen simply as examples of ideological misrecognition or as effects of the dominant discourses of individuality. A stress on authenticity tends to be used at the points at which the accounts are most disruptive of the sex-gender-sexual identity continuum, and therefore most contentious in a heteronormative culture. In particular I argue that essentialist repertoires are used to stress gender authenticity in butch accounts and lesbian authenticity in femme accounts.

Munt contrasts understandings of butch and femme genders either as epistemological

[...] a style of knowing, interpreting and doing lesbian gender. Butch/femme is also mustered in an ontological framework, where it is concerned with being, with having an identity, and a kind of true self (Munt 1998: 1).

She suggests that in the disputes over these understandings, femmes often

maintain the former and butches the latter. This is reflected in my research with regard to butch and femme as genders. The femmes I spoke to drew on repertoires of performance and play when talking about their gendered styles. One talked about having 'full clothing rights' and being able to 'do the whole spectrum'. Choice, agency and consciousness were also stressed. Frequently they were aware that this was not the case for the butches they knew, and most of the butches I spoke to were deeply uncomfortable with the accoutrements of femininity. Often this meant that they could not countenance performing femininity or softening and feminising their appearance for the sake of a job or interview, with serious implications for their careers. I examine butch and femme gender narratives and argue that these may be strategically framed, so that butch gender essentialism may offer a stronger defence against gender policing as well as being a product of a personal history of gender non-conformity, ambiguity and difference. Considered as sexual identities, though, this tendency was reversed. The butch and androgynous women I spoke to were more willing to draw on repertoires of fluidity and choice when discussing their sexual identities than the women who identified as femmes.

### **Defining the terms: 'butch' and 'femme' in lesbian discourses.**

Butch and femme are the stereotypical and widely recognised terms for lesbian genders. While lesbian subcultures have produced a variety of more locally recognised terms for lesbian 'types' which are often based on lifestyle and consumption patterns, O'Sullivan and Ardill (1990), Rubin (1992) and others have recognised the way in which the paucity of lesbian language overburdens these two terms. They are used by lesbians as adjectives, nouns and verbs, ranging from deeply felt core identities to ironic playfulness around gender to simple shorthand descriptions of appearance. Significantly among the younger lesbians they are used primarily as adjectives to describe gendered personal styles in the absence of alternative discourse: 'she's a bit femmy', 'she's a femmy butch'. Rubin observes that in common lesbian usage of 'butch', the term encompasses a variety of different ways of, and motivations for, using masculine gender codes,

from gender 'dysphoria', to women who are not interested in male gender identities but who use masculine signs to communicate lesbian desire, to those who simply prefer the clothing. She argues that despite the wide range of lesbian gender variance, it remains undertheorised. The term 'butch' itself is one of few terms available to refer to a whole spectrum of masculine gender preferences, '... and it carries a heavy, undifferentiated load' (Rubin 1992: 468)

Butch and femme are used across this range of seriousness, as deeply felt identities and as simple short-hand to describe appearance, and across this range in three particular ways: as gender, sexual and emotional identities. There is a distinction between their contemporary and historical meanings. Contemporary accounts draw upon the historical lexicon, sometimes ironically and sometimes in order to distinguish 'new' from 'old' butch/femme. In most individual accounts, different and often contradictory definitions are used. The terms are also part of a heteronormative discourse which reinscribes the logic of heterosexuality within lesbianism. This produces misreadings of lesbian genders which may be innocent or homophobic in intent. Lesbians may contribute to and have been routinely exposed to heteronormative discourses, and what Ingraham (1996: 169) calls the heterosexual imaginary and the logic of 'heterogenders'. This is the process of naturalisation of heterosexuality which 'conceals its constructedness'.

Reframing gender as heterogender foregrounds the relation between heterosexuality and gender. Heterogender confronts the equation of heterosexuality with *the natural* and of gender with the cultural, and suggests that both are socially constructed, open to other configurations (not only opposites and binary), and open to change. (Ingraham 1996:169)

This logic has produced the butch/femme stereotypes that many lesbians find alienating. This can have an impact on the process of self-identification, so that many women report being put off by these images and not participating in lesbian subcultures until they found other lesbians with similar styles attitudes to their own (Ainley 1995: 146). There is still widespread embarrassment at and sometimes hostility towards those lesbians who identify as butch or femme within mainstream lesbian subcultures. In particular, as Halberstam claims, '... butch-

phobia continues to haunt lesbian self-definition' (1998b: 58).

The relationship between sex, gender and sexuality is generally perceived as fixed in Western cultures. Classifying certain gender expressions as "butch" or "femme" potentially subverts conventional notions of gender and its relation to sexuality. Butler's work on performativity works towards establishing that all gender is imitation of norms and ideals (1990). Her interest in drag and butch/femme is because they can show up the fabricating mechanisms of gender itself. Heterosexuality naturalises itself by installing the 'illusions of continuity' between sex, gender and desire, which butch/femme identities have the potential to disrupt. Butch and femme practices each trouble this naturalisation at different points. However it is at the points where the performative status of all gender is thrown into relief that butch and femme identity accounts assert their authenticity through repertoires which highlight essentialist understandings and play down the possibility of choice. This distinguishes performativity from reflexive volition, a distinction Butler insists upon. Again the language of performance, play and choice does not offer a strong defence of one's identity and practices in a heteronormative culture. In general the accounts readily draw upon the language of construction, reflexivity, fluidity and performance, and where essentialist accounts are employed they are frequently qualified and combined with these others. However at the key points where the 'heterosexual imaginary' is disrupted, essentialist defences of identity and practices are used.

The work of Nestle (1987, 1992) relies upon asserting the authenticity of butch/femme identities and practices as authentic lesbian erotic styles in order to refute the charges of inauthenticity and imitation often levelled at them. Several of the contributors to the butch/femme anthology she edited vigorously dispute the assertion that their deeply felt identification as butch or femme was 'mere' role-play (Nestle 1992). Similarly the participants draw upon a repertoire of authenticity. They consciously relate their practices and identities to the butch/femme tradition, drawing on historical work on lesbian communities.

This process of strategically drawing on particular interpretative repertoires does

not imply conscious intention, and it is important to distinguish between agency and individual reflexivity and choice. Identity accounts are not neutral and butch and femme accounts are each positioned by particular discourses of gender and sexuality, as well as being intersected by other structures of power. The strategic elements of repertoires are not at a conscious individual level, chosen for their instrumental value. Butler's disavowal of conscious agency has the effect of polarising positions between performativity as voluntarist performance or else endorsing her use of performativity as a way out of the structure-agency dualism. The strategic employment of particular repertoires to perform specific identity work suggests an alternative form of agency as collective and situated, working through particular dispositions at the individual level and drawing upon available discourses, so that it is both reflexive and constrained.

The readings produced by these practices cannot be fixed and are materially and discursively positioned in specific ways. The same practices may be read as subversive or as reinforcing the heterosexual imaginary regardless of individual intention. Attention to the social location of particular gender performance is key in examining the way in which readings are produced and meanings contested or fixed.

Butch identities trouble the naturalisation of heterosexuality by disturbing the connection between biological sex and gender identity, but at the same time can be seen as reinforcing the heterosexual imaginary where they underscore the connection between masculine gender and desire for femininity. The butch accounts stressed the authenticity of their gender identities, using a repertoire of 'butch essentialism'. Androgynous women similarly drew upon this repertoire, which offers a strong defence of the 'gender troubling' part of their identity. At the same time butches were more reluctant to use essentialist language with regard to desire, drawing upon repertoires of choice and fluidity much more readily.

In contrast femmes commonly drew upon repertoires of femme consciousness and strength with regard to gender identity. These contrast heterosexual femininity, which is portrayed as conformist and unthinking, with a femme emphasis on



gender performativity, subversion and choice. This contrasted with the accounts of their sexual identification as lesbian. Femme accounts stressed their *lesbian* authenticity and are less likely to use repertoires of performativity and choice with regard to desire and sexual preference.

These accounts do different discursive work since butch and femme are positioned differently in relation to heteronormative and lesbian subcultural discourses. Butch and femme identities and practices are part of ongoing struggles over gender, contributing to the establishment of particular subject positions.

Femmes trouble the continuity of the sex-gender-desire axis at different points to butches. While their gender identities could be seen to reinforce the 'natural' link between gender and biological sex, femme repertoires of consciousness, irony and gender play disputed this. The femme accounts consistently positioned femme femininity as non-normative and subversive because it was chosen and performed in a lesbian context. The connection between conventional gender identity and desire is troubled by the femme's desire for a woman. The fact that this is assumed to be for a masculine woman is used to attempt to recuperate femme desire back into the heterosexual imaginary but never fully succeeds, which is why attempts to use a logic of inversion have always struggled to make sense of femme desire. The desire of the femme for another biological woman, regardless of gender, is the point at which the naturalisation of heterosexuality is disputed, and performativity and the constructed nature of identities potentially revealed, and yet this is the point at which femme identity accounts used a repertoire of authenticity and essentialism. In the sample, more of the femmes disclosed having had no heterosexual sexual experience at all than did the butches. While the sample is not designed to be statistically representative, this stands out because it inverts a common assumption among lesbian and mainstream accounts of femmes as not 'real' lesbians in the way that butches are. The femme accounts focussed on the non-voluntary and compelled nature of their lesbian desire. It is possible that without the early experience of gender non-conformity that many butches experience and which is central to their identity formation, sexual non-conformity

becomes more central to femme identity formations, particularly for white women for whom it is the primary site of difference.

Femme accounts were clearly doing a different type of identity work, and again it is possible to see that a repertoire of authenticity offer a more robust defence in a heteronormative culture than repertoires of performativity and choice. Femme accounts are required to perform the additional task of asserting the fixity of (lesbian) desire in a culture that does not see them as 'real' lesbians, a suspicion that is still common in mainstream lesbian culture. Femme accounts in a lesbian context were more likely to use repertoires of choice and consciousness in order to distinguish them from heterosexual women.

#### **'Old' and 'new' butch/femme.**

Emma: Separately butch means – it's a word I'd use to describe kind of boy-identified dykes, masculine identified lesbians. And femme to identify feminine identified lesbians, girls, girl dykes. But I immediately run into difficulties over that because I think they've got historical kind of meaning, as a pairing, as indicators of a sexual dynamic, and we're sort of in a situation now where I think they're almost sort of seen as polar opposites, and aren't necessarily seen as having any attraction to each other. I think lesbian culture has changed, in ways that's kind of disturbed that relationship, that balance, so that the understanding is that they're separate types of lesbian, don't relate to each other and might actually dislike each other, and there's a lot of, if you read the ads in the gay press, you notice really quickly that a lot of femmes say 'femme lesbian' or 'feminine lesbian looking for similar', and they'll say 'no butch', and I'd say that to me those women aren't actually femmes, in the kind of historical sense of the word, the lesbian cultural sense of the word, and not in my sense of the word.

Emma's comments highlight some important issues. 'Butch' and 'femme' are commonly used to refer to lesbian genders in contemporary lesbian communities and bear no necessary relationship to each other. The distinction between 'old' and 'new' butch/femme was widely recognised although not necessarily referred to in exactly those terms. The older women I spoke to referred back to the 1950s and 60s, when roles were more rigid and interdependent, with nostalgia and affection. The younger butch and femme lesbians were keen to distinguish themselves from that tradition by drawing on an egalitarian repertoire when

talking about their relationships and denying that butch/femme mirrors stereotypical heterosexual gender roles. The terms are used independently throughout mainstream androgynous lesbian communities as well, as shorthand for lesbian genders, and with little sense of their historical development and relationship. However, within 'new' butch/femme subcultures their meanings are being consciously and creatively re-worked with a playfulness and respect for and knowledge of their history. In this way these subject positions are maintained and re-formed as specifically lesbian genders.

Jan, an older femme, draws attention to the need to historicize the concepts, that for her butch and femme mean different things in different periods.

Jan: I think at one time butch and femme had a real significance in that there wasn't a way to be lesbian apart from following heterosexual role-models, and heterosexual role-models as the male and female, and for a lot of women they took those roles and dressed those roles and acted those roles much more than you do today. I don't actually think there's very much in terms of real butch and femme these days- I think there are people who strike attitudes, who go for a style, and I think a lot of younger women who would perhaps classify themselves as butch are actually modelling themselves on young gay men. In the look, the dress, the way of being, out dancing [...]

'New' butch/femme is very much based on gender styles, and has a playful and camp element that Jan contrasts with the emphasis on more rigid roles. She recalls going to venues such as 'Gateways' in London where the choice was very stark: 'You were there in your big frock or you were there in your suit and tie.'

Jan: I think there'll be elements of it in any relationship, and we are all attracted to a broad physical type, so you might find a more femme woman automatically going towards a more boyish young woman, but that's about physical taste and what you find sexually attractive, I just don't see it so rigid. ... Whereas I have been in places and been in company with people where the roles have been very rigid, years ago where a butch would automatically open a door for me when I walked in, because I present as more femme... and where if you try to light your own cigarette there's always somebody there snapping a lighter in front of you, and where you used to see the 'are you looking at my woman?' from one butch to another.

Historical work such as that by Kennedy and Davis (1993) and Nestle (1987, 1992) outlines the ways in which erotic identities and roles in lesbian

communities were structured by butch/femme. There is no necessary continuity between these. Kraus (1996) discusses the 'desire work' that was necessary to maintain the normative alignments that constituted 'butchness' and 'femness', arguing that these were sometimes experienced as misaligned, threatening community structure.

A butch or fem's continual process of desire work, her attempt to realign erotic role, erotic identity and sexual preference to fit community standards, enabled self-presentation of butchness or femness to fit with her self-definition of those terms; it was the process of performativity of sexual identity. (1996: 36)

These alignments have been relaxed in 'new' butch/femme subcultures so that different configurations of desire are accepted. While one of the respondents identifies as a stone butch, the butch role in particular is less clearly defined. Annie, a forty-year-old butch remembered when she first came out being attracted to a woman who was described to her as 'old-school' and 'untouchable'. Initially this made her doubt her own butch status, and wonder if this was expected of her, although in the community she came out into there was a greater stress on reciprocity. This greater fluidity and the widespread use of egalitarian repertoires based in feminist discourses have steadily eroded the historical meaning of butch/femme as a particular erotic dynamic.

An older couple gave an account that came closest to 'old' butch/femme, with its insistence on conventional gender roles.

Jean: I think our relationship is very much a marriage - if I was a man I would be a chauvinist, I really would, because my idea is that the woman is feminine and does what Sheila does, to me this is a perfect set up. Sheila did go out to work at some stages but most of the time she stayed home and cared for [her daughter]- she chose to do that and I was happy for her to do that. I like to go out to work and come home to a warm home, because I never had it when I was young. Dinner's on the table and we'd sit down and have a nice meal, so in that respect it is similar to a marriage.

Even here though Sheila continually challenges the portrayal of her that Jean has given by giving examples of when she carried out more 'masculine' activities and drawing on more egalitarian gendered discourses.

Sheila: We used to laugh because I'd say 'ooh, I've been doing butch jobs all day!' [...] I've got this picture now that you've given that I'm this little woman who stays at home and cooks, and I don't see it like that [...] I've got the power in this relationship. I'm the one who makes the wheels go round.

Their background in 1960s lesbian communities, when, 'it was definitely butch and femme, you saw a couple and you knew who was butch and who was femme—that's how all our friends were', also structures their understanding of the relationships of their friends and which they see going on around them. Butch and femme are understood as a pairing in a way that is based in the dominant discourses of opposites attracting, so that the various configurations of 'new' butch/femme are difficult to understand.

Jean: All the women I have ever had affairs with have always been attractive, feminine women. But I don't think every butch feels like that because when I look round town now I see these big strapping women going out with each other and I think, how can you fancy that, it's not feminine, it's strange to me, but then I'm from the 60's and when you were butch in the 60's you wore a suit and tie.

She has always associated the attraction to women with masculinity, a logic that draws upon a discourse of inversion to realign sex, gender and desire within a heteronormative logic.

Jean: I remember when I was 15 I really fancied this woman and we were going out together and she was older than me, and she said 'this isn't right' when I tried to kiss her, and I remember saying, 'well, when I've changed sex then I'll come back'.

The language of lesbian gender is culturally as well as historically specific. A few women drew a contrast between American and British lesbian cultures. The former was seen as more rigid and more serious in comparison with the London scene where 'you do get your stereotypically butch and femme kind of a male role and a female role, but I think certainly in my circle of friends, it's more tongue in cheek.' In the US the perception was that conventional gender roles often shape roles within the relationship. This may be connected to the wealth of fictional and historical material on 'old' butch/femme subcultures from the US. Many of the women who drew this distinction based this either on personal experience or

butch/femme cyber-communities.

It is important to historicize these concepts, and to recognise the impact of changes in gender roles, employment patterns and fashion in society as a whole in the structuring of lesbian genders, as well as the growth and change within lesbian and gay communities. Writers such as Nestle (1987, 1992), Kennedy and Davis (1993), and Feinberg (1993) have examined butch/femme identities in working class US communities, and there are similarities with British lesbian communities of the period. Those communities were polarised in gender terms, reflecting a polarisation in the wider society. There was no room to be in-between if your sexual identity was to be recognisably lesbian, as communities were structured along butch/femme lines. These writers argue for seeing butch/femme as an authentically lesbian erotic style rather than an imitation of heterosexuality. Butch style enabled lesbian visibility as well as survival and protection on the streets, but crucially relied upon and was shaped by the availability of employment in typically male jobs.

'New' butch/femme is shaped in a very different context. Nestle (1987) has remarked upon the fact that although she clearly identified as femme in a lesbian context, she would frequently be called 'bulldagger' on the streets on the way to the bars, bringing out the fact that gendered style is relative and subject to readings and misreadings which are context dependent and based on cultural and subcultural competencies. There is now clearly much more scope for Western women in terms of appearance and employment, regardless of their sexual identities. Traditional male jobs are increasingly scarce and were not perceived as an option for working-class butches in the way that they may have been in the 1950s and 60s, and so among the women I spoke to there was no significant employment division along gendered lines. Appearance is an issue for butch and androgynous women and certain types of employment are ruled out if they require a feminine appearance. However the overall pattern among both butch and femme women, from both working-class and middle-class backgrounds was to study, qualify and gain employment in professional and semi-professional posts where

they felt able to be open about their sexuality. The butch women in working class occupations worked for public or voluntary sector employers with strong equal opportunities policies, as did the majority of the professional women. The picture was slightly different for the youngest women I spoke to, who were still at school or college, and whose lack of economic independence restricts their freedom. One butch student talked about the difficulty in finding casual summer jobs, and being limited by the fact that she felt unable and unwilling to compromise her masculinity by softening her look.

Jay: I couldn't do it, no matter how much I wanted the job, and it does make it harder to get jobs, unless you're happy to stack shelves or work in a warehouse, then you can wear overalls and be as butch as you like. Shit pay and harassment- a lot of the butch dykes I know have real quandaries about it because meanwhile their femme partners are advertising directors and raking it in and they can't even get a job at the local supermarket packing bags because they're not willing- well they can't -they just can't, and I couldn't either, I wouldn't be myself and I'd feel really uncomfortable and I wouldn't be able to do the job anyway.

As I have argued earlier, second-wave Anglo and American feminism was, on the whole, both suspicious of and hostile to butch/femme 'role playing' which was seen as eroticising power differences and mirroring or celebrating oppressive heterosexual gendered relations and so contributing to the reproduction of precisely the gender inequalities that feminism set out to critique (Martin and Lyons, 1972; Jeffreys, 1989). This is still sometimes retrospectively applied to 'old style' butch and femme identities and communities formed prior to the influence of second-wave feminist discourses. This is distinguished from 'new' butch/femme, popularly revived in the late 1980s. Contemporaneous with the 'sex wars', 'new' butch/femme was shaped in both positive and negative ways by its encounter with feminism. As a sex radical position it '... proved you were bad and bold, flying in the face of the lesbian feminist mummy' (Smyth 1998: 82).

One of the distinguishing features of 'new' butch/femme is the way that it has been shaped through its interaction with the feminist critiques of gender roles. This is not to suggest that women in 'old' butch/femme communities were ideologically duped or imitating heterosexuality, but simply to observe that

feminist discourses frame contemporary accounts of gender identity in a way that was not the case then, and that many 'new' butch and femme narratives draw on these debates quite explicitly, using gender signifiers in a playful and ironic way. Kennedy and Davis (1993: 326) argue that in their research on butch and femme identities in the US in the 1940s, the two were experienced differently. 'Butch identity was deeply felt internally, something that marked the person as different, while fem identity was rooted in socializing with and having relationships with gays. Femmes did not experience themselves as basically different from heterosexual women except to the extent that they were part of gay life'. In contrast I suggest that one of the features of 'new' butch/femme is the insistence in femme accounts on their lesbian authenticity as well as the frequent claims made for femme as strong, performative and subversive.

Gill, a bisexual femme, distinguishes between 'that 1950's thing' and new butch-femme, so that:

Gill: [...] if people are stereotyping around butch and femme, that it's something about straight man, straight woman, then people that I know would have to make the point that femme is actually dead asser~~tive~~tive, and that they are into initiating things rather than being the recipient. Nobody wants to be seen as just being girly, nobody wants to be seen as being a bit of a naf kind of a useless giggly [...]

'Old' butch/femme was a way of organising and structuring communities and relationships. 'Proper' butch/femme has its roots in this history but is more intangible, and I am using this to refer to the ill-defined sense of subcultural norms which is present in the accounts. For example Jean, 60, sees herself as a 'proper' butch and expresses alternate disapproval and bewilderment at the fact that she sees what she interprets as butch-but~~ch~~ch relationships. Jay, a much younger butch, expresses similar sentiments. Commenting on a photo of two femmes together she says that if they were:

[...] dykes and I saw them out together I would immediately think 'butter on butter' - I have this saying, 'bread on bread' is 2 butches going out together so therefore 'butter on butter' is 2 femmes, which if you ask me is a complete waste as there aren't enough femmes to go round as it is, but I'm not a complete fascist about it so it's fair enough.



Similarly Maya had experience of being chastised for not doing femme properly. She recalled a conversation with a friend about the new femme partner of a butch mutual friend.

Maya: Her girlfriend is such a babe – and I was saying to her, she is so gorgeous and she was going ‘ You’re not supposed to find her attractive, she’s a femme and you’re a femme’ and I was saying ‘Oh for God’s sake, what the hell does that mean!

### **Butch and femme as gender identities**

Newton and Walton propose a specific terminology with which to discuss butch and femme. They suggest using the categories of sexual preference, erotic identity, erotic role and erotic act to analyse sexual interactions and enable description of, ‘...interaction, not physical activities’ (1984: 245-6). Sexual preference refers to the preference for a particular self-presentation. Erotic identity refers to self-presentation and how a lesbian symbolises desire. Erotic role, which refers to the manner in which she is sexually active, is distinct from this. Erotic act is a more specific concept so that ‘[...] while erotic roles describe processes and relation, erotic acts refer to content, such as body zones [...] or specific scenes’ (1984: 246).

The way in which contemporary accounts used ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ to refer simply to gender identities in a way that is distinct from, and may have a complex relationship to, sexual preference and erotic role is still missing from this conceptual outline. The terms butch and femme may be a way for women to identify others who inhabit similar gender spaces as they do, although there is significant variation within the categories.

If you put four self-identified femmes in a row, you may find it hard to determine what they are supposed to have in common. Watch your perplexity grow as your gaze jumps back and forth from one woman's red pumps to another's gym shoes, and from each individual woman to representations of ‘the’ femme (Weston 1993: 4).

Butch and femme are most commonly used in contemporary lesbian cultures as a shorthand way of describing lesbian gender styles. Helen's description is typical in its ambivalence. She draws on ideas about visual gender style but suggests that this is superficial and that butch-femme means something deeper than this, struggling with wanting to treat the identities with respect while steering clear of essentialist categories.

Helen: I think it's not something I've ever got into very seriously but at the same time it's something that's important to me [...] The first thing that comes into my mind is appearance and clothes, but that's the superficial side of it. Then I think it's also about... it's a sense of identity but it is really hard to pin down.

Her experience of the lesbian scene as a young femme is that while 'butch' and 'femme' are commonly used as descriptive terms and in a light-hearted way, '[...] if you then said you identified strongly with butch and femme roles then a lot of people are uncomfortable with that.'

In terms of gender identity, some of the women talked about the non-voluntary aspects of this, and the way that others can impose this. Jay, a butch, has been told that '[...] even when I was a baby in little suits not in any colour, people used to always think I was a boy.' This sense of gender as given or innate rather than chosen was far more common among butch and androgynous women and was linked to a personal history of gender ambiguity. For them, femininity was simply not an option. Similar descriptions of gender as given, fixed and involuntary were given by several of the younger participants, so that lesbian gender was seen as going beyond style to ways of thinking. Seni: 'I just know that there is a different way of thinking and a different way of being even though you don't necessarily have to look like a stereotypical butch or femme.' Several of the narratives, particularly from butch and androgynous women, linked bodily disposition and the involuntary nature of gender. Its constructed nature does not mean that it is experienced as any less real or optional.

Claire draws on different repertoires that could be seen as logically contradictory in trying to give a definition of the terms 'butch' and 'femme', revealing an

ideological dilemma.

Claire: [...] I suppose they're like masculine and feminine, from one extreme to the other and people are all sorts of things in between. But I think they're identifying as masculine or feminine but not as man or woman. They're terms that describe women, really, to me, I know they can mean other things but in terms of being a lesbian they're descriptions of women, and because you're butch doesn't necessarily mean you want to be a man. But if you're butch you identify more with things that are masculine.

Butch and femme are used as gender categories. Here a distinction is drawn between gender and the sexed body. There is use of a repertoire of choice, so that it is not necessary to identify as butch or femme. This is in contrast to traditional butch-femme scenes and communities where it was obligatory to identify as either one or the other.

Claire: They're also something you don't have to be. If you don't want to, they are a choice, in some ways. At the extremes I suppose people would say that's what they had to be to be happy, so yeah they're a role that you can choose and for some people it's good when you find one or the other.

The latter suggests an essentialist view of gender, that there is a 'true' gender underlying everything and for women like this it may be a relief to 'find' a gender home where they can be free to be themselves. Gender as performative and linked to practices is used again, while at the same time being linked to erotic choices:

Claire: I think they're used a lot to sort of describe people's sexual preferences, and dresses and stuff like that so they're used like that but I don't think it's that common that people identify with them, or would say that they identify with them. Activities or certain ways of looking are described as butch or femme, quite commonly, but whether people say 'I am butch, I am femme', is less common.

She uses more discursive resources when thinking about her own use of femme as an identity. On the one hand this is something which other people use about her more than she uses it herself, but she is happy to use it in a self-consciously playful way.

Claire: And then it's fun to play with, and I was never described as femme until I grew my hair. That was really amusing [...] it was quite nice because it was a bit like reclaiming something that I had before I was a lesbian, because

when I first came out it was like all shaved heads and purple track suits and stuff like that [...] So you cut your hair and wore trousers and didn't wear skirts ever again. I grew up in the East End and you had to get dressed up on a Saturday night to go out and I used to really enjoy that, and it wasn't something that you could really do in a way that I enjoyed at the time when I first came out, it just wasn't ok.

The playful, dressing up side of doing femininity is something she feels able to enjoy again. At the same time this also draws on a concept of authentic gender, something which was lost and can now be reclaimed.

Jay ultimately thinks butch and femme are gender identities. Keen to stress the fact that they can be fluid and provisional, influenced by one's sexual partner, she also brings in butch-femme as sexual identities. 'I think they're identities and they're influenced by your own idea of your gender identity, your own self and who you're attracted to and masculinity and femininity which comes into play as well...' and the fact that the attribution is often made regardless of one's own intentions. However for her it is mainly a question of gender.

Jay: I've always identified more with masculinity. I don't think I've ever identified with femininity [...] I used to go to my grandma's and tell everybody I was a boy for the whole six weeks of the holiday- I would pass as a boy [...] I wouldn't say that I can relate to femininity at all. Most femme lesbian's I've spoken to never had a problem with that. For butch dykes what usually characterises their past is some kind of conflict about that. Which isn't there for femmes.

Several femmes reported a tomboy past. However as Halberstam suggests, 'feminine' behaviour is so narrowly defined for young children that often simply being active as a girl attracts a 'tomboy' label. She distinguishes between butch and femme tomboyism, since the former frequently involves being read as a boy and has a gender ambiguity or inappropriateness at its heart (1998b: 61).

Liz uses butch and femme as both gender and sexual identities, drawing on an understanding of their historical meanings within lesbian subcultures.

Liz: I think butch and femme really implies a lesbian coupling that happens sometimes but not all the time on the gay scene, I think there are a lot of women that are more masculine that will identify as butch because I think until fairly recently butch was the only label that was available to them, and it goes

right back, butch and femme relationships have been happening for decades, for lots of reasons, people take on those roles.

Here butch and femme are used together and apart, to signify gender identities and sexual identities. This again draws attention to the lack of language for female masculinity, so that butch is used as a default category.

There is a clearly a generational issue in understandings of butch and femme. I spoke to younger women who identified as butch and femme, but many of those under 25 refer to the fact that they were terms most often heard used by older women, and some are ambivalent about using the terms about themselves, seeing them as having little relevance to them, and being outdated. There is less awareness of the debates that have surrounded these issues within Anglo and American lesbian culture and communities over the last two decades. Even where they are used there is sometimes little understanding of the terms butch and femme as anything more than superficial styles.

Kate: I know a lot of lesbians use the terms but we're all gay it doesn't matter. Butch is short hair; femme is long hair basically.

This may be something that changes as a their knowledge of lesbian culture and range of contacts grows. Lacking a context, there was bewilderment at butch styles. Without knowledge of feminist debates about beauty practices and knowledge of the history of butch and femme or the 'sex wars', femme and particularly butch styles and identities made little sense and so were attributed to underlying gender. Butch styles were understood as part of a lack of effort to look good, a deliberate and puzzling neglect of pride in one's appearance. As Smyth observes the personal ads increasingly are full of 'feminine' and 'straight-acting' women seeking the same, and 'no butches need apply' (1998: 83). Several of the older participants picked up on this too and perceived it as part of the rise of the apolitical 'lipstick lesbian'. Women who identify as butch and femme struggle with those who consider the terms irrelevant and outdated, since they clearly are very relevant and deeply significant to them. They see this as a lack of understanding among younger lesbians and one which threatens the viability of the two subject positions, producing a lack of distinction and gender difference in

mainstream lesbian communities.

### **Femmes and gender fluidity**

I have argued that a key element in femme gender discourse was an emphasis on gender fluidity and choice, and this contributes to the repertoires of femme strength and consciousness outlined in the next chapter. Femme accounts are required to do a particular type of discursive work in lesbian subcultures which often interpret their femininity as gender conformity. Many femmes and feminine lesbians commented having felt pressure to adopt the androgynous look that dominates mainstream lesbian culture, so that a common pattern was to adopt that style on coming out and then identify as femme and adopt a femme gender style later. A common problem for femmes is their lack of visibility as lesbians.

Emma: I was just trying to do lesbian, but lesbian was very kind of identified with masculinity, with butch styles, not masculinity exactly but butch styles, certainly in the 1980s when I came out if you wanted to look like a dyke you didn't grow your hair and put a frock on- well you still don't. [...] if you wanted to be taken seriously then you didn't flounce about in lipstick and dangly earrings. And to a certain extent you probably still don't, especially in some parts of the country.

In Chapter 7 I outline the way in which femme accounts attempted to distinguish visually between heterosexual and femme femininity.

### **Butch authenticity**

It is possible to identify a femme repertoire of consciousness and choice, positioning femmes as knowing and subversive. There is no equivalent for butches with regard to gender identity. The feminist critique of beauty discourses has privileged an androgynous style and contributed to a suspicion and misunderstanding of femme and feminine lesbians. This provides also a discursive resource for women who refuse to perform normative femininity. The reluctance to use essentialist concepts with regard to sexual identity, and to qualify their use and combine them with an emphasis on choice and agency was in marked contrast to the use of essentialist repertoires with regard to lesbian masculinity. Butches tend to use repertoires of authenticity with regard to their gender identities, seeing

these as relatively fixed and not subject to conscious choice.

Jo: I feel easier walking around like this than I do wearing a skirt, it's just how I feel comfortable. I always get called transvestite in a skirt. I've always felt uncomfortable in skirts.

Personal histories of gender ambiguity and non-conformity which position butches outside 'proper' gender produce strong and defensive identity narratives.

Helen: I think being a femme has an awareness to it that just being feminine doesn't. And being butch, well I mean, being butch sets you more obviously apart. I think it might not be a choice. I mean I talk to people, butches I know who identify strongly as butch, say I don't necessarily choose to be butch, I am butch. But then it also might be something cultivated, it's complicated.

Jo's masculine gendered presentation is experienced as a core, unchanging part of her identity, and possibly more fixed than her sexual identity. 'I think I'd look like this anyway. It's more part of me than my sexuality is. Or about equal.'

Gabby used a logic of inversion to position her sexual preference and erotic identity, but added that when she identified as a heterosexual adult she was not attracted to feminine men.

Gabby: I think I'm very butch, because I'm just a boy and I go out with girls [...] I've always been butch and identified as butch- I've always been attracted to femme women as well. Exclusively. [...] I like my men to be men and my girls to be girls- where that leaves me I don't know!

Some of the butch women have had heterosexual relationships and so the link between their sexuality and gender is not clearly experienced. It was possible for the masculinity to be constant rather than the lesbianism. There was a tendency though to retrospectively read one's own masculinity as an indication of one's sexuality. Lesbian culture and communities are much more accepting of female masculinity as a whole, but as several women pointed out, not all masculine women are lesbians. However it was generally agreed that heterosexual cultures are less accepting of female masculinity.

Luisa: I think that I would look like this anyway, even when I was [heterosexual], I lived with a bloke for about a year, 18 months when I was about 21. I knew I was a lesbian. He used to go 'couldn't you wear a skirt?'

and I'd be like, 'fuck off!'

The butch discomfort with femininity differed from femme discomfort with masculinity. For instance Jay described femininity as unthinkable, even for the sake of a job.

Jay: Summers I've needed to get jobs and it's really difficult because it's not even a case of am I willing to compromise, which I'm not. I would not entertain the idea of wearing a skirt for a job, I just couldn't do it, perhaps not even women's trousers [...]

This may be related to the fact that in the wider heteronormative culture, women have more freedom over gendered style, even as women's appearance is tightly policed and central to the performance of normative femininity. There is a degree of masculinity which is an acceptable part of western feminine fashion, although is usually softened as it can risk being read as butch or male. Halberstam's (1998a) work on drag kings is interesting because it highlights the understated nature of masculinity, which is associated with the 'natural' and 'casual', in contrast with the artifice of femininity. Femininity too is seen as natural for women but there is conversely recognition of the work that goes into the production of femininity which is a mainstay of heteronormative humour. When men dress as women the juxtaposition produces humour, whereas when women adopt a masculine style it is widely acceptable, up to a point and if appropriately softened. Cultural and material inequalities between men and women mean that for a woman this is dressing above rather than beneath her status (Kennedy and Davis 1993). Drag kings typically perform versions of hypermasculinity, often non-white and associated with specific uniforms or celebrity, as anything less than this does not work as humour and is not necessarily recognisable as masculine drag.

While butch and androgynous describe having experienced pressure when they were younger to look more appropriately feminine, they also describe enduring ridicule when attempting to do this.

Liz: I think I kind of was [a tomboy] and then people label you it don't they? You start it and then they put the label on you and fall about laughing if you do



wear a skirt. And we don't all grow out of it. I kept it in a way, and there's a sense I'm like what I am now because I have always been like that.

Joan describes always having felt as though she was not doing femininity properly as a child, which draws upon a repertoire of performance, but at the same time this is contrasted with a true gender which is not feminine.

Joan: When I was a kid it was always jeans and stuff like that. Any pictures of me when I was a kid and that, if I had a skirt on I looked really miserable... I'm just me.

### **Age**

One factor that can produce changes in butch identities is age and the increased confidence this brings. Joan, who used to be married, has become more butch as her confidence in her own sexual identity has increased. She describes having become more butch even in the time since she came out, and puts this down to the scene and support enabling her the safe space to express herself more fully and accept herself. So although the emphasis is on change an essentialist sense of self as a core to be true to and which is gradually revealed underpin the account. 'Because it's myself, I've just come more out of myself, accepted what I am, and other people have had to accept it as well, and then if they don't it's not my fault.' She talks about resisting pressure from family and friends to 'look more feminine' and her determination to be herself rather than 'being what other people want me to be'.

Nancy describes having always felt quite masculine but in the rural area where she was a young adult in the early 70s styles were very androgynous. '... men and women just looked exactly the same. We all had long hair and all wore jeans and afghans, tie dyed stuff, and the women didn't wear make-up much, and I was comfortable with that...' Having returned to the area after university, fashions had changed and she felt increasingly under pressure to look more feminine.

Nancy: When I was at work I used to dress as a lady. But that was my problem. I didn't feel any more ladylike. Or female or whatever. I just had to do it. There were rules and you couldn't wear trousers. I wore make up [...] I didn't feel all right about doing it and I had a bad time, I would say it was from

when I was about 23 to when I was about 28, 29. And I should have really been being me. And letting loose.

She describes always having been aware of an underlying masculinity but because of various outside pressures her gender presentation has changed over time. More established now as part of a small town lesbian community, she feels more able to adopt more masculine styles of self-presentation.

### **Butch and femme as sexual identities**

Historically within lesbian communities butch and femme have been used to denote an erotic dynamic in which sexual preference, erotic identity, erotic role and erotic act take on a particular configuration. These elements may not take the same shape in contemporary accounts, but the majority of the lesbians who claim butch and femme identities do so to convey a relationship between sexual preference and erotic role. This relationship may not be fixed however. For example Claire uses femme to describe her gender identity there is clearly a sexual element to it as she has always been attracted to butch women. However the woman she was seeing at the time of the interview was also femme.

For Beth while butch and femme are convenient shorthand for lesbian gender there is deeper meaning that goes beyond style.

Beth: I am sexually attracted to butches. Fuck knows where that comes from but to some extent it's part of what positions you as femme. It's not sexually relevant to me to position myself in a cross-gender way, to be masculine [...] I don't have any understanding of the 'you're not a proper lesbian because you look like this', I don't know how that disapproval works.

This insistence on the non-voluntary, authentic, fixed and specifically lesbian nature of their desire was central to femme identity narratives. Beth's reference to the suspicion of femmes as not 'proper' lesbians points to the way in which femme narratives are required to do this defensive work. While even those butches who had little or no heterosexual experience were able to freely use repertoires of fluidity and choice with regard to their sexuality, femmes were

insistent on the consistency of their desires. The 'heterosexual imaginary' attempts to recuperate butch/femme desire into its own terms, claiming femme desire for the masculine as heterosexual. This makes it necessary for femmes to insist on the distinction between biological sex and gender, and that they are attracted to a particular female masculinity. At the same time within lesbian cultures there is a necessity for femme accounts to insist upon their attraction to masculinity rather than all women, again distinguishing sex and gender. Beth is typical. 'Sexually attracted to it's always butch. Other women may look really good but it doesn't give me that charge of this is really sexy. Within varying scales of butch. Doesn't have to be 10 but it has to be there.'

Even when Maria is describing a shift in the gender of the women she finds attractive, she still readily expresses discomfort at the thought of being attracted to feminine women.

Maria: I suppose from the outside if you looked at the girlfriends I've picked they have been more butch as I've gone along.

*Are you ever attracted to feminine women?*

No. a femme friend recently made a pass at me and I was quite startled and just thought- no way! [laughs]

Overall erotic roles and acts were used less frequently in defining butch/femme than sexual preference, erotic and gender identity. 'Butch' and 'femme' may sometimes still imply a sexual preference for the 'opposite' lesbian gender, but no longer signify erotic responsibility in terms of erotic roles and acts in the same way that the terms have done historically. Nestle describes butch women as '...tabooed women who were willing to identify their passion for other women by wearing clothes that symbolized the taking of responsibility. Part of this responsibility was sexual expertise' (1987:89-90). Kennedy and Davis (1993) argue that in butch/femme communities the butch erotic role carried with it the expectation that she would be the active and dominant partner in sexual interaction. At the same time the butch/femme sexual dynamic was distinguished from heterosexual roles, because while the femme role involved a relinquishing of

erotic responsibility to the butch, the focus of the exchange was the sexual pleasure of the femme. The stone butch identity epitomised this dynamic. Kraus (1996) points to the 'desire' work necessary to align desire and identity in this way even in 1940s and 50s American communities. While they are still relevant for some of the participants, lesbian subcultures are no longer organised strictly along these lines. Where the terms butch and femme are used as indicators of sexual preference and erotic identity this is often simply to indicate a gender preference. The feminist emphasis on reciprocity and equality structures even those accounts that position themselves in opposition to this and draw upon SM discourses. There is a sense in which butch and femme subject positions have a specific sexual element and each offer female sexual agency.

Knowledge of the historical subcultural meanings of butch and femme may be drawn upon in a playful way, either with irony or in sexual interaction. Gabby immediately linked her identity as lesbian with being butch and brought in the issue of sexual practices. There was a clear emphasis on role-play and the awareness of playing with gender but the safety and security which enables this ultimately rests on biological sex. Gabby's gender is clearly masculine but the fact that she is a woman and has been through the process of being brought up as a woman is a crucial part of her masculinity and distinguishes her from biological men. This is a specifically butch lesbian subjectivity.

Gabby: If you're a butch you can get the kind of sex with femmy women that straight men can't get, because femme women are more likely to do un-pc [politically correct] things with a butch than straight women are with a guy. I've spoken to straight guys and they'll go 'my girlfriend won't wear stockings and suspenders-she thinks it's really naff' but I think we get away with more because we're playing with gender roles. [...] I hate to say it and I don't like those words but it's in a post-modern ironic way. You're both aware of what's happening- it's not some evil power-trip where someone's downtrodden and is doing something they don't want to do, and they're doing it because they're in a position of subordination or financial or emotional or whatever, it's something that you're both well aware of and you're playing with. [...] But they feel safer doing it with a butch because a guy isn't going through all those thought processes and isn't a woman.

Helen clearly relates her femme identity to her sexuality. While she plays with

masculine signifiers she argues that she does not feel butch.

Helen: And certainly as far as my sexuality is concerned, because it very much relates to my sexuality, there's no butchness there. I don't play butch in the bedroom.

She is clear that she is not exclusively attracted to butches, and that her sexuality is linked to issues of power, but nevertheless butch imagery is interwoven with this and is part of this, as it is associated with erotic competence and control. In accounts like this the meaning of butch is expanded.

Helen: The woman I'm seeing at the moment, she's like long hair, make-up, bunches, but she is like oomph, I call her 100% butch in stiletto heels and eye shadow! She is just total, like, power. And that's also getting into what do you mean by butch/femme. But then there's another woman who I totally fancy who is butch, big shoulders, big muscles, cap, short hair, shaved head, I just love that- I go for all types of women. It's not about superficial appearance, it's about a sense of confidence, competence, power, that kind of thing.

### **Relationship between butch and femme**

An important component of claiming a butch or femme identity for oneself, rather than using the terms as adjectives for gendered styles, has been an understanding and appreciation of the other. If butch/femme is visualised as a continuum, the women closest to each end of the scale showed the most respect and understanding for those at the opposite end. Those closest to the centre ground of lesbian androgyny had least awareness of the historical role of butch and femme in lesbian communities, were less understanding of women who identified in that way and more likely to associate butch/femme with heterosexuality. There is a sense in which historically the roles have gone together and are based upon a mutual appreciation and understanding of the other. Several butches spoke of femmes expressing relief at finding someone who appreciated them dressing up and wearing make-up. Gabby describes this as ' [...] a real put down of femininity. Femininity's beautiful, I can't do it myself and I'm a woman, so I'm fucked up, but I can appreciate it in women who can do it.' She talks about finding the trappings of femininity very attractive.

Gabby: I just find femininity and a woman who can do femininity and do it

convincingly and be comfortable and happy with it- I find that really attractive. [...] It's just femininity- the way they talk to you and hold their cigarette and the way they respond to you and you get some femmes and they really know how to be with a butch- how to bat their eyelashes and all them little things and it's a game but it's really nice, but I think as long as you realise it is a game to a certain extent and that this person is an equal and they deserve respect, then you're all right.

Historically the relationship between butch and femme was one of respect for and desire for the other. The older participants clearly use the terms in this way.

Where the categories of femme and feminine overlap in contemporary lesbian subcultures there is evidence of antipathy towards butch women. Several participants reported having noticed this tendency in personal ads. As 'femme' edges closer in meaning to feminine lesbian the specific relationship to lesbian masculinity may be lost.

Helen makes the point that while feminine women may be disparaging towards masculine women, part of doing femme is the appreciation of butches.

Helen: I think maybe a lot of feminine girls would be very derogatory about masculine women whereas a femme probably wouldn't, she'd probably adore masculine women. Femme is a more tolerant position, it's more aware [...]

Several of the women highlight attitude towards butches as key. These women stress the relationship of butch to femme as identities and while they would not go as far as making the terms co-dependent or arguing for a version of 'real' or 'proper' butch-femme, for them the terms have both an historical relationship to one another as well as an ongoing relevance to one another. While often in personal ads feminine lesbians seek each other out, these women all point out the fact that femmes appreciate female masculinity (and vice versa) even if it is not what they are exclusively drawn to, and are certainly not hostile to butch women.

### **Independent identities**

A key distinction between 'old' and 'new' butch and femme is that they are understood as identities that stand alone.

Helen: I like all types of women. I do like butch women, but I also like femme

women. Basically what I go for in a woman is a sense of power.'... 'So I'm not exclusively into butches, and that's another one of my things. I don't think being a femme means you have to go with a butch, and I don't believe that you need butch and femme to complete the equation. They can stand separate, so you can have femmes who go for femmes.

Michelle: The first 3 years of discovering my femme self I wasn't seeing anybody. And I wasn't really looking either. I was very much stand-alone. And I have had things with femmes as well.

Since femmes have been regarded as not 'proper' lesbians within lesbian as well as hegemonic culture, femmes see this recognition of independence as a step forward and part of the repertoire of femme strength which will be examined in the next chapter.

Jay, who identifies as butch feels her masculinity to be interactional as well as a core identification. This means that being with another butch would undermine her masculinity. She talks about an incident with a male friend who was being chivalrous towards her: '... it didn't fit with me, but because he was being so nice I found myself going along with it but it didn't feel like me, I didn't feel like I was being myself.' Her sense of her identity as butch is played out in relation to a femme. At the same time she acknowledges that: 'A lot of it is in interactions but perhaps it's easier for me to have that identity without a partner than it is for a femme to have that identity without a partner. I do get dyke recognition and stuff.' She sees butch and femme as relational terms; both as an erotic coupling and as a gender binary in which each term depends on the other. The women she is attracted to are:

Jay: Definitely feminine women. Not ever butch-ish women because it would just undermine me if I was going out with someone who was as butch or butcher than me, it would undermine my masculinity, it would be like 'I'll put the shelves up- no I'll do it!' it would just get really complicated. I wouldn't like it, it would compromise my position and how I see my role. If they acted butcher than me then I'd have to act femmier than them and I wouldn't really like that.

Her masculinity, while deeply felt, seems strangely fragile in her own accounts, and readily threatened by the masculine self-presentation of other women.

Similarly Maria refers to the relational aspect of butch and femme, joking that, '[...] my girlfriends always end up saying "Well I'm a lot more butch than I thought I was!"'

Despite the frequent emphasis on the independent and stand-alone nature of butch and femme identities, the women do sometimes draw upon a logic of inversion which reflects common-sense ideas about opposites attracting. Maria, a femme, talks about becoming more confident in exploring this, as '[...] there's a chemistry about that combination that is interesting.' Helen comments about the clothing and style in one of the photos she initially finds attractive, but then notices that she has an item of clothing very similar to what is being worn in the picture, so that while she likes the look she would possibly not be attracted by it. '[...] if it's too close to what I go for then I really wouldn't go for it. So maybe that's a little bit too close to what I'd wear. Not quite enough distinction.'

Butch/femme reinstates gendered difference within lesbianism. A common theme in the repertoires of butch and femme lesbians is the lack of gendered distinction between androgynous lesbians. Often referred to as 'in-betweenies', they are often referred to as quite boring and unimaginative in their gendered styles. Gabby talks disparagingly about androgynous lesbians as, '[...] identikit dykes who look like each other and dress like each other', and is critical of the lack of gender differentiation within mainstream lesbian culture.

Many of the women assert that there are butch-femme elements in many lesbian relationships even though often they are unacknowledged and disavowed because of the connotations of power imbalances.

## **Conclusion**

Butch and femme identity accounts draw upon repertoires of authenticity and choice in distinctive ways according to their positioning with regard to hegemonic and subcultural discourses.



Historically butch/femme has been a specific erotic coupling. Contemporary British lesbian subcultures are not organised around a butch/femme dynamic in this way, and the two are increasingly understood as independent categories, although for butch and femme lesbians these identities are characterised by a respect for the 'opposite'. While their historical and symbolic relationship may be acknowledged, many permutations of desire are recognised. Butch/femme still relates to desire, sexual practices and erotic responsibility for some women. There are multiple erotic configurations. The butch/femme stereotype is of a masculine-feminine coupling and it is the interdependent nature of this coupling that has been criticised and misunderstood by feminist critiques and which enables its recuperation as a reiteration of heteronormative hegemony.

## **Chapter 6: Lesbian Genders or Heterosexual Imitations**

It's hard- we're all lesbians but this issue of how to be a lesbian is very difficult. You can't just easily assume that you just do it ... (Maria)

### **Introduction**

Lesbian masculinities and femininities are frequently read as and reduced to butch/femme, sometimes understood as derivative of heterosexuality even within mainstream lesbian culture and particular versions of lesbian feminism. As I argued in Chapter 1, the work of queer theorists on performativity, parody and camp enables this relationship of 'original' and 'copy' to be reconceptualised. My aim in this chapter is to bring these often abstract discussions into an analysis of the ways in which lesbian genders are articulated and lived in everyday life. On one level I am interested in the way in which the women themselves understand the relationship between butch and femme and heterosexuality, as this type of 'street theorising' is rarely examined. I also examine the repertoires that have been developed in order to distinguish butch/femme from heterosexuality. These are often combined within a single account. While I see this identity work as a necessary task in a heteronormative culture in order to present an identity account that will be viewed positively rather than seen as a 'mere' copy, it is at the same time constitutive of specific lesbian gender identities. I consider the status of butch and femme as distinctive lesbian genders and examine the key role played by a 'repertoire of performance' in these accounts. In particular two specifically lesbian butch and femme subject positions are outlined and related to the construction and performance of lesbian genders in everyday life.

### **Imitation and/or lesbian gender?**

Historical work on butch and femme identities and lesbian communities in the US prior to the emergence of the gay liberation and women's movements has

emphasised that the adoption of butch and femme styles was a way of enabling lesbian visibility (Kennedy and Davis 1993, Nestle 1987, Faderman 1991) While the rigidity of gender roles and the strength of post-war conservative discourses reinforced discourses of inversion within lesbian communities and contributed to the paucity of gendered styles, these writers focus on the way that heterosexual imagery was strategically redeployed in order to make the sexual nature of lesbian relationships clear and visible to other lesbians and to the world at large.

The critique of heterosexuality articulated by the women's and gay liberation movements obscured this aspect of butch/femme, focussing on the limiting nature of 'role-play' and criticising it for being imitative of heterosexual relationships which were identified as a key site of patriarchal power. The lesbian identity accounts analysed often similarly associated heterosexuality with conformity, and only discussed its relationship to butch/femme in a heavily qualified way. Since butch/femme is so readily seen as imitative and inauthentic in the wider culture this is unsurprising. For butch and femme identity accounts to be viewed positively in the context of hegemonic and subcultural interpretations, they need to contest their positioning as derivative of and inferior to heterosexuality. Mills and White (1997) identify radicalism as a 'lesbian prototype' in identity accounts, linking this to the potential for subversion in the lesbian refusal of 'proper' (heterosexual) femininity, so that accounts which emphasise radicalism are viewed more favourably in lesbian subcultures than those which emphasise conformity. The only accounts that saw butch/femme as based on heterosexuality and which did not assert its independence and specificity came from those women who came out before the 1970s and second-wave feminism.

Jean and Sheila are an older lesbian couple who have been together since the 1960s. They explicitly distanced themselves from radical politics and were heavily involved in the working class bar scene in Manchester in the 1960s, which was clearly organised along butch/femme lines. They see their relationship as 'proper' butch/femme and based on the heterosexual model, yet even here there is an implicit critique of heterosexuality for failing to live up to its own ideals. The

stress is on mutual support and sensitivity in the relationship even though for them this is structured along conventionally gendered lines. Similar themes characterised a repertoire of butch as a 'better' masculinity which was found in many of the accounts, and which will be outlined later in the chapter. Rather than draw upon the feminist critiques of heterosexuality and masculinity, the emphasis is on the ways in which the butch and femme versions of these are better than the heterosexual ones. Their accounts bring out the similarity between butch/femme and heterosexual relationships but position butch/femme as better for women, since as women they understand each other. Both women draw on their experience of friendships and working relationships with heterosexual women to emphasise the similarities in the relationships while asserting that their friends are often jealous of the 'set-up' they have.

### **Butch/femme as authentic lesbian identities**

In direct contrast a significant number of women strongly disputed the assertion that butch and femme is imitative of heterosexuality and wanted to emphasise their status as authentic and independent lesbian identities. One of the younger butches argued that for femmes the issue of choice distinguishes them.

Jay: I don't think it apes heterosexual roles, at all because femme women in butch-femme roles, they act the way they do because they want to, not because society expects them to or because they think they should or because it's the dominant image of what they should do- they actively choose to do this.

Helen's account explicitly drew upon queer critiques by emphasising the performative status of gender and distinguishing between sex, gender and sexuality. At the same time she describes butch/femme as specific and authentic lesbian identities.

Helen: I don't think it's an imitation at all. I can see how on the surface level people think 'oh, she looks like a man and she looks like a woman', but I mean that's buying into gender notions that I don't really adhere to, so as far as I'm concerned butch femme is a very specific lesbian sexuality. It is about women and it is nothing to do with men. It's about masculinity and about femininity, but I don't see why men should be into that equation. I think that the only thing is that most people think that masculinity equals a man, and femininity equals

a woman, and I don't see why that has to be the case at all, and I think butch masculinity as well has got its own strengths, it's not just looking at men and copying them - there's something more specific about butch and femme I think. And of course sometimes it does emulate your average guy; it would do because your average guy is going to be masculine. [...] There's a relationship on a surface level but I don't think it's an emulation at all.

In the accounts of the younger lesbians it is clear how lesbian identities are constructed through interaction with a heteronormative culture that sees them as imitative and insignificant. Paula for example is a young working class androgynous lesbian, still at college and living with her family in a small town in the north-west. While she is generally 'out', her social circle is predominantly heterosexual and she is the only known lesbian acquaintance for most of these people. She is aware of the responsibility this involves in challenging their assumptions, and asserting the autonomy of butch/femme desire is part of this process.

Paula: It's not a copy... If a femme girl's fancying a butch girl, they're not looking for a man, they're not thinking 'oh yeah she's like a man', they're not looking for something that's going to replace the man, in the man's sort of image and everything, otherwise they wouldn't be a lesbian, would they?

This charge of imitation was seen as being imposed from outside and based on reductive misconceptions and homophobia, even by women who elsewhere saw butch/femme and heterosexuality as linked in a qualified way. Partly this was seen as being simply down to ignorance. As Seni put this, 'People that make these homophobic comments just don't have any idea at all. They can only judge from what they see in terms of how we dress.' Most of the women had experienced these charges of imitation as clearly and consciously homophobic or recuperative, and were readily able to challenge these arguments and offer alternative accounts.

Maria: That's just what heterosexual people say because they think that heterosexual defines the norm- in what sense can it be an inferior copy? It's just a different way of acting out who you are and your sexuality, but very often heterosexual people want to diffuse and recuperate because it's quite unsettling for men- the notion of women who are sexually self-sufficient- that is so frightening. [...]

Jan: I think it's a very effective term for them to explain us. Explain our

relationships. And I think it can be used in a derogatory way as well. Not so much about femmes, because my impression is that they think of femmes as a bit wayward, you know, and you could easily be pulled back into the straight world, but butches are butches because they couldn't get a good man.

### **Qualified accounts**

The relationship between heterosexuality and butch/femme was most frequently acknowledged in qualified ways, with varying degrees of reflexivity. One of these allowed that there has been an historical relationship and that the lack of alternative ways for two women to be together facilitated and promoted butch/femme relationships. 'Old' and 'new' butch/femme were distinguished with the latter portrayed as more playful and optional.

Claire: It would be stupid to say no they're not [related], because they are by history and stuff like that, but I don't think they have to be. I don't think it's necessarily part of that. I think as lesbians it should be something that we take out of that rather than referring back to it being aping heterosexuality. At certain times it was about aping heterosexuality because that's how you had to survive. That was a way of living as a lesbian, was to be one or the other. So they are and they're not.

One of the androgynous women distanced contemporary lesbian identities from this 'unenlightened' past. This is closer to the attitude that butch and femme lesbians commonly encounter in mainstream lesbian subcultures and was expressed by some of the androgynous masculine women. These women resist identification as butch since this term is often attributed in a hostile and injurious way to women who refuse normative femininity. Their identity narratives were more likely to be based on a defence of their individuality, sometimes drawing on feminist critiques of conventional beauty practices. They showed little evidence of engagement with the debates around butch/femme, so that the term 'butch' was seen as part of a reductive heteronormative discourse on lesbianism from which to distance oneself.

Gabby, a working class butch talked about attitudes she had encountered from some feminists and other lesbians. 'For a start they're crediting us with having no brain whatsoever- that's a thing which has always been thrown at butch/femme,

it's only thick working-class people who do that.' More commonly participants reflected that it is difficult to escape heterosexual imagery and ideology because it has been surrounding us and shaping our desires since we were children, so that lesbian subcultures are bound to reflect this.

Maria: It would be nice to say that they're completely independent but it would be a lie wouldn't it. I know people try to maintain that it's completely a lesbian thing but where do we get our models from? What does it mean to be masculine or feminine? There are no free floating models about, there's just how it's acted around us and that's why we've got such debased ideas really of what it means to be masculine and feminine. They're out there in an extremely sexist and heterosexual community. I don't see where else they could have come from really.

Seni argues that lesbians are more likely to use and draw on heterosexual imagery when they first come out. In the construction and establishment of a lesbian identity, butch and androgynous styles are more likely to be adopted because they are more visible and recognisable, and may be perceived as the correct way to 'do lesbian'. In a culture which conflates lesbianism with butch/femme, reincorporating lesbian desire into a 'heterosexual imaginary', this can shape the expectations of young and inexperienced lesbians.

Seni: I think it goes back to when I came out and you kind of grab onto what a lesbian looks like or how a lesbian behaves and then once you get comfortable in your sexuality, you just go for what you feel comfortable with most, that's how I see lesbian relationships and gay relationships, at the beginning very kind of butch-femme, and then you get this happy medium, it wouldn't be appropriate to call it a butch-femme relationship, or describe those roles as that's the man's role and that's the woman's role- and also even in straight relationships the roles that are played by men and women are ever merging and ever, less of a defined boundary so of course that affects how we live our lives.

Nancy, an older masculine/androgynous lesbian similarly argues that over time and with the support of a community it becomes easier to 'be yourself' rather than to feel obliged to fit butch/femme stereotypes.

Nancy: And I also think that the more comfortable people are with their sexuality the less they want to portray- the easier they find it to be themselves. And that their expression of themselves is physically more about who they are rather than I'm making a statement that I'm gay or straight or a little proper lady. I find that I meet people who are happy with who they are and they just

seem to buck the stereotype.

The most common argument held that butch and femme as identities draw on normative gender but are positioned at a critical distance from this. There was more stress on the interplay between conscious and unconscious aspects of this. There was a clear distinction between sex and gender in many of these accounts so that masculinity was not seen as the property of men but was open to lesbian interpretation and performance. The particular sexual dynamic between masculinity and femininity was similarly disaggregated from heterosexuality and recast as positions rather than identities.

Gabby: It's not a poor imitation. If you're both thinking people it's an ironic playful twist on heterosexuality. I think it is related to heterosexuality, you take bits- well you take quite a lot, I mean who has the butch got to model herself on but all the films she's ever seen since she was a little girl that had sexy blokes in, and femmes have just got normality to model themselves on, whatever that is, they don't have to step outside at all do they really.

Emma: [...] we're all kind of playing the same game but I don't think straight people have got the monopoly on it, I don't think they own that. I heard one of the interviewees in a film that I saw at the festival last week said 'Straight people don't own the masculine-feminine relationship model any more than men own masculinity' which I thought was a very neat way of packaging it.

Several women who explicitly used a language of performance took up this emphasis on reflexive and ironic play and parody. These women were in their 20s and 30s and had contact with 'queer' subcultures. The accounts clearly showed a high level of reflexivity, so that while the power of hegemonic discourses was acknowledged this consciousness of their operation created opportunities for their subversion. Again different repertoires structured the accounts, so that the language of performance sat alongside the concept of 'innate' characteristics.

Beth: I think the relationship is partly to do with playing with the heterosexual structures. I don't see how there can not be a relationship, you all live in the same world, you are using these two styles or categories in some way [...] but I don't think it's a relationship of copying, I think it's more to do with playing with it, subverting it quite a lot I suppose. I don't think butch/femme is all about style and presentation, I think it is innate at some level as well but as a presentational style then yes, it's to do with playing with and subverting heterosexual ideas. With a lot more freedom than you would have in a



heterosexual setting, to subvert. What the relationship is on a more innate level, I don't know.

### **Fluidity**

The unmarked and hegemonic status of heterosexuality is reflected in the lack of discourse around specific types of heterosexual relationship or categories of heterosexual sexual practice (Mills and White, 1997). This is in contrast to the volume of lesbian discourse on these issues, which is often oppositional and/or celebratory and constitutive of lesbian identities. In particular Mills and White observe the ready discussion of issues of dominance and passivity, concluding that this is affirmative and is important in distinguishing lesbian sexual practices from apparently similar but tabooed heterosexual practices such as SM. Many of their lesbian participants stressed the situated and provisional nature of butch and femme labels, which rather than signifying types of lesbian or sexual practice can refer to flexible roles. This is a point that was taken up by several of the participants, particularly in distinguishing between butch/femme and heterosexuality. Luisa contrasted butch and femme to gender within a heterosexual framework, arguing of the former that: 'I don't think they're really fixed things, I think they are quite distinct things but quite fluid in themselves.'

Gill, a bisexual femme, distinguished between the fluid way that lesbians understand butch and femme and the role of gender within heterosexuality, suggesting that this contributes to different interpretations.

Gill: I have heard people say that when they came out to their parents, one of the things they seemed very interested in was – and I can't even think how parents might express this- but whether they were the active one or the passive one, whether they were the man or the woman- that says something about heterosexuality.

In terms of gender and erotic roles the emphasis is on the fluidity of lesbian gender. Jay argues that 'we can make it up as we go along- there's nothing telling us how we should do it' so that gender roles within butch/femme relationships are shifting and negotiable. She admits that some women do take butch/femme 'too

far' and reproduce the worst things about heterosexuality, but also adds that there is nothing inherently bad about the latter since as a way of relating to each other it need not imply fixity and inequality.

According to these accounts butch and femme can be seen as specifically lesbian genders. They are forms of masculinity and femininity, and as such inevitably share common features with their heterosexual equivalents. It is useful to see genders in terms of subject positions which are negotiated rather than as fixed properties of individuals.

### **Concepts of heterosexuality**

The ways in which butch and femme are defined in opposition to heterosexual masculinity and femininity in identity narratives can leave heterosexual hegemony untroubled, unproblematised and not historicized. Heterosexuality can take on a universal status even as it is criticised. Butch and androgynous lesbians, revealing a form of sexism within lesbianism that several femme participants had experienced often equated in particular, 'straight' femininity with weakness and conformity. Femmes accounts were resistant to equating femininity with conformity and weakness but in claiming 'femme' as a powerful, autonomous identity this still tended to be in contrast to a reified normative femininity which is attributed to heterosexual women in general. Where a relationship between butch/femme and heterosexuality was articulated this was generally in terms of aesthetics and imagery, while distinctions were made in terms of gender roles, consciousness and intention. Changing gender roles generally and the impact of feminist critiques have put heterosexual relationships under pressure and contributed to change (Pearce and Stacey, 1995:35) This was acknowledged by a smaller number of the participants, who stressed that there are positive features of heterosexuality that butch/femme relationships could incorporate, and that heterosexuality should not be seen as monolithic.

### **Repertoire of performance**

The emphasis on gender as practices and as positions which may or may not be

taken up regardless of the sex of the body is a key feature and runs throughout the accounts. It is particularly apparent in the distinction between butch/femme and heterosexuality. The participants show an awareness of the details of performing or 'doing' gender in general and in everyday life. This is similar to findings in the 'dramaturgical sociology' of Goffman (1959) and Garfinkel (1967). The accounts are littered with phrases such as 'game', 'role' and 'play', and distinctions between identities and practices are routine.

Butler (1993) clearly distinguishes between conscious and willed performance and 'performativity' which is constitutive of rather than directed by the subject. While I am arguing that this repertoire of performance has reflexive and conscious elements, it can be distinguished from a repertoire of choice. Gender is expressed as something that you 'do', and therefore can do differently, and as playful, ironic, creative and knowing, in opposition to the compulsory and unconscious nature of the performance of femininity that is attributed to heterosexual women.

Claire: I see it quite as fun, I enjoy it. It's a game really at the end of the day- they're not prescriptive, so it doesn't mean that you can't lift heavy things if you're a femme, or do the washing up. You can choose not to, but that's a different matter altogether.

The construction of butch and femme as lesbian gender identities is in part a conscious and self-aware process, as expressed in repertoires of choice and performance. This is in contrast to accounts which see them as merely imitative and which stress the determining role of patriarchal ideologies. At the same time, as the women are clearly aware themselves, their gender and sexual identities and desires are constructed through an interaction with heteronormative culture and society over which they have limited control or agency. This is productive of particular dispositions which are experienced as limiting and which reinforce the repertoire of authenticity outlined in chapter 4. There is a sense of not being able to accomplish normative femininity that underlies butch accounts stressing the authentic and involuntary nature of their masculinity.

The concept of performance goes beyond the issue of conscious choice in the accomplishment and construction of identities. Gender and sexuality are also

expressed as situated, provisional, involuntary and imposed; as a performance which may not be chosen. I will be looking in more detail at this issue of butch and femme as situational and attributed by others in Chapter 8, but at this point it is worth noting that it is clearly not enough to think only in terms of choice and self-attribution of sexual and gender identities. Gender performance can be seen as an ongoing negotiation of discourses, which in everyday life involves gendered signifiers and attributions of gender. There is also a sense in which identity narratives produce 'truths' about the self in a Foucauldian sense and in terms of constructing those identities in a material sense through dispositions and establishing them as social facts.

### **Identity and performance**

Butch and femme are recognised within lesbian subcultures as particular practices and images taken from heterosexual iconography within popular culture and cited within a lesbian context. The most recognisable of these are the classic white butch images taken from 50s movie stars such as Brando and Dean. This is also about striking a pose: the stance, the walk, the smoking of the cigarette, the proffering of a light and so on. There are classic femme takes on femininity that are equally recognisable and again often based in the iconography of Hollywood. These practices and postures are recognised as performance and are both part of the construction of butch and femme identities and open to all to do and play with, regardless of lesbian gender.

While these images and practices are open to all regardless of identification, there are expectations within the subculture attached to identifying as either butch or femme and the use of those terms about oneself. Some of the participants gave a strong version of this account in which butch/femme subcultural standards were experienced as judgmental and as a policing or fixing down of identity. More generally, butch was described as a difficult subject position to take up.

Luisa: My friends laugh but I call myself butch [...] I'm obsessed about clothes and the bathroom and things like that; it's a standing joke. One of my friends goes out and buys me after-shave for the bathroom; she goes 'what are you

doing with this perfume in your bathroom?' [laughs]. Thinks I'm far too femme for my own good. I'm big into my kitchen, so in some ways quite a big homemaker, so those kind of things. And to a degree in bed, if I'm really honest.

The concept of the 'baby-butch' in lesbian subcultures in itself suggests the way in which butch is recognised as performed, requiring particular subcultural capital and competencies rather than simply expressing a pre-existing gender identification or sexual preference. It is an erotic identity or 'sexy persona'<sup>iii</sup> learnt from other butches. While the identity narratives of butch and androgynous/masculine women are characterised by a repertoire of authenticity when articulating gender identity, claiming a butch identity has implications with regard to desire and sexuality.

Only four of the women unequivocally described themselves as butch; for the majority there was ambivalence in their use of the term about themselves. Butch is a difficult subject position to inhabit for a number of reasons. Homophobic attitudes towards 'mannish' and butch women are widespread, and the internalisation of these attitudes among lesbians contributes to a degree of hostility and embarrassment in many lesbian cultures with regard to women who identify as butch. Many feminine and androgynous lesbians are very uncomfortable with the attribution of a butch label and actively distance themselves from this.

Maria: My current girlfriend is a 6'3" woman who works out 4 times a week and has done for 16 years and is very big and powerful and she always wears jeans and a T-shirt and big boots but she is *horrified* by the notion that she's butch- she doesn't like it. [...] But in terms of what the sexual chemistry is between us it's got a lot to do with I'm very femme and she's very butch [...]

While a butch/androgynous/boyish look is both the most visible lesbian image, and historically butch lesbians have been respected for their gender non-conformity, actually calling oneself 'butch' was often seen as anachronistic and slightly embarrassing, associated with role-play prior to its feminist critique. Even in large urban lesbian subcultures butch identities can be associated with a fixing down of gender rather than irony and fluidity. O'Sullivan and Ardill (1996)

observed the way that butch/femme became almost obligatory among fashionable London lesbians in the late 80s but was articulated in terms of style, performance and play. They are critical of this definition of butch and femme identities through 'trial by clothing, or haircuts, or make-up' as shallow and unable to consider their deeper aspects (1996: 91). Since butch gender is typically articulated through repertoires of authenticity there is a tension between butch identification and this stress on style. Ten years on butch/femme and gender play is no longer fashionable, and there many lesbian subcultures in which it never was, so that many women are unfamiliar with 'new' butch/femme. Personal ads in the lesbian media often specify 'no butches', and as several of the women pointed out, 'no one calls themselves butch any more'. This is backed up by recent research on personal ads in the US (Crawley 2001). This was also reflected in the experiences of the femme participants who bemoaned the lack of butches. O'Sullivan and Ardill reflect that the resurgence of butch/femme should more accurately have been described as a resurgence of femme (1996: 91). In one sense a butch/androgynous style never went away and continues to be the predominant lesbian 'look', and yet fewer lesbians have (re)claimed 'butch' as an identity.

Butch participants described the difficulties that they had encountered from other lesbians in identifying as 'butch', which was described as a difficult subject position to inhabit and accomplish. Frequently their partners, friends and people around them did not recognise them as butch out of embarrassment, political disapproval or because they did not fit particular butch stereotypes.

Seni has an ambivalent relationship to butch as an identity and finds that her friends are reluctant to see her this way. She puts this down to the lack of seriousness in her butch presentation compared to what she sees from other butches around her, because although the identity is important to her she does not wish to live up to traditional butch stereotypes. Her friends use butch-femme terminology themselves but in a lighter and more humorous way, and do not see her as butch, laughing at her when she talks about herself in that way.

Seni: I think their stereotype of what butch is, they've got to have short hair

and they've got to act in a certain way, and I don't [...] I think they think that butches, the stereotype, they don't smile very much, they go out and they make the first move in terms of asking women out, they're very proud, cool, people that don't smile a lot. Because I have noticed other butches in clubs and they have the stance and it's like 'look at me, I'm cool and you're not going to see me on the dance floor, but if you see me on the dance floor I'm going to be dancing really cool and I'm not going to be taking the piss out of myself.' But I don't, I just take the piss out of myself.

There is a sense in which the performance of butch is difficult to accomplish successfully.

Seni: But it was always a bit hard when I was coming out because [...] it's a bit of a skill to ask a woman out and if you dress like a butch then people think you're a butch and you describe yourself as a butch, you have to make the first move and I was never good at doing that so I was a useless butch really.

Several women tended to refer to themselves as 'boyish' rather than 'butch' because it did not 'set you up to fail' in the same way. The term was also seen as potentially misleading by those butches who were not interested in 'proper' butch/femme relationships.

Luisa: Boyish rather than butch. I still have friends who are pretty butch and I don't do all that suit and tie stuff. And physically I'm not [...] I'm hesitating because I think about my butch friends and I hate comparing myself in that way but I would be worried about giving the wrong impression by saying butch, partly because I don't take it seriously enough and partly because I don't want to attract somebody, a femme who takes it as seriously as that. So although I guess my type is a femme, that's within a range and I'm not about to the whole big butch role-play thing.

In several accounts butch comes across as something which is quite difficult to live up to for a lot of women, rather than some kind of natural state. This runs alongside and in tension with the repertoire of authenticity that characterises the narratives of butches with regard to their gender. It highlights identity work and the amount of effort and attention to detail which is necessary to 'do' butch successfully, even for women who experience their masculinity as given and 'natural'.

### **Distinguishing between 'butch' and heterosexual masculinity**

Definitions of butch and femme tend to mirror the distinction between masculine and feminine in the way that they are positioned at opposite ends of a continuum. When asking participants to position themselves on a butch/femme scale it was useful to do this in the conventional way and then to suggest two separate scales so that the two were expressed independently rather than as one at the expense of the other (Loulan 1990). Like many of the women Luisa found this a challenging and useful idea and scored herself relatively high on both scales. Butch masculinity, unlike traditional heterosexual masculinity, need not involve the denial or suppression of femininity and some of the accounts do stress and value what have traditionally been seen as feminine qualities, such as sensitivity and gentleness. This is in contrast with 'old' or 'proper' butch/femme which are much more clearly based on traditional gender roles which are defined in opposition to each other.

Jay: I guard myself for feminine behaviour. I monitor myself to make sure I don't slip into anything that could be construed as feminine, like if I'm sitting on the bus and a guy comes to sit next to me I'm not going to move- I will stay sitting however I was, he has to fit in, [I won't accommodate him] but sometimes you find yourself doing that unconsciously.

A common theme throughout the butch and femme accounts was the potential for butch masculinities to be better than heterosexual masculinities. Lesbians are stereotyped in homophobic discourse as either hating masculinity and men or wanting to be men. In fact masculinity was valued by both butch and femme women while being clearly distinguished from biological sex. Hegemonic definitions of gender may see it as being the property of a particular sex but in the accounts they are clearly disarticulated.

There was also a perception that while hegemonic masculinity is portrayed as being in crisis, butch masculinity is closer to what 'most' women want- sensitive, caring, strong, capable, respectful and courteous. This was common to 'old' and 'new' and across the range of butch masculinities.

Butch and femme have become so readily associated with shorthand terms for lesbian gender and sexual practice that their association with emotional styles is



easily overlooked. These may be linked to hegemonic gender discourses, as in the wider culture. The participants found it easier to make generalisations about their preference for butch or femme partners in emotional terms than physical appearance, other than the basic physical distinction between butch and femme. There are many possible reasons for this. The focus on appearance can seem superficial, and for butches in particular there is a danger of fulfilling the stereotype of male identification and sexism. However the emphasis on and attraction to butch sensitivity or femme emotional expressiveness and strength was consistent with the ways in which these were constructed as subject positions.

Sheila, an older femme, had previously been married and so for her there was 'no comparison' between butch and heterosexual masculinities.

Sheila: There's the cherishing and the caring factor, and men are selfish. And then you've got the sex thing. There's no comparison; I don't see how it can be compared. It's miles apart.

Jay: I think most butch dykes, if they are - and I don't like the word copy because there is no original, but for ease of use- if they are copying masculinity, I think that most of them copy the best aspects of it rather than the worst. They don't have all the sexism and misogyny that poisons the masculinity of men. I think there are a lot of good things about masculinity which men could well do with doing and I think women let them get away with that.

There was an awareness of the dangers of going 'too far' with butch/femme, which was defined in terms of being too close to heterosexual stereotypes and inequalities, either in sex roles within the relationship and the domestic division of labour between the couple, or in terms of behaviour. Gill, a bisexual femme, found the tendency for personal ads to specify 'no butches' frustrating. This was partly because she feels protective towards butches. Many women who identify as femme rather than feminine spoke of a similar awareness of the costs of performing female masculinity and their respect for butches. Her frustration was also with the lack of specificity she saw in these ads and their negativity.

Gill: I think, do you mean no 'lads'? Because I don't like that, I don't like butch or boyish women that are actually laddish, and like a badly behaved straight man, that sort of thing, but I've got the language and I've thought

about it and I can make that distinction and maybe those who don't, some women, particularly on the scene see that behaviour and think, that's all butch women, they all do it and they all have this swaggering kind of manner... and it's like a little bit of swagger's quite cute, quite endearing, but when it kicks the wrong way it just reminds you of a straight bloke being completely obnoxious.

Jo: I've had people terminate relationships because I act too much like a man. They want me to change. 'I've had relationships with men and it's not working. I may as well have had a relationship with a man as with you,' stuff like that. It's the way I act, nothing I can pinpoint. I have had relationships with straight women who've been attracted to the androgynism about it, because I act like a male but I'm not, and I'll use the word aggressive again, I'm not as aggressive as they would be in a straight relationship, I'm quite soft but they're getting roughly what they'd get from a straight relationship.

Gabby described the version of masculinity she aspired to, distinguishing this from stereotypical roles.

Gabby: I'm really into cooking. My role models are gangsters- I'd be some poncey Italianate gangster who's really into his threads and who cooks, and who wouldn't dream of doing DIY or getting under a car- he'd get someone else to do it- that's the kind of image that I fit into.

### **Butch as a transgendered identity**

Some of the butches described childhood memories of wanting to be male. This discourse of inversion is common throughout the culture and can be reflected in lesbian discourses around sexual and gender identities. This is particularly true for young lesbians prior to developing an alternative understanding of the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality. In general the association between butch masculinity and wanting to be (like) a man was strongly contested. However two of the butch participants identified as transgendered.

Nestle (1987, 1992) argues for seeing butch as a specifically lesbian gendered sexual style, stressing the play of masculine signifiers against a female body. The body grounds the butch as female and therefore lesbian. More recently she has recognised that this was part of a defensive tendency in face of homophobic assertions and assumptions that all lesbians want to be men and are not 'real'

women, but it has effect of silencing transgendered butches (1997: 115).

During the interviews photographs were used to facilitate discussion, particularly with regard to lesbian gender styles. One of the pictures I used had the effect of allowing women too articulate what were for them the boundaries of female masculinity, either because going beyond this line was disturbing, puzzling or seemed pointless. Participants who had previously been liberal and non-judgmental on issues of female femininity and masculinity often raised transgender issues in an emotive manner.

Jan: I don't see the thrill in boxer shorts and aping that entire masculinity bit. Not unattractive but I just wouldn't go for it. I don't want to play roles that defined. And if you were going out with someone or in a relationship with somebody like that it's almost like you might as well go out with a man, as with somebody who's gone so far down that path of taking on a masculine image.

The way that this woman looked was central, the assumption being that if she wanted to look so masculine then she was 'aping' masculinity and her partner 'might as well be with a man'. The degree of masculinity was the key issue, since in other respects these reactions were indistinguishable from 'misunderstandings' of butch/femme that the same women were vigorously contesting. Claire responded to the photo by first identifying the image as male and then distinguishing between gender and sexual identities.

Claire: I don't think that that's a particularly lesbian image. I think that's more about being male or female... it's not a butch image that I find particularly attractive. It's too much like a man.

This is similar to Emma's comments on female masculinity. For several femmes the image highlighted the specificity of their physical attraction to butch masculinity.

Emma: There are butches that I know who I don't fancy because they're just not [...] if they don't flip my radar, like if they can just walk past me in the street and I just think 'man' then I'm probably not going to be interested. Attracted to them sexually. I like that thing about there being something a bit wrong with the picture. Somebody who's perfectly kind of thin and narrow hipped and flat chested and strong jawed and all the rest of it isn't going to

interest me as much as somebody who is having to struggle slightly with something.

The attitude of the butch participants was particularly hostile towards the image in the photograph and the association of butch with transgendered identities.

Annie: But then some lesbians dress up like drag, and that's repellent to me as well. Like Della Grace, her look sometimes I find unpleasant. When she has a beard and stuff [...] perhaps because there's nothing womanly left almost.

Gabby: I think all the people who are turning into some sort of hybrid weirdness are going a bit too far- I just think they look very very unattractive, to anyone [...] [in response to the photo] It's just horrible, she's far too muscley and I really wouldn't want to look like that, because, maybe I'm not brave enough, maybe you would get a lot more hassle if you looked like that. But it does look peculiar, has she had her tits off or is she flattening them? I would be embarrassed in front of straight people to say that this is a lesbian image. I think it embodies a lot of the worst sort of- because I don't think they look very sexy or attractive at all, I just think they look freaky and quite scary. I just don't like it.

### **Distinguishing between femme and heterosexual femininity**

The issue of choice was identified as the crucial difference between femme as lesbian gender and normative femininity.

Annie: The fundamental difference [is] that lesbian femmes have made an informed conscious choice about – she's had a choice of identities and a choice of sexualities. So she has decided for herself somewhere along the line.

Hemmings argues for the need to 'consider femme narratives on their own terms... rather than impose meanings that attach themselves more readily to a consideration of butch narratives' (1999: 460). She observes the empirical problems this caused for Kennedy and Davis who made a methodological decision to only interview women who still identified as lesbian at the time of their research into an American working class lesbian community of the 1940s and 50s, thus excluding many femmes by using a term that had not been relevant to their identities. Hemmings contrasts this with 'Stone Butch Blues, in which Feinberg 'does not restrict her femme's pathways by harnessing to an opposition between "still lesbian" or "gone straight"' (1999: 461). Hemmings is critical of

the tendency of contemporary femmes to use narratives which '...produce themselves as queer subjects in opposition to an imagined straight femininity...' (1999: 455) in a way which reinforces the boundaries between the categories and denies space for bisexual femme identities. This was reflected in the repertoire of femme consciousness I have identified, where 'femme' as reflexive, subversive, queer and knowing is defined in opposition to a reified and untroubled normative femininity, characterised by an unthinking adherence to dominant gender norms. Repertoires of consciousness and choice were used by both butch and femme women to talk about femmes. There is a knowing and ironic element to this. This constructs a femme subject position that is specifically lesbian, unlike the 'femme' identity described by Kennedy and Davis (1993: 326). The ability to take up this contemporary femme subject position may be dependent on possession of sufficient subcultural capital and competencies to articulate these repertoires of consciousness.

Heterosexual women are assumed not to have had to make an active choice about their gender and sexual identities because heterosexuality is the default assumption in this culture.

Gill: I think in some ways you only realise that you need to call yourself something because you're not doing the same as other people. Straight women don't even need to call themselves straight particularly, because they're just average aren't they.

Helen's account highlighted the importance of choice, awareness and transgression in distinguishing heterosexual femininity and femme femininity.

Helen: I've chosen to be feminine with an awareness of what I'm buying into, and I have problematised that- I do not want to put on a skirt and a dress and heels because, well that's what you do when you're a girl, isn't it. A straight woman going for a man is doing exactly what you're supposed to do. A femme woman going for a masculine woman is not only breaking the taboo of going for a woman, but is then breaking the taboo of going for a masculine woman, so it's like totally a whole different thing, you're like double breaking the rules, whereas a straight woman going for a man is totally conforming, so in that sense you're worlds apart.

Femmes and feminine lesbians can be distinguished through the interpretative

repertoires they used and by their attitude to butches. While femme narratives emphasised femme strength, consciousness and performance with regard to their gender, feminine accounts relied upon a repertoire of authenticity. While most femmes were open to the possibility of relationships with other femme or feminine lesbians and saw 'femme' as an independent identity, femmes were also attracted to and respectful of butches. They thought that this, as well as their knowing attitude towards their own femininity as gender performance, distinguished them from feminine lesbians, and this was backed up by my findings. The attitude of feminine lesbians to butch women ranged from incomprehension to hostility. There was no sense of butch/femme as an historic coupling and their feminine gender style was discussed with reference to discourses of individualism.

### **Femme Strength**

A key repertoire used by all the women who identified as butch or femme described femme strength. This is in contrast with the association of femininity with conformity and passivity and referred to the balance of power within the relationship as well as the particular sexual imagery of femme.

Gill: Going back to that 1950's thing, if people are stereotyping around butch and femme is something about straight man, straight woman, then people that I know would have to make the point that femme is actually dead assertive, and that they are into initiating things rather than being the recipient. Nobody wants to be seen as just being girly, nobody wants to be seen as being a bit of a naff kind of a useless giggly [...] and that's so not what it is- though I expect there are people who are like that.

For butch and femme women, femme is a strong, sexual, strident and even aggressive identity. As one femme put this, 'there's a kind of aggression about it all, a power that is the difference- it is a very strident statement.' There is an emphasis on glamour and showing up the artifice of gender that has parallels with a drag aesthetic. Tyler refers to this as 'parodic excess' (1991: 55).

Beth: I think if I was straight I would probably dress far more butch. Because if you're lesbian, femme is quite a strong powerful thing. If I was a straight girl, to get the same kind of identity as I've got now I'd probably spend a lot

more time in combat trousers and clubby girl clothes.

Femmes are contrasted with heterosexual women because they have had to make an active choice about sexual identity which goes against the norm in the wider society as well as about their gender or erotic identity which goes against the norm in their community, while heterosexual women in contrast do not have to make any active choices and implicitly are seen to conform to gender norms.

Maria: There must be a different take on femininity or a different way of being feminine [...] it doesn't defer to men and there is something very deferential about the way straight women are because they have to please men in the end, don't they. Even quite strong heterosexual women [...] there's still that baseline... So [it's] what makes you feel sexy or how you want to present yourself when you're out on the prowl. Femme women [are] very strong and powerful because they've had to go against the norm a bit. In lesbian venues, you can count the number of women who are wearing a dress. You do stand out so you do have to definitely choose to be like that and most of the femmes I know do it from a very strong sense of femininity- it's about having a very strong sense of being female in a very independent sense of the word. And wanting to flaunt it really. And be sexy.'

The chosen and conscious nature of femme femininity is not just a discursive resource or simply asserted but is related to the different ways in which butch and femme are positioned with regard to hegemonic and subcultural gender norms. While gender roles are not static and the degree of latitude in the acceptably feminine may have increased in recent decades, femininity is still expected of heterosexual women by virtue of their social positioning. Several butch participants had spent periods of their adult life identifying as heterosexual, and most young butches begin to identify as masculine prior to identifying as lesbian. They had first hand experience of pressure from male partners and families to be more feminine. While the existence of masculine heterosexual women was acknowledged, lesbian subcultures were valued for the freedom they offered and positive way in which they viewed female masculinity. However for femmes their positioning as lesbian not only allows but promotes the adoption of androgynous if not masculine style. Chapter 7 examines lesbian visibility and style, the 'androgynous imperative', discourses of beauty and their feminist critiques. In this context 'doing' femininity does involve an active and conscious choice.

## Conclusion

Despite Hemming's (1999) criticism of the contrast between lesbian and straight as inappropriate and unhelpful in theorising femme narratives, the femmes I spoke to were insistent on their identification as lesbian. Like the butch insistence on gender authenticity and essentialism, this femme repertoire of authenticity with regard to sexuality seemed to be a defensive boundary construction and a response to the discourse of inversion that has been characteristic of sexological and mainstream discourses of sexuality as well as the suspicion within lesbian and feminist cultures, all of which have seen femmes as 'not real lesbians'.

Despite the use of repertoires of performance and choice, both butch and femme narratives constructed the identities as authentically lesbian, seeking to reinscribe the difference between lesbian and heterosexual genders at precisely the point where queer theorists have complicated the inside/outside distinction. In Chapter 4 I argued that opposition between the dominant paradigms of constructionism in lesbian and gay/queer theory and essentialism at an individual and subcultural level has been overplayed and oversimplifies a complex relationship between identity accounts and positioning. In these accounts the relationship between butch/femme and heterosexuality was articulated as complex and interdependent. At the same time masculinity and femininity and the sexual dynamic between the two were disaggregated from heterosexuality. Distinctive butch and femme positions were constructed through the use of specific interpretative repertoires. In particular butch was constructed as a 'better masculinity', combining elements of traditional masculinity with sensitivity and softness. Femme was constructed in opposition to a 'conformist' heterosexual femininity as a strong, sexual, conscious and chosen subject position offering female sexual agency.



## **Chapter 7: She's Got the Look: Butch/femme Genders and Lesbian Aesthetics**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I examine the ways in which lesbians negotiate the aesthetic discourses of femininity, and investigate the possible creation of alternative, specifically lesbian aesthetic. Fashion, style and beauty practices are key sites in the construction of gendered identities. The body becomes part of a system of signification through these cultural practices. This is an area which has been criticised as shallow and insignificant both by theorists of mass culture and within the culture more generally through its association with femininity. Throughout the 1970s and 80s fashion and beauty practices were subject to a sustained feminist critique. This made the reluctance of the participants to emphasise issues of fashion and gendered style unsurprising, and yet in the accounts they are clearly central to the lived experience of gender and sexual identity. I examine the importance of fashion and style in the accounts, noting the ways in which they draw on the repertoire of authenticity which was identified in chapter 4. Style can also function as a signifier of sexual preference within lesbianism.

### **Why look at visibility and style?**

Issues of fashion and personal style were repeatedly identified as important areas for the construction of identities by the participants, although they tended to be ambivalent in their attitudes and did not want to be seen as trivial. Lewis (1997) observes that the anti-fashion and anti-consumerist discourses of feminism are still influential in this respect. However she argues that as lesbians we are in effect consumers of one another's appearance and that there is pleasure to be had from the use of the subcultural competencies which enable us to recognise each other. It is clear from the interviews that personal gendered styles have a particular significance for lesbians, as this is a key site for the construction and performance of gender. Gender is constructed and enacted through everyday social and cultural

practices, through the negotiation of a mixture of shifting and sometimes contradictory cultural arrangements and gendered resources. In addition to this the heterosexual presumption means that lesbians are always liable to erasure, to pass inadvertently, so that our visibility to each other becomes important in terms of reaffirming our identities and sense of community. Rothblum (1994) argues that without codes lesbians are invisible, and that these visible signs are necessary for the formation of group identity and solidarity.

Sedgwick (1991: 1) has argued that an understanding of the role of 'the closet' is key to understanding Western culture. The naturalised status of heterosexuality makes issues of visibility of key importance in lesbian subcultures. Visibility needs to be seen in relation to issues of power. Lesbian visibility is achieved with particular costs, making the individual vulnerable to violence and discrimination. It is often achieved in a coded way that is recognisable to those sharing the same subcultural capital. In most contexts, and increasingly this applies to specifically lesbian and gay spaces, it is not safe for a lesbian to assume that another woman identifies as lesbian or bisexual unless she makes this visible in some way. In practice for femme and feminine lesbians this can be frustratingly difficult to achieve. At the same time such easy categorisation may be resisted by those whose relationship to the available sexual identities is ambiguous or who actively challenge the constraining nature of identities.

Sociological and feminist theory have, in the last two decades, undergone what Witz (2000) has described as a 'corporeal turn'. This has seen increased attention to the construction and performance of gender through embodied practices. The body can be seen as a key site for the enactment of 'sex'. Work on embodiment and identity has grouped around three major axes: reflexivity, performativity and habitus. I would argue that there are parallels between these and the three major repertoires in the identity narratives outlined in chapter 4: choice, performance and authenticity.

Work by social theorists such as Giddens (1991), Beck (1992) and Bauman

(1992) seeks to locate the increasingly reflexive nature of identities within the context of a detraditionalised late modernity. The breakdown of traditional roles and certainties, rapid social change and a proliferation of lifestyle choices not only allows but compels the active construction of identity in a project of the self. This work in turn has been criticised as overemphasising the scope for reflexivity. Campbell (1996: 165) argues that while more areas of life may have come under the modernist gaze and lost traditional or natural legitimation, there are real limits on the freedom to act that this allows, since the 'traditional' is a by-product of routinization. As McNay has pointed out, this is where Bourdieu's work on performativity is useful and in particular the concept of 'habitus'. Performativity as outlined by Butler (1990, 1993a) has a limited concept of agency and reflexivity. At the same time the language of performance she uses can be interpreted in a voluntaristic way and the potential space for agency opened up through the process of resignification is not linked to material constraints. In a similar way the repertoire of performance outlined earlier combines elements of performance, which may be conscious and parodic, and discursive positioning which may be beyond reflexive agency. In Butler's work on performativity there is no attempt to account for the more durable aspects of identity without foreclosing the scope for reflexive agency. Bourdieu (1992) attempts to give a sociological account of the construction of subjectivity through power relations which is able to adequately theorise agency. 'Habitus' is the central concept and is an attempt to look at how social and cultural norms become inscribed on the body and the way in which these are lived through. Possibilities are narrowed down to a range within which we feel we are making free choices, so that we are complicit with our own domination (1992: 167). Gender identity is conceived as a temporally open process of repetition rather than an externally imposed normativity. Performativity reveals gender as both arbitrary and deeply rooted since its performance reinscribes it on the body, but at the same time this is seen as an active process (McNay 2001: 33). 'Habitus' enables an understanding of embodied experience which is relatively fixed and habitual and not subject to reflexive agency, but at the same time open to creative agency and innovation. It

suggests a way of escaping the dualisms of structure and agency, essentialism and constructionism, and sees gender norms as 'entrenched but not unsurpassable boundaries' (McNay 2001: 33). This offers a useful approach to examining the embodied and symbolic aspects of lesbianism.

### **Bodies and identities**

A sense of identity is related to feelings about one's own body in a variety of ways. Erickson (1999: 71) testifies to the shame and humiliation often experienced in trying to 'do' conventional beauty with the 'wrong' body-type. This can bring with it ridicule from family or peers as well as their embarrassment and confusion. Erickson describes feeling 'like I was dressed up for a costume party or living in someone else's body, a straight woman's body' (1999: 71). Similarly Jo, a young butch, thinks that her body shape is too big to 'do' femininity, causing discomfort and embarrassment to herself and others, who 'don't know where to look', and so she has given up trying.

Jo: I have tried in the past, but it doesn't really work, because I get called a transvestite and because I've got huge thighs as well, so it doesn't work. I just don't- it's a self-confidence thing in dresses and that. I just feel like everybody's looking at me.

Many butch and androgynous women expressed feeling unable to 'do' femininity successfully. This was sometimes related to body shape and size, and more often to feeling 'wrong' and 'unnatural', and 'like a man in drag'. A general discomfort with one's body was quite common, and can be related to wider issues of body-image and feminine beauty discourses in western cultures (Cogan and Erikson: 1999). Some of the women talked about wearing men's clothes for practical reasons, because they are more comfortable or because they are particularly tall or big. However claiming a butch identity can operate as part of a reverse discourse, so that this gender ambiguity becomes positive and powerful rather than

inhibiting. Butch/femme subcultures provide a space for this recognition.

Carmen: I think men give off a strength, and I think often butches are a larger build than femmes, I think they give off this physical impression, and you get power from that don't fuck with me attitude, from that big strong body, she's my girlfriend, I think you get strength from the things you don't think you have as the two become one.

In Chapter 5 I argued that a discourse of authenticity was most commonly drawn upon by butch and masculine/androgynous lesbians with regard to gender identity. The concept of habitus enables a way of addressing the relatively fixed way in which this is experienced without seeing it simply as a product of the available discursive resources. There is room for agency within certain boundaries and yet some things are experienced as unthinkable and unnatural for the individual. Masculinity and femininity are seen as socially constructed through an ongoing process of inscription on the body, and so are marked on the ways in which we move and speak, and our tastes and aspirations. This can be distinguished from the sociological concept of socialisation since it does not necessarily pass through consciousness, so that while it may be reflected upon it is primarily pre-reflexive and embodied.

Jean: I think because I tend to walk masculine, and act masculine in the mannerisms. I would never ever sit like Sheila sits - I just have masculine mannerisms [...] But even little babies say to me 'are you a man or a woman', you know. 'Are you a man in a skirt?'

Luisa: One of my staff [...] said to me 'boy you've got some walk on you' and I have and always have had.

The way in which gender produces particular dispositions and is marked on the body can be related to the participants' insistence on authenticity and depth when defining butch and femme identities. Within lesbian subcultures butch and femme are recognised as types of performance which are available to anyone, and this is often a source of humour as well as sexual role-play. Several participants, both butch and femme, added an insistence on a deeper element to lesbian gender,

using the term 'innate' in a qualified way alongside repertoires of choice and performance.

Some of the women readily linked their gender identity to their body type in a direct way. For Emma being very slim has always affected her sense of femininity, so that while she identifies as femme she has always felt unable to 'do' conventional femininity.

Emma: I've always felt [unable], I think because I'm skinny and have had a really ambivalent relationship to femininity. I don't wear skirts very much at the moment but that's a kind of confidence thing, it's partly about being single and wanting to feel really dykey, not wanting there to be any equivocality about that. [...] But maybe that's just to do with getting older and not being as confident about my body or something.

Helen, a femme, is one of several women who feels that her body type rules out a butch identity. While she is able to 'do' 'boy-dyke', she feels she is too large-breasted and too short to wear men's clothes. Two of the butches mentioned the issue of body size and shape as an obstacle to their performance of masculinity. A relative lack of height makes it difficult to win validation in a couple with partners unless the femme is smaller than them. If validated they tend to pass as a straight couple, so that there is a lack of specifically lesbian visibility. They both express discomfort with their breasts.

Jay: I would be very tempted to take hormones if it was freely available- if I was in America where all the dykes are getting it on the black market and stuff then I maybe would do it. It's more a practical thing. I wouldn't say that I hate my body - I just have learned to live with it really, I've accepted that there's nothing I can do to change it so I just don't pay any attention to it, like I don't wear a bra, I never look at my breasts, they're just there, I

don't ever look at myself in that way. When I was working out that was to get muscles, to get thinner, to loose hips and stuff.

Gabby: I've got quite a little arse and I'm quite narrow hipped so I've always looked all right in trousers and stuff. I would like my tits to go. They're not

particularly big but they're not small- they're just normal sized but they're definitely there. I don't know if I want them to go completely but I would like to have really tiny little tits where you don't need a bra and you can just wear a t-shirt. If I did anything to my body I think the only thing I would do is have a breast reduction but I've heard that it's more expensive and more dangerous than breast enlargements. I think about it but I'll probably never do it.

Nicky is an androgynous lesbian and often mistaken for a man which she hates. She regards attribution of the label 'butch' as insulting and as her 'worst nightmare'. In one sense she sees her gender ambiguity as being in spite of her body.

Nicky: They're not paying attention. I've got massive tits for a start! How rude! I'm not saying that I want people to identify me by my breasts, but I don't understand how I can be mistaken for a man!

At the same time she describes the difference in the way her and her partner are perceived partly in terms of their body shapes and types.

Nicky: I think her mannerisms are more feminine than mine. I'm bigger, my stature- being built like a brick shit-house makes you feel, makes me look more dykey I think, being more muscley and stuff like that. She's quite petite.

The size and shape of the body interacted with gender identities in particular ways. For some women it worked against and ruled out particular gender performances and reinforced their identity as either butch, femme or androgynous, while for others it acted as a drag on their gender performance and was something to be worked on and transformed.

### **Discourses of Beauty**

Feminist theorists such as Wilson (1990, 1993) have been interested in fashion and beauty practices as productive of gendered identities. Second wave feminism developed a critique of femininity as artificial and constraining, so that the rejection of mainstream fashion and beauty practices was central. While femininity was associated with constraint and conformity, masculinity was seen as

natural and practical. Since our culture views masculinity as the 'given', and the 'natural', while femininity is seen in terms of artifice, virtually any attempt to refuse to 'do' femininity properly can and often is seen as butch, masculine, or wanting to be (or be like) a man.

Many lesbians had an ambivalent attitude to 'butch'. Even if they used it about themselves, they may have come to accept this initially as a term which was used about them in this pejorative sense, rather than by them, and preferred to describe themselves in ways that draw upon alternative beauty discourses. This was particularly true for androgynous lesbians.

Based on research among lesbians in the United States, Hammidi and Kaiser (1999: 58-62) have identified three particular beauty discourses. 'Natural beauty' is summarised as 'being oneself', unadorned and unconcerned with appearance, so that the emphasis is on comfort. 'Inner beauty' is based on principles of empowerment and which tries to avoid discrimination based on looks. This refers to an inner mental strength as well as physical strength and feeling at home in one's body. This is concerned with self-confidence, going out into the world and not being intimidated. 'Political beauty' is based upon feminist discourses that explicitly challenge feminine beauty standards around make-up, body-hair.

These are useful analytical distinctions; however in this British-based study lesbians tended to use elements of all of these, while discourses of 'natural' and 'inner' beauty in particular were used interchangeably. In each case the refusal to 'do' normative femininity is often interpreted in the heterosexual world as wanting to be masculine, and unattractive, regardless of the individual women's intentions.

Hammidi and Kaiser (1999: 59) also identify what they call the discourse of 'dominant lesbian beauty' which can vary from community to community but in the British case would refer to urban, trendy, brand conscious 'dyke' styles, drawing on what are often black street styles. They argue that conforming to the dominant queer look 'ups the ante' of your beauty in lesbian terms (1999: 60).



More conventionally feminine styles score lower because they are less easily recognisable.

In many lesbian identity accounts, coming out is associated with freedom from the constraints and expectations of normative femininity. Despite the emphasis on freedom many women have experienced what has been called the 'androgynous imperative' which on a butch/femme continuum would be slightly to the butch side of the centre.

The participants were all able to identify this dominant lesbian look, and several applied this to their own style. Those with stronger butch and femme identifications were more critical of this style, either because they had experienced pressure to look like this themselves or because they valued the sexual dynamic offered by butch/femme which was threatened with erasure by the dominance of this style. Styles can function as signifiers of sexual preference within lesbianism, and give an indication as to whether a woman is attracted to butches, femmes androgynous-looking women. However I came across numerous examples of butch/butch and femme/femme relationships and patterns of attraction so there is no necessary link.

Several butch and femme women were critical of 'in-betweenies' because of their visual similarity. Emma described consciously trying to look more femme than her butch partner to make visible the sense that they both had of the dynamic of their relationship as their being 'opposites' which 'was private, that wasn't written on the outside, and to non-lesbian observers I later realised it wasn't clear at all'.

Gabby: There's all different kinds, there's your young urban dyke with Diesel on [...] A lot of them start to look like each other with the same bad haircuts- they're non-descript - that's the word, not necessarily bad haircuts but non-descript, and maybe they're not going 'look at me, look at me, I'm gorgeous and stylish', maybe they're thinking 'don't look at me I'm a lesbian, don't hit me'- I don't know. They just look comfortable - they obviously would regard me as totally shallow and they're not bothered about clothes at all, and image. I know I sound shallow when it comes to image and honestly I'm not- there's a lot of other stuff there but your packaging's up front isn't it, it's your stall with your fruit out and I do attach a lot of importance to that although I want more obviously.

Lesbians who identify as butch and femme find themselves outside this dominant androgynous style. The 'lipstick lesbian' phenomenon of the early 1990s may have made feminine style more common but its impact has not dislodged the dominance of androgyny. Femmes find themselves invisible as lesbians and so the dominance of butch and androgynous styles as the visible imagery of lesbianism is perpetuated.

This exchange between the older butch/femme couple contrasts the dominant lesbian looks from the scene they came out into in the 1960s with the contemporary Manchester scene on which Sheila finds herself invisible as a femme.

Sheila: Because you're very feminine they assume you can't be gay. And it must be difficult on the gay scene now because I remember looking round the bar that night and thinking, I don't think there was another feminine woman in there apart from me. There is no way I would go on the gay scene in a dress- ever, or a skirt. I might wear high heels but I would always wear trousers. Low heels and trousers. I used to wear a skirt.

Jean: Your trousers and my trousers are a bit different.

Sheila: Feminine trousers yes, but I wouldn't- nobody wears skirts on the gay scene any more.

Jean: I know, I look round in despair and think they're all the same.

Sheila: Where's all the legs gone!

Many participants, particularly femmes and feminine lesbians, described having conformed to this look when they first came out. Ellie describes having been a conventionally feminine child and adopting a more androgynous style when she began to identify as a lesbian, since the only lesbians she had any contact with were androgynous in style.

Ellie: I thought right if this is the way she looks and she's a proper lesbian then I must have to look like that. It was really stupid but [...] You know what, but when I went to [lesbian club] a couple of weeks ago I think it's just really weird, the way I felt out of place. Because I was wearing, well I sound like some little woman, but I had this really full skirt on with flowers on up the side

and a red  $\frac{3}{4}$  sleeve top and a little grey flowery clutch-bag and I felt out of place. Just wearing that. And I think that that is not right. *Out of place in what sense?*

In the way that everyone would probably think that I was straight. Because I was wearing a skirt and everything.

### **The politics of visibility**

Esterberg's research suggests that 'the desire to recognise others seems linked to a desire to make connections and a desire to see more lesbians present and visible in the world' (1996: 269). Jay talks about the pleasure of recognition. This is in part about a validation of one's subcultural capital and reinforcing a sense of community and overcoming potential isolation.

Jay: I like the whole feeling of having a community and getting recognition when you pass another dyke on the street, and you feel like you've got an identity and it's something you can feel really sure of, and it becomes your life as well. [...]

According to Michelle identifying as femme is seen by some butches as the 'easy way out.' As her subsequent comments make clear, this involves a refusal to recognise the issues of visibility facing femmes as women, and as lesbians determined to make their desire visible.

Michelle: I went to Gay Pride last year or the year before and I always do a bit of a get dressed up proper for Pride you know, very short skirt, very low-cut top, and I'd had a bit of a funny night...and anyway I ended up wandering out of the [safe space] full of lesbians and gay men, to get myself a taxi, and realised suddenly that I was wandering through the centre of town on a Saturday night in Newcastle, very scantily clad and I had a bit of a dodgy experience with these blokes, handled it, and was telling a butch friend the next day, and she basically told me that I had asked for it! And this is a woman that's a big feminist and all that. What is that about? Because it feels like there is some understanding that's extended to heterosexual women, in a group sense, that individual femmes in the lesbian community don't get. Like you're asking for it or you shouldn't put yourself at risk, [...] I was really pissed off.

Walker (1993) has argued that dominant ideologies exclude and delegitimize on the basis of visibility and that identity movements tend to replicate this in their tendency to celebrate those same signifiers of difference in a kind of reverse

discourse which celebrates transgression. The example she uses is drag queens at gay pride parades. This renders femme lesbians invisible and black femmes as triply erased. She argues that a butch woman of colour may not be read as lesbian because not white. This was confirmed by my participants. Often race serves to obscure their lesbian visibility to white observers. A Chinese butch recalled that when she had short hair she was rarely seen as butch and almost always involuntarily passed as male. However, Walker continues, a butch woman of colour may be read as lesbian because her sexual style is blatant. The femme woman of colour is not butch and not white and therefore the erasure is compounded. While she agrees that we need to reclaim the signifiers that have been used against us she sees this strategy as problematic.

The paradigm of visibility is totalizing when a signifier of difference becomes synonymous with the identity it signifies. In this situation, members of a given population who do not bear that signifier of difference or who bear visible signs of another identity are rendered invisible and are marginalised within an already marginalised community (Walker 1993: 888)

Maya, a femme with an Indian working-class background described not being able to be too unconventional in her gendered style out of respect for her family and the shame they already felt about her sexual identity, but within that East-end community her gender-presentation was seen as unconventional. Nevertheless she was aware of the fact that often white people 'just see her as an Asian woman about to get an arranged marriage...' She was aware of the fact that her ability to 'pass' on the street made her less vulnerable to homophobic violence than white friends and colleagues, and that her safety was most often threatened by racism.

Style functions as a signifier of pride and attitude in lesbian subcultures. For some women visibility is an achievement. There is a distinction between being or making oneself recognisable to other lesbians in a coded way that can be disavowed if necessary and being unambiguously read as gay by heterosexuals. For some lesbians, both butch and femme, it is a matter of pride and principle to

overcome the heterosexual presumption and become visible.

Negative stereotypes about lesbians in contemporary popular culture have included assumptions about the way that lesbians look and why. The stereotypical image has been butch, and the assumptions have been shaped by discourses of inversion, so that an active sexual desire for women has been seen as necessarily masculine. These women are often seen as mannish, ugly and unable to get a man themselves. There is no space in this schema for imagining female masculinity and lesbian visibility as a positive and active choice. At the same time the naturalised status of heterosexuality means that lesbians will be presumed to be heterosexual unless they actively make themselves visible. This is particularly difficult for women who are uncomfortable with a masculine gendered style, and so their performance of femininity may be accessorised with lesbian and gay signifiers such as rainbow ribbons, t-shirt slogans, badges and tattoos.

Maria: People have an amazing ability to assume you're heterosexual even if you're giving out all kinds of clear statements to the contrary... no [passing as straight] irritates me- I have got a tattoo on my back because it annoys me, for instance in clubs I like to have my shoulders bare so I can put it in people's faces. Anyone who looks at it closely can see it's got a woman's symbol right in the middle.

Annie: I think they must be thick if they think I'm straight, I really do. I can't believe it when people say 'is he your partner?' I just think, get a grip! I presume they always see me as a lesbian because I've had so much shit because of it, that I never think I'll be taken for a straight woman. But I am sometimes, but the signals I send out are so unequivocal that I think they must be deaf, blind [...] I never feel relieved [to pass] because I'll always correct them unless I'm in direct danger.

A minority of butch women describe being mostly seen by heterosexual and gay people as gay, demonstrating the enduring strength of the heterosexual presumption. Female masculinity has historically functioned in lesbian subcultures as a marker of desire. It continues to function as a subcultural resource which enables visibility.

However this too can be read as heterosexual, either by recuperating butch/femme

back into the heterosexual imaginary through a logic of inversion or by misreading butch gender presentation as male and the butch/femme couple as a heterosexual man and woman. Joan's gendered presentation is a conventional, white, mainstream masculine style, and she is either read as male or lesbian but never as a heterosexual woman. This is quite deliberate on her part. She is in her forties and has a heterosexual married past in which she felt uncomfortable conforming to the normative femininity which was expected of her by those around her, and now wishes for her sexual identity to be unambiguous. 'I don't want people to think I'm straight. I want people to know who I am and what I am'.

### **Readings and misreadings**

Style and fashion function as signifiers of lesbianism. There is a mainstream androgynous 'lesbian look' which all interviewees were able to describe and are all able to recognise, although this is often invisible to heterosexual onlookers. Nancy, white and in her 40s, is more ambivalent about her masculinity and more likely to describe herself as androgynous than butch. She describes her gendered presentation in terms of authenticity and individuality rather than as conscious visibility. She too is frequently read as male.

Nancy: They'll say 'ok sir', or 'hi sir' or 'thank you sir' and then they do a double take, or you open your mouth and they say 'oh sorry'. It doesn't bother me. I suppose people just glance and it's the short hair and the stance and the clothes, and maybe I just have this aura about me - no, I think it's just physical.

Lesbians who identified as butch and femme and who did not conform to the androgynous look were often misrecognised by both straight and gay onlookers. An unambiguously masculine style tended to be read as heterosexual male, while a conventionally feminine style was read as heterosexual female. This may be particularly marked for black and Asian lesbians. There was a sense in which passing was not an option for black women.

Luisa: I've spent all of my life not fitting in so it used to really piss me off and bug me, not just about being a lesbian but about being black as well and I can't separate those things out.

Seni suggests that Asian women are more likely to be misread by white heterosexuals as straight, both as men and women. In her experience Asian women have to do less masculinity than white women to pass as male. She refers back to when her hair was very short and she was more stereotypically butch, reflecting that this ability to pass as male made her and her femme partner less visible as lesbians.

Historically butch has borne the weight of being the visible marker of lesbianism, and so butches have to defend themselves against the homophobia that goes with that. The use of a discourse of authenticity with regard to gender style can be seen as defensive and reactive. Femmes have historically had to bear the weight of invisibility, so the claiming of a femme identity operates within quite different power relations. This invisibility is both in the heterosexual world, and brings with it unwanted male attention, the heterosexual presumption and the constant need to disclose or else pass. This applies to other lesbians as well as to heterosexuals, leading to a lack of recognition and solidarity, as well as suspicion and even hostility, because by doing femininity 'properly' the femme is often perceived to be deliberately choosing to pass rather than disclose. This apparently gives her access to a whole area of heterosexual privilege that butches, by nature of their masculine gender, do not and cannot have.

Heterosexual ignorance, misunderstanding and misreading of femme style was assumed by the participants, many of whom said that they would never use butch/femme discourse in the presence of heterosexual people as it would simply be misunderstood and reinforce negative stereotypes. For femmes in particular this misunderstanding was likely to involve undermining their identity by associating them with a lapsed but underlying heterosexuality. Many femmes reported feeling similarly misunderstood by some lesbians.

### **Femme invisibility**

Many lesbians and even butch and femme women who are more familiar with the

subcultural styles have difficulty distinguishing between femme and heterosexual performances of femininity. Gender performances are read in particular contexts which have a bearing on their meanings regardless of intention. For femmes in particular the reading of their femininity as queer was understood to be context dependent.

Gill: I think the only way you can do it is if you see a big group of women and they're all wearing dresses and strappy sandals then they are probably straight, although there might be one person in there who is gay and femme, whereas if you see a group of women and most of them are wearing trousers but one or two of them are wearing dresses, then they're probably gay- in the village. It's generalising, there is an androgynous, slightly butchy thing going on, it's also a thing about language, when people are careful not to use gender in their sentences [...] It's the company that you keep- I wouldn't spot a femme woman in a crowd of straight women. But you would in a gay situation.

Helen: Yeah then you are blatantly like – I don't think a femme woman generally walks around with butch women unless she's gay. So that does immediately identify you as gay.

Claire is a femme and at the time of the interview was involved with another femme lesbian. She explained the way that appearance, behaviour and context combine to produce particular readings of her identity.

Claire: It depends what we're doing, if we're shopping then we can probably pass as straight. In some ways I think when two women are together it's less likely that you pass as straight, regardless, I think. Just because of the way that you relate towards each other.

She is mostly read as lesbian by other lesbians. Her performance of femininity is unconventional and includes piercings and tattoos and contributes to an ambiguity with regard to her identity. However she described her frustration when this is misread by other lesbians.

Claire: I went to Lesbos one year and got asked if I was a lesbian, in a lesbian bar. No I'm just an incredibly stupid straight person! I was actually camping in the campsite. Like you'd go and do that if you wasn't a lesbian. It's because I had long hair. It must have been because you don't even wear clothes, most of the time. People check that I'm not straight. Not all the time but it does happen. They do the 'Oh, do you sleep with men?' 'are you a lesbian?' type thing.



Helen complains about how difficult it is to be visibly femme as a single woman.

Helen: Being a femme on the gay scene at the moment is impossible, because basically the clubs are full-up with straight girls. In their little dresses and heels and blah blah blah, and most dykes that I know will not approach a femme looking girl in a gay club because they think she's straight. So if you're a femme you're then in an awkward situation of do I go out dressed as I want to in a dress and heels [...] and risk getting no attention from gay people all night- even if you don't want to pull, it's horrid to have that blank thing going on. Or do I buy into more dykey fashion and push towards a slightly more butch side and not feel comfortable. So the relationship between femmes and straight girls in my opinion is strained to say the least [...] And the fashion as well seems to be very androgynous now, not much room for being either butch or femme. Like if you're going to be a fashionable dyke you're kind of a bit in between.'

The legacy of radical feminism is evident in the mainstream lesbian discourse which positions butches as 'gender warriors', and femmes as 'dupes'. One of the femmes, who was highly active in the women's movement in the 1970s, commented ironically:

Jan: Oh yes I'm a fluffy little thing without a brain-cell in my body... whereas butches are out there – they've thought about it, yeah!

A series of oppositions are commonly set up in mainstream lesbian discourse which favours androgyny and tends to see butches as natural and authentic, and femmes as artificial. This echoes the distinction in mainstream culture between masculinity as natural and understated and femininity as frivolous. Similarly butches are seen as outside and femmes inside the closet.

Luisa: I think it obviously is true, butches are much more out there [...] you are much more visible and also much more vulnerable, and it does really piss me off sometimes actually, femmes who, you're in the pub and men are chatting them up and in some ways I think they do play along with that- not all of them, but also having said that it's there's no rules that you've got to tell everybody you're a lesbian, but I think if you're out there with a butch you're telling everybody you're a lesbian. Sometimes you have to deal with the consequences of that [...] but is it a cop out, I suppose it depends if you're doing it for those reasons.

Butches are often seen as 'real' and femmes not as 'real' lesbians. It is possible to identify a femme repertoire which has been developed in opposition to this, which

figures the femme as knowing and subversive; a version of femininity which is then contrasted with heterosexual femininity (see Chapter 6). In this repertoire the negative perception of femme as an identity in feminist discourse is shifted onto heterosexual femininity, which then becomes apolitical, conformist and non-threatening. Femmes' accounts of 'doing' lesbian beauty can be seen in terms of a negotiation of beauty discourses. They often describe feeling pressure to 'do' lesbian, and so reject femininity, yet feel trapped by the androgynous look. Femmes, often in a very knowing way, 'do' femininity in a lesbian context.

Helen: I used to have a grade one shaved head and stomp around in dungarees and doc martens, I did the full on dyke thing, and then came round to experimenting with femininity all over again in a different way, after I'd got into feminism and like questioned femininity, I then came back to it, and reclaimed it with a sense of fun. So I think being a femme has an awareness to it that just being feminine doesn't.

One of the young women talked about the assumptions made by heterosexual people regarding the relationship between gender performance and sexuality, noting the scrutiny of lesbians and the assumptions that are made.

Ellie: Because the thing is if you've got two girls and you know that one's gay and one's straight, and the straight one's wearing the track-suit, then she's still - she's just straight. And that sounds really stupid but [...] if this person is wearing like a track-suit and she's still straight, and if she's wearing a track-suit then she's butch. Or if she's got short hair or if she does this or does that then she's butch. And I don't like it. And it's usually only with gays that it's applies to. The straight person is not being pointed out as anything, she's just straight. So a straight woman can have short hair, run around, play football, do all sorts of things and that label would never be attached. I suppose I've got this attitude because of all my prejudiced 'friends' - that I did have - I've mainly got that attitude from what they've said. So if you sense that there's something a bit butch about yourself then you'll try to change it. Because I don't want to be [...] that sort of stereotype.

Ellie's gender style is conventionally feminine although she describes herself as quite tomboyish and enjoys playing football. She offered a scenario whereby if she was described as butch on the basis of the way that she walked across a room, for example, then she would guard herself against this and consciously try to walk in a 'womanly' way for the rest of the day.

It was common for femmes to report that they were more visible when with a butch partner, and this is reflected in much of the literature on butch/femme. Several femmes described their pleasure at being more visible when with a butch woman but the discomfort of their butch and androgynous partners at being clearly read as butch lesbians.

Gill: She was worried about her appearance in some way and I said I do like being with someone who looks butcher than me because it makes me look gayer.

The way in which being seen with a femme makes butch and androgynous lesbians more visible is rarely acknowledged in the literature on butch/femme. Androgynous women who may otherwise pass as straight suddenly become visible as lesbians when with a femme. Where two butch or androgynous women may, due to the heterosexual presumption, be perceived as heterosexual friends, the femme presence sexualises the coupling in a highly visual way. The femmes drew attention to this and to the discomfort of many of the more androgynous lesbians they had known. The reading (and misreading) of personal style as either butch or femme, or even recognisably lesbian is profoundly context specific.

### **Subcultural capital and competencies**

One of my research strategies was to enable discussion of visual discourses through the use of visual images. The participants were asked to respond to a range of archetypal lesbian images taken from a variety of lesbian media and which reflected the range of lesbian gender styles. This facilitated discussion of which looks they found most attractive for themselves and in others. They were asked to arrange the images along a butch/femme continuum and also to consider whether each image was recognisably lesbian. This enabled discussion of the visual cues with which lesbians make themselves visible to one another and the contextual elements of these readings.

All of the respondents were familiar with terms such as 'dyke-spotting' and

'gaydar' and the pleasures of recognition. They were able to go into detail with regard to the physical signifiers of lesbianism including short hair, types of jewellery, physical stance and walks, eye-contact and so on. Thornton uses Bourdieu's work on class and distinction to develop the term 'subcultural capital' which confers status within a given field (1997: 202). The readings offered showed how subcultural capital and competencies varied across the range of lesbians. In particular women who positively identified as butch or femme were more likely to be familiar with the subcultural and historical contexts of the identities, to recognise the styles visually and to positively evaluate butch/femme in those terms. Androgynous women and those with more ambivalent relationships to the terms 'butch' and 'femme' had not gone through the process of positively identifying themselves in this way. Although that attribution may have been made by others, their understandings of butch/femme were more likely to be more negative and come from either the hegemonic culture or feminism. I would suggest that younger lesbians may lack the subcultural resources with which to positively evaluate butch/femme and to resist heteronormative readings of lesbian subcultural styles. The terms had little meaning for young lesbians beyond their pejorative use. For instance Ellie stated that she did not understand female masculinity or why a lesbian would want to go out with anyone who 'looked like a man'. Bearing in mind that the butches said very similar things with regard to transgendered identities the issue would seem to be one of degree. The statements tended to reflect the values and understandings of the dominant culture with regard to butch/femme. The latter was of little relevance to lesbians of this age and so their knowledge of the culture was limited. At the same time, as Ellie also pointed out, the first piece of information generally given in personal ads in the lesbian and gay media is in relation to butch/femme.

While other masculine/androgynous lesbians may have been critical of butch/femme or have distanced themselves from the label there was usually an understanding of their historical role or the pressure to conform to conventional feminine beauty standards and they would typically draw upon feminist discourses or discourses of 'natural' or 'inner' beauty in support of their own

rejection of normative femininity. Butch lesbians also drew on these discursive resources.

### **Lesbian aesthetics?**

Butch/femme can be seen as shared subcultural resources which are used to construct alternative lesbian subject positions. There can be no 'outside' of gender so some femmes chose 'femininity with a twist'. However femmes were often invisible, even to each other and butches, unless in a lesbian context, and so their styles were often misread. A more glamorous and flamboyant femme style deliberately mixed up styles, had incongruous elements, was highly sexualised as an image, or was closer to a drag queen aesthetic.

Emma: To me a lot of really high femmes look more like drag queens than straight girls anyway. When you're really playing up femininity to the max you don't look like a straight woman.

Liz: I think femme does tend to exaggerate more the costume side of femme, and femmes tend to be quite adventurous with it as well I think, if you think of the classic femmes and the classic 50s outfits and they have glamorous handbags and it really takes it to an extreme, they've always got large collections of shoes and handbags, and many straight women wouldn't necessarily have that.

'Femme' was articulated by femmes as a subject position which offered female sexual agency through a negotiation and appropriation of the discourses of femininity. It was seen as a form of citation of gender codes which constructs a specifically lesbian gender, and described in terms of glamour, extravagance and sexual power.

Rugg (1997) distinguishes between femme and feminine lesbians, arguing that the 'lipstick lesbian' aesthetic of the latter has been part of the assimilationist project in the US. She describes the difficulties in claiming a femme identity while at the same time distinguishing oneself from the assimilationist politics of the straight-acting, butch-hating, 'lipstick-lesbian' culture of 1990's Los Angeles. Class inflects femme, so that the association between femme and prostitute that Nestle's (1987) work has drawn attention to becomes an insult. Femininity is considered useful as

long as it promotes a straight-acting respectability. 'Without brand-name clothes or when not classy enough to blend in, when the heels are high enough to call attention, then femme acquires a fallen woman status and is used as a pejorative term' (Rugg, 1997: 178). Like drag queens and butches, working class high femmes are too visibly different and something of an embarrassment to the assimilationist project. A similar point was made by many of the participants in distinguishing femme style from mainstream heterosexual femininity. Femme style is often deliberately loud and sexual rather than conformist and respectable.

Claire: I think that looking femme is quite a strident thing. You're not choosing to look flouncy and pink necessarily, it's not a flouncy image, it's not something that's soft, necessarily, it can be but I don't think it is necessarily.

Emma: I think butch and femme lesbians tend to think that femme is just natural femininity but I know that [...] it's something that I do really consciously, and other femmes do, increasingly younger femmes know that they're putting it on, younger more conscious femmes I'm talking about rather than feminine lesbians who probably think that's their natural state to be. But I think there's beginning to be a dialogue around that, and certainly in my social circle there's a lot of emphasis on how well you do it. A lot of appreciation of somebody putting on a really good show, not for butches necessarily but for us.

This visual distinction between femme and normative femininity was insisted upon by femmes and butches but passed unnoticed by the more androgynous women as well as the wider population. The possession of subcultural capital and competencies is important again here. Gill, a bisexual femme distinguished femme from femininity by emphasising its conscious and playful elements and the relationship to drag. Whereas normative femininity was associated with conformity and immaculate make-up and appearance, she says that 'I do almost stage make-up and I don't care!'

Gill: I think we're doing it with a lot more knowingness, with a lot more piss take [...] I do feel comfortable going over the top, wearing wigs and that.

The drag-like quality of femme gender performance may be confined to gay space. On a day to day basis Gill's femininity is played down and was described

as being much closer to and probably indistinguishable from the femininity of heterosexual women. One of the butches similarly emphasised the hyper-femininity of femme performance and contrasted it with the lack of visibility for femmes in everyday situations. However in spite of the attempts of femmes to distinguish between heterosexual and femme femininity their gendered styles are often misread even lesbians familiar with butch/femme subcultures.

Jay: Femmes- sometimes they're *more* feminine than straight girls in terms of how they present themselves and how they look and the time and care they take over their appearance, they sometimes look *extra* feminine. [femme friend] has a mobile phone and the case is this lace thing with sequins on it, the average straight girl wouldn't have that- she wouldn't bother. Obviously if you see them in a gay club then - but then there's so many fag hags and straight girls hanging around now. Sometimes it's their attitude in that they are more assertive, and the way that they relate to men- they don't really notice them in the way that straight women do- they don't change their behaviour when they're around them. But just passing them on the street- I don't notice them.

One of the femmes admits that in gay clubs she often assumes that femmes are bisexual.

Helen: I do it, myself, if I see femme women in a gay club I'm like oh fucking straight girls again, and then I think to myself this is exactly what I hate people doing to me, but I wouldn't approach a femme woman in a club, because I'd think she was straight, and I fancy butch and femme women, but I wouldn't approach a feminine woman in a club, because I'd be worried, unless she was really like blatantly snogging a woman or something, so you knew. Like so I'm just as guilty of putting my own stereotypes onto other people that I don't like myself.

Her own femininity is consciously unconventional in an attempt to make her visibly lesbian but she realises that she is still not clearly readable as queer even to other lesbians. She may not 'spot' herself.

Most butches expressed personal style in terms of the repertoire of authenticity, drawing on discourses of natural, inner or political beauty. Far fewer expressed this in terms of choice, or spoke of masculinity as performative, and the attitudes tended to be less playful. There was little 'dressing-up', playing with looks, and the typical look tended to be played down, even where it was fashion-conscious. The butch aesthetic was closer to 'dominant lesbian beauty', and the androgynous

look. This latter look plays down gender differences.

However some butches were developing a distinctive flamboyant butch look, drawing on but distinct from heterosexual male fashion, playfully using the juxtaposition of masculine signifiers with the female body, and this was expressed in terms of choice and performance. Sometimes these butches passed as male and were relieved by this from the point of view of personal safety, but clearly this was not the aim. In this sense it is quite different from 1950's and 60's when on the street and in the workplace 'passing' as male was often essential and shaped butch style. Halberstam (1998: 234) agrees that the need for butches to pass is central to the lack of a lesbian drag tradition, but also insists on the importance of '...mainstream definitions of masculinity as nonperformative', so that while masculinity 'just is', in the language of advertising, femininity 'reeks of the artificial'.

The default status of masculinity means that the refusal of normative femininity is read as male identification. Crowder (1998: 52) argues that since lesbians are reared within the heterosexual imperative and dominant social definitions of femininity they are invisible within the category 'women' unless they choose to differentiate themselves. In a culture where so much behaviour is coded masculine or feminine, she argues that it is inevitable that many lesbians gravitate towards masculinity as there are few ways to express one's refusal to conform.

Jay distinguishes between butch masculinity and heterosexual masculinity in terms of details, brands and accessories. While she freely draws on mainstream men's fashion and sees her gendered style as closer to this than 'dyke stuff' she is able to distinguish between the ways in which this is worn.

Jay: I suppose a lot of dykes wear men's clothes. Like now I've got a Ben Sherman shirt on which a lot of lads wear and if I was to also be wearing cream or brown jeans with this or combats and not Acupuncture trainers but Nike or Adidas or something, then I would probably look exactly like them but I've actually got cords on and Acupuncture trainers.[...] and a rainbow ribbon on it as well. Little differences.

The dominant butch aesthetic combined masculine signifiers with a visibly female



body and used that gender ambiguity and dissonance to produce a specifically lesbian style. There was also a butch aesthetic which was closer to transgender, and was sometimes described as such by these lesbians. Here the dissonance between gendered style and physical body was played down and the overlap between the two was almost seamless. Physically feminine characteristics were worked on to produce a more masculine body, so that the proportion and shape of muscle and fat is transformed. This drew on popular cultural images of masculinity which were often based in a gay men's aesthetic, something which was noted by several butches.

Seni explains that one of the good things about being a man would be that, 'They can build up muscles much easier than being a woman. And what I quite like about men is how they look and I suppose there is this gay men's aesthetic where muscle, six-pack, I'd like to have a body like that.'

Personal style was seen as important in terms of 'being oneself' particularly for butches as this involved an element of refusing to 'do' femininity in conventional ways. Butches were less reflexive in articulating their own gendered practices and tended to use a repertoire of authenticity in relation to their gender identification. Gabby was one of the few to stress the performative aspect of 'doing' butch.

Gabby: I've got a silver, silk Italian shiny like Robert de Niro wears in Casino at the beginning, and I wear it with a Hawaiian shirt open with a pair of ox blood loafers with little bars across the front - I'd go out looking like- I like that 70's gangster look when I'm getting dressed up. and I don't see any other butches doing that. I never see anyone looking like me. I also remember when I used to do a skinhead thing years ago I used to go to Venus Rising in the late 80's and I used to wear bleached out Levis and 8 hole cherry Doc Martins and braces and it looked really sexy and a lot of the gay boys were doing it, but no dykes were doing it at all. I like being a bit sartorial. I do like dressing up. I don't always wear a suit when we go out - special occasions. I really do like clothes and playing with fashion.

## Conclusions

Lesbian masculinities and femininities are frequently read as butch and femme

and understood as derivatives of heterosexuality. Heterosexual genders are also read in a heteronormative context. Halberstam's (1998a) work on female masculinity extends the concept beyond butch lesbian identities to examine transgendered masculinities and acknowledge heterosexual female masculinities. The boundaries of the latter are socially and culturally variable. Work on women in sport, for example, shows how the spectre of 'butch' haunts female athleticism, policing the borders of acceptable gender. Beyond this one's heterosexual identity becomes suspect and with it comes the suspicion of wanting to be (like) a man. Feminist work has shown how conventional feminine beauty practices and gendered styles are generally read within a heterosexual framework as inviting male attention. Feminism offered androgyny as a way out of this bind. Feminist critiques of butch and femme unfortunately remain within the same logic, unable to see the specificity of lesbian gender performances.

Butch-femme is often characterised as imitative, unable to imagine an alternative to heterosexual styles, a copy of the 'real' thing. Butler's insistence on the performative status of all gender enables a re-thinking of butch-femme. However in a heteronormative society, saturated with heterosexual imagery, in which 'opposites' attract, and in which masculine is unmarked and seen as natural, it is difficult to create styles, fashions and practices that are genuinely independent, or which can be read as such. The attempts of lesbian feminists to de-sexualise lesbianism and make it women-centred can be seen as an attempt to do just that. However heteronormative readings of androgyny as not feminine and therefore butch or masculine meant that lesbian visibility, when achieved, was often liable to be misread as male or butch. Similarly within 'dominant lesbian beauty', androgynous lesbians are seen as butch, regardless of their own definition of gender identity. Rather than seeking to deny gendered difference, butch-femme styles use these differences in a creative subversion of the dominant gendered signifiers. However the cultural barriers of heteronormativity mean that these styles are often misread. Styles which clearly draw on the dominant gendered styles are frequently misread by the dominant culture as well as by other lesbians.



## **Chapter 8: Power, Parody and Subversion**

In conclusion I want to return to queer theory and issues of power, parody and subversion. Seidman is critical of, '[...] the refusal of the poststructuralist critique of the logic of identity [...] to name a "subject" or agent of critique' (1997: 134). The critique of identity politics and critique of the disciplinary effects of identity 'conflates identity with domination and a politics of subversion with a politics against identity' (1997: 134). He argues that the politics of subversion offered becomes little more than a disruptive performance against identity.

Butler has repeatedly contested readings of performativity which imply a volitional subject (1993: 7). I argue that the continued reading of her work in this way is due to its undertheorised concept of agency and to its social and discursive location. The insistence in queer and poststructuralist theory on the provisional, performative and unfinished status of identities and on seeing identities as sites of contestation becomes in itself a powerful discursive resource. It is possible to identify a repertoire of subversion in the accounts in which performance, parody and camp are combined with discourses from feminist and lesbian and gay politics. I locate these theoretical issues in the context of everyday performances of identities, looking at how power is perceived, how identities may be imposed and contested, the prohibitions on female masculinity and the costs of identifying as femme. I conclude by considering the subversive potential of lesbian gender performances.

### **Queer Theory, Gender trouble and Subversion**

Queer theory may be difficult to summarise but Foucault's (1978) influence, both independently and as taken up by Butler (1990, 1993a), has been central in dislodging the theoretical binaries of voluntarism and determinism and emphasising the productive possibilities of power.

Key to this argument is the thesis that in order to be intelligible, the law

compels certain repetitions, the remaking of (gender) identity as an ongoing series of repetitious acts that become sedimented as the linear effects of identity. Yet at the same time, in being dependent on repetitious acts of renewal, the law produces possibilities of alternative or even transgressive practices and performances. (Campbell and Harbord, 1999: 231)

Butler (1993: 15) argues that her work does not rule out agency, but that agency and resistance are immanent to power and reiterative rather than external. Transgressive performances of gender and sexuality are seen as a product of power or 'the law'.

The thrust of the work of Butler (1990) and Sedgwick (1991) has been to question naturalised identity categories and expose their instability. In particular Butler's early work interrogated the concept of gender and developed a way of seeing gender as performative. This has frequently been understood as seeing gender as a kind of voluntary theatrical performance, for example by Benhabib (1995), an understanding from which Butler has subsequently distanced herself (Butler, 1993a). Part of this reading of Butler has involved a valorisation of practices such as drag and butch/femme as transgressive and therefore subversive. This has led to debates around the status and impact of practices such as camp performance, radical drag and butch/femme (Meyer 1994; Tyler 1991; Case 1993).

### **Parody**

Butler's work has contributed to and been read in the context of debates on radical drag and camp as part of queer political strategies. Tyler (1991) argues that radical drag uses inversion in a parodic way. 'In mimicry, as in camp, one "does" ideology in order to undo it, producing knowledge about it: that gender and the heterosexual orientation presumed to anchor it are unnatural and even oppressive' (1991: 53). Therefore, 'the butch lesbian or gay queen marks 'his/her' impersonation as such through the use of incongruous contrasts, signs of double gender identity, as well as through ... parodic excess. This 'excess' is what prevents drag from being mere inversion, signifying a distance from what could

be a heterosexual role" (Tyler 1991: 55). There is a danger in femme performances of this not being recognised because does not rely, as butch does, on excess and incongruities, recontextualising masculinity. For Butler (1990) and Case (1993), femme gender performances recontextualise femininity by directing this at another lesbian in order to signify her desire, and this is what distinguishes them from heterosexual femininity. The femme participants interviewed also made this distinction. If it was simply inversion then homosexual relationships could be recuperated back into the heterosexual models of masculinity and femininity. Parodic excess aims to get the audience to recognise the fraudulence of gender signifiers, "playing [parodying] the gender role so as to hold it at a distance foregrounds the fact that it is a role rather than nature" (Tyler 1991: 53). In effect, parodic excess is camp employed consciously to produce a subversive effect.

The excessive performance of masculinity and femininity within homosexual frames exposes not only the fabricated nature of heterosexuality but also its claim to authenticity. The "macho" man and the "femme" woman are not tautologies, but work to disrupt conventional assumptions surrounding the straight mapping of man/masculine and woman/feminine within heterosexual and homosexual constructs. (Bell, Binnie, Cream, Valentine, 1994:33)

Tyler points out that claims for the subversive status of butch/femme or drag which depend on their queer context are tautological and depend on reinstating an essential difference between straight and gay (1991: 56). Claims to subversion ultimately rely upon authorial intention as a way of distinguishing between radical camp and drag and unenlightened masquerade.

These debates are often too abstract and need to be connected to everyday practices and a sense of social location. This strategy of making gender visible in order to dislodge its naturalised status is not necessarily subversive and is subject to readings made in particular contexts. Despite femme claims regarding the specificity of femme femininity, femme femininity is still frequently misread. Even those lesbians interviewed who identify as butch or femme and have the necessary subcultural capital to read femme style in line with its authorial

intention expressed difficulties in recognition. This shows the difficulties in coding femme as recognisably queer.

### **Performativity and agency**

Morrill describes how camp has been linked to drag and butch/femme and theorised as gender performance through masquerade theory, becoming 'recognized as an example par excellence of a postmodern denaturalization of gender categories' (1994: 110). Particularly in the early 90s the work of Butler in particular became popularised through queer politics and culture and associated with work on precisely the type of volitional and conscious parodic performance that she had criticised.

However, as Deutscher (1997) shows through her re-examination of 'Gender Trouble' (1990), Butler's argument is vulnerable to such readings because of the lack of clarity in her own work as to what may constitute subversion. She demonstrates that there is a textual basis within Butler's work for readings which stress the subversive potential of willed, transgressive gendered practices which overlook her focus on the compulsory and enduring aspects of gender. I would argue that these readings are also readily taken up because of the way that they tie in with other radical discourses available within lesbian and gay political culture, discourses that draw in part upon voluntarist arguments. For butch and femme lesbians in particular, whose identities and practices are marginalised in lesbian culture, often understood as imitative of heterosexuality, and positioned as reactionary and male-identified in feminist critiques, work which links butch/femme, performativity, parody and transgression becomes a positive and valuable discursive resource. A small minority of participants reported some familiarity with queer theory or politics. Many more combined repertoires of authenticity and performance in a more pragmatic way. Although I have identified in these accounts a sense in which gender performances are situated and involuntary, 'performance' is also used as parodic in precisely the sort of conscious and volitional way Butler criticises. The performative status of all gender is asserted primarily as a defence against charges of the inauthenticity of

lesbian genders and desires; more often the conscious performance of femme femininity is contrasted with a heterosexual femininity which is positioned as unthinking and compulsory.

### **Discursive and social location**

Lesbian identities are constructed in particular social and discursive locations. If this involves contact with lesbian and gay cultures, it will also involve contact with discourses developed specifically as part of an attempt to politicise sexual identities. While this varies according to time, place and the type of 'scene' that one came out into or is involved in, for most women this has involved encountering discourses of feminism and gay identity politics.

The emphasis in second-wave feminism on the politicisation of the personal, and the particular emphasis on the critique of heterosexual sex as key to the maintenance of male dominance, led to debates about political lesbianism which have voluntarist foundations. At the same time the discourses of gay rights which grew out of 1960s liberationist and civil rights movements drew on the work of sex radicals such as Marcuse (Weeks 1985). While much of the analysis and political activity that went with this initially drew heavily on Marxism, by the end of the 1970's a discourse of individualism and identity politics based on an ethnic model, based in the development of commercial 'scenes' in metropolitan areas, was dominant, particularly in those gay communities less influenced by feminism. The rhetoric of 'coming out', while attempting to address queer invisibility and draw attention to our collective numbers, similarly relies on the political efficacy of individual actions in the sphere of the 'personal'.

Rubin's article 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' (1993), first published in 1984 can be seen as defending a sex radical position at a time when this debate was attempting to police the boundaries of 'lesbian'. Rubin was taking up a position defined in opposition to that of Rich's 'lesbian continuum' and emphasising sexuality rather than female solidarity as the



foundation of lesbianism. This also suggested a queer position prior to the reclaiming of the term by attempting to make the links with other non-mainstream and marginalised sexual identifications. This is clearly directed against an assimilationist position and those lesbian feminist theories that played down the role of sex in identity. This was possibly a necessary stand to make politically. S-M and butch-femme were very much a part of these debates as forms of erotic preferences which came under fire from radical and lesbian feminism and which were interpreted as eroticising power imbalances and social inequalities. There is a danger though in Rubin's position of endorsing a sex radical position of drawing on the same themes as Reich and Marcuse and emphasising the liberatory potentialities of an unleashed sexuality, as a natural force or drive which has been repressed (Weeks 1985). This is the kind of position Foucault explicitly rejected and which social constructionism in general has sought to overcome.

The so-called 'sex wars' of the 1980s that divided sections of the feminist and lesbian communities over issues of pornography, s/m and butch/femme were roughly divided between lesbian feminist and sex radical positions. To speak of a 'sex radical' position may be over-homogenising a disparate collection of discourses, but this was developed in opposition to a lesbian feminist discourse which shared a common focus on sexuality and power, and which similarly made strong claims for the political importance and impact of sexual practices despite the radical discrepancies between the two. So Butler's work was sometimes read by queer theorists and in queer- and particularly male - communities as a theory of willed performance. At its most extreme this would imply that the importance of gender has diminished, that its deconstruction means that we are in a 'post-gender' period, or that one may wake up in the morning and consciously choose a gender for the day.

The emphasis on play and subversion could be combined with a 'sex radical' sensibility, producing a theory of gender performance, 'gender fuck' and transgression.

By choosing to deconstruct femininity in physical appearance- by refusing to

'pass'- lesbians do more than seek a freedom that can be mistaken for an embrace of the masculine (pun intended). We go further and, through our presentation of the body, openly challenge the heterosexual imperative. By revealing the artificiality of 'woman' as signified in the feminine body - that 'natural' entity which heterosexual American culture so contentiously constructs - the lesbian body undermines the very categories of sex and gender themselves (Griffin Crowder: 52-3)

Given the emphasis on the political status of personal conduct the elements of voluntarism underlying lesbian feminism, the rhetoric of 'coming out' from gay liberationist and sex radical discourses, it is not surprising that Butler's work, framed as it is by discussions of subversion, was and continues to be read in this way. These were not abstract issues for the participants but very real and live debates that form the basis of the construction, defence and attacks on their identities both inside and outside their communities. 'Performativity' has become another of the available repertoires through which to reflect upon and articulate one's own practices. The repertoires on which lesbians draw combine a range of ideas about subversion and co-option, transgression and recuperation by the mainstream.

### **Repertoires of subversion and intentionality**

In butch accounts gender nonconformity tended to be constructed through repertoires of authenticity, although this was sometimes combined with an emphasis on conscious transgression. Butch claims to subversion were tied to a repertoire of authenticity because this was located in their gender non-conformity, at the point at which the continuity between sexed bodies, gender and sexuality is disrupted (see Chapter 5). However several butch women talked about enjoying being different and the pleasures of transgression. If their masculinity was constructed as given and authentic rather than chosen, this could still be played up or down. Lesbian subcultures provide a social and cultural space in which female masculinity is tolerated and recognised, and may be valued and desired. For some of the butch and androgynous women I spoke to, their gender ambiguity and the unease it often provokes was a source of pleasure. Liz performs as a drag king and is hopeful that the increasing popularity and visibility of drag kings will

contribute to a greater awareness and acceptance of female masculinity

Liz: 'It probably is a little bit [challenging], you know? In that I'm allowing you to mistake me for the wrong gender and not objecting to that, it doesn't matter. And I think that the more people that see women who are a bit more masculine and learn to accept that then it's going to help in the future so that those of us who want to be like this can be like this, it will become a bit more accepted. I don't mind, if people call me the wrong gender then it's all right, I know I'm asking for it a bit because I am trying to confuse people a bit sometimes.

Carmen argues that butch visibility is transgressive. 'It's taboo. We make people question everything that they thought was natural and written in stone.' Similarly for Luisa, 'Butch is much more about the unconventional side of the lesbian community that a lot of straight people find more difficult to deal with.'

Femme claims to subversion tended to be through the conscious and knowing elements of their performance of femininity and the insistence on its specifically lesbian status. In Chapter 5 I claimed that femmes were more likely to use a repertoire of authenticity with regard to their sexuality, locating this at the point where femmes can be seen to disrupt the continuity between sexed bodies, gender and sexuality. Femme repertoires emphasising strength and consciousness emphasised the chosen status of their femininity. This is seen as subversive in the context of their sexual identity because of the way in which it disrupts discourses of inversion which only recognise butch lesbians and are dismissive of femme identification, challenging the stereotypes and expectations of heterosexuals. Nearly all the femmes I spoke to consciously choose to come out wherever possible.

Maria: It threatens them. It's not a political decision to be a lesbian but it certainly has a political effect. It's more unsettling when femmes come out because people's assumptions about you have been more secure, if you've got long hair and wear a skirt they assume you're a proper girl [...] it's as if you've been allowed in and then you're declaring yourself and they haven't had suspicions so then it's like, 'it could be anyone'.

Gabby: [femmes] are doing something very subversive because they're giving all their femme charms to a woman, not a man.

Femme is seen as subversive because of its location in lesbian culture.

It is reclaiming the attributes associated with femininity that have so often been used against us individually and collectively and using them for our own benefit and pleasure (Ortiz 1997: 92).

Femmes are portrayed as the 'enemy within', subversive but invisible to most, and there is a perception of the increased danger for femmes in coming out.

Women who look and act like girls and who desire girls. We're just the queerest of the queers (Davis 1992: 270)

'Straight' society was felt to be more threatened by femmes at a general and individual level. This is part of a repertoire of femme consciousness which is related to the stress on choice. For these femmes their performance of femininity is rooted in pleasure and desire and seen as transgressive. They see this as more subversive than a 'dyke' look because when they come out the effect is more unsettling for straight people.

Jan: I actually think it's harder [to be femme] because to have a very butch image you might face people who would be aggressive with you, because they see you in that way, but you tend to be aware of that, but if you look more femme, you tend to get treated as heterosexual, and when you knock people back- that's when they get really angry. Because you've misled them in some way. Even though you haven't.

### **The costs of doing butch and femme**

I have outlined the tendency within a repertoire of femme consciousness to position itself in opposition to a reified normative femininity. Martin is concerned that a similar distinction is made in theoretical work on gender performativity, contrasting cross-gender transgression with ' "the feminine" played straight' (1996: 73), celebrating the former as radical and implicitly denigrating the latter as conformist. She is right to point out that the ways in which femmes resist normative femininity have been under-theorised. She is also drawing attention to the fact that the privileging of visibility as a signifier of identity renders femmes invisible. However there is a danger in theorising gender as performance of likening it to an avant-garde transgressive practice and losing sight of the

mundane and depressingly predictable aspects of doing butch and femme in daily life.

In response to the comments of a femme lamenting her inability to 'do' masculinity successfully and thus positioning female masculinity as privileged, Halberstam observes that,

It is surely only within an academic discussion, however, that conformity and transgression can be so thoroughly uprooted from daily experience. While academics may celebrate transgression, the experience of transgression itself is often filled with fear, danger and shame rather than heroic self-satisfaction. (1998: 59)

Among the lesbians interviewed, a butch identity is not perceived as privileged or as a choice. Munt links the dialectic of inside/outside with that of pride/shame, noting that butches and femmes are often seen as failed women. This was reflected by some of my butch participants when talking about not being able to do femininity themselves while desiring it in other women.

All the butch and many androgynous women I spoke to were able to give a host of examples of 'gender shaming'; of being challenged about their gender in public toilets and other public places and of verbal abuse on the street. In the butch and androgynous accounts the operation of shame is central to the way in which power is experienced and gender is policed. 'The bathroom problem' in which those who present as gender ambiguous are challenged about their presence in the 'wrong' public toilet was a near-universal experience among butch and androgynous lesbians, as well as those femmes who do not match up to standards of normative femininity. Emma, a femme, describes getting 'gender weird stuff' thrown at her before she had come out. This increased later when she began to identify as femme and had a butch partner.

Emma: 'Are you a boy or a girl?' Constantly, about twice a week, all through my teenage years. Even before I cut my hair. I think I had a way of walking which I've probably modified a bit now but I had a really long stride and kind of bounced a bit, so it wasn't kind of feminine, and because I was very thin, especially once I cut my hair short. I would get it when I was in a skirt. It was very controlling, and it was young boys and older men, really controlling- 'are

you a boy or a girl?’ – just trying to knock you back into line. I didn’t start getting it from girls until I had come out and was more obviously a dyke, and then it was just a free for all.

Lesbian visibility brings with it the threat of violence and intimidation, and again this is different for butch and femme lesbians. Femmes tend to be visible only with butches or androgynous women, and so their experience of violence and intimidation is linked to this. Several femmes explicitly linked a decrease in harassment as individuals with their decision to look and identify as femme. At the same time, as many femmes pointed out, femininity brings with it the routine sexism and danger faced by heterosexual women without the advantages of heterosexual privilege. Michelle described feeling ‘overwhelmed’ by the everyday sexism she faced when identifying and looking visibly femme after years of ‘looking like a dyke’.

Claire: I think I can pass as in walking down the street- people aren’t necessarily going to assume I’m a dyke, so you pass on that front, and on the whole that does make life easier in some ways but then you get harassed on another level- I mean, women get harassed, it’s that simple, one kind of woman can get harassed in one way and one type can get harassed in another. The amount of blokes that you have- I mean blokes are ridiculous, they come up and say the most stupid things to you, they ask you to marry them, and you get that type of harassment [...]

However, the fact that the presence of a femme makes butch and androgynous women more visible as lesbians means that the majority of femmes had experienced verbal harassment and physical intimidation.

Helen: I was with a friend and I was dressed up hyper-femme to the point of drag queen and she was dressed up hyper butch to the point of drag king, and these bunch of blokes followed us down the spion and yelled really nasty abuse at us the whole way down [...] I remember it was really scary, so it was pretty abusive and threatening and nasty. [...] And another time when we were dressed up just butch and femme and we were going out to dinner and she was in a shirt and suit and tie, and I was in a dress, we didn’t get abuse but every single person walking down the street stopped and turned and looked and not in a nice way, even people in their cars. We were talking about it today; we were like why does it draw so much attention, a woman in a suit? Arm in arm with a woman in a dress. You’d think they’d never seen anything like it in their lives, a freak show or something.

Jan: A car on a dual carriageway literally came over the central reservation so that this car full of men could scream abuse at us. Another time two guys stopped the car and got out shouting abuse and some men on a building site chased them off.

Among the butches and androgynous lesbians I interviewed, verbal and physical intimidation and violence was common. One butch described having been hospitalised twice with broken limbs and ribs while another described being '[...] thrown through a plate glass window, and beaten up on buses and punched in chippies'. Luisa described having been beaten up, '[...] a few times. Usually in a pub. And I have friends who have been attacked on the street just for being out there visible butch lesbians'.

For the younger women this involved bullying at school, including hostility and humiliation from teachers. Paula described frequent verbal abuse and physical intimidation at school.

Paula: 'you fucking lesbo' and it's all over the toilets... because I'm the only one who's out, but there must be fucking loads of students, they just won't come out [...] I'm on a hitlist at school.

Jo: I've had my skirt removed a couple of times and lifted up in public because it's common knowledge that I wear boxer shorts- I get laughed at, I wear shorts under my skirt I get laughed at, just because easier- it's hard with the public humiliation thing but I think everyone's past that point now. Spitting and throwing bottles- because of the way I look and I don't know whether it's because I'm homosexual but the word dyke comes up a lot, which usually refers to butch anyway. At school and in the street.

There was often a relationship between masculine gender style and career, so that the majority of butch and masculine/androgynous women have consciously chosen work in fields where their gendered style will not be compromised. This is to the extent where certain jobs would not be considered because of the compulsory feminine gender performance they entailed.

Carmen is an androgynous lesbian and although ambivalent about looking 'like a lesbian' at the expense of her individuality, maintains that she would never go for a job or job interview which would involve softening the masculinity of her look, as this would be far too high a price to pay for a career.

Carmen: I work in hospitals where I can wear what I want. I did work in an office where I had to wear a suit so I just wore a pantsuit. I wouldn't [wear a skirt]. To be honest I've never been in that position. I'd wear my suit. It shouldn't matter. If it does I wouldn't want to work there.

For butch and androgynous women their gendered style constantly brings them into conflict with gendered norms and this positioning supports the construction of a repertoire of authenticity in order to maintain this aspect of their identity. The everyday costs of a masculine gender style should not be underestimated. The women showed a great deal of reflexivity with regard to the details of gendered presentation and the ways in which this can be softened.

Luisa: I can't do anything about it- well I could stop having my hair cut really short, but I'm not going to do that. And given that I'm black as well it is challenging for people sometimes. There are things you can do to soften it, I agree, but for example I wear my jewellery all the time. I used to do things like put a brooch on my suit, but it would be something that I liked anyway. I think early on I did do things like that, definitely. Now I have more confidence and experience, no. Generally I think people think 'dyke'.

Several butch women described blatant discrimination and incidents of gender shaming. Jay described trying to get a summer job in Index, 'working in the background stacking the shelves'.

Jay: I went in and asked for an application form and the woman was like 'oh Jean this "young person" was wondering if we had any forms' and being funny about it and the other one came and said 'oh no I think they've all gone' and then as I was on my way out I saw this schoolgirl go in and come out with a form. That's just the way it is. There's so many factors against me.

However with regard to jobs many femmes choose not to pass and some make a point of coming out prior to or at the interview stage.

Michelle: It's hard because my instinctive answer is that I would come out- I've always come out before I've been recruited, because I think if they're going to have a problem then I'd rather not work there. If I had to get that job



then what I normally wear for interviews, smart trousers, nice top, plain, nothing too frilly or fancy.

When asked about a hypothetical interview situation, many of the femmes described their usual interview outfit as a smart trouser suit rather than a skirt. Passing as straight remains an option that they are aware of although it may not be taken up voluntarily.

For femmes, as outlined in Chapter 7, their lack of visibility as lesbians produces a lack of recognition and affirmation from other lesbians, and is sometimes met with suspicion and hostility.

Judy: If I've gone out with people and met their friends I've met with suspicion and I find that offensive really, you know, do you trust her... Sometimes I wish I had shorter hair or looked more like a lesbian. At work you have to come out all the time, and people say, 'oh you don't look gay', so sometimes I wish I was more identifiable so I didn't have to do that all the time. I just look like I do and I think it would be false to go and cut all my hair off- this is the way I've always looked. I've seen women come out and change the way they look, but I feel comfortable with it.

Some butches and femmes described a sexism in lesbian subcultures that associates femininity with weakness. Sheila, a femme who had previously been married, described the attitude of her butch partner's friends.

Sheila: In the beginning a few friends of Jean's said it won't last and somebody actually said to me at a party, when Jean had been very ill and this person was very drunk and said 'we always thought you were a fliberty giberty blonde and you wouldn't cope with this, and we're all very shocked'. Words to the effect that I wouldn't cope with anything that needed strength. They didn't see the strength in me before [...] what amazed me was these people had known me for years and that's how they'd seen me and that shocked me- that they saw me as this dumb blonde.

Despite the femme repertoires of subversion and knowingness there was a strong sense of the exasperation and weariness involved in continually being positioned as heterosexual by default, and having to choose whether to let this pass or to come out again and again.

### **Butch and femme as imposed by others**

I have argued that both butch and femme are both difficult positions to inhabit. Both can be subversive of the heterosexual imaginary but in different ways and these are context dependent. This gives rise to distinctive identity accounts. For many gender ambiguous lesbians though, butch, like lesbian was used as a term of abuse and a label imposed by others. While some women go on to identify as and reclaim butch, for others the injurious associations are too strong or the identity feels too limiting.

Paula: Yeah, I hear them all the time, more by straight people, it's more they seem to want to categorise you into different groups. It's the only way they can understand it.... Oh god I hear that all the time at school- it's like 'which one of you is the man' and that in the relationship and they always presume it and they always say there's a really femme one and a dead butch one. You're just stereotyped all the time like that, and they always presume it's the butch one who's the man and all this and the femme one's dead submissive.

For many androgynous lesbians identifying as butch or femme was not associated with subversion and transgression but with conforming to homophobic prejudice.

### **Conclusion**

Butch/Femme, however, is internally self-contradictory from the beginning: inconceivability is nonetheless conceivable; a woman is nonetheless a man. What is important in the case of Butch/Femme is that the two processes- inconceivability and recuperation- and their internal contradictions coexist in a tension that never quite resolves itself, producing a systematic challenge to the necessary connection between gender and sexuality while appearing to reaffirm heterosexuality and forcing a consciousness of the artificiality and constructedness of gender positions. Neither completely regressive nor completely subversive, Butch/Femme is diverse in itself, encompassing a range of possibilities that all operate very differently in relation to a phallogocentric system. (Roof 1991: 245)

Roof locates a tension in the contradiction between the two processes which constitute butch/femme- 'inconceivability and recuperation' (1991: 245). She argues that this tension is never resolved so that at the same time as systematically challenging the connection between sexuality and gender and showing gender

positions to be artificial and constructed, butch/femme simultaneously appears to reconfirm heterosexuality and is recuperable by a phallogentric culture. I would argue that the subversive potential of a particular gender performance cannot be determined in the abstract or by individual intention and needs to be analysed with regard to its social and spatial location.

## **Chapter 9: Conclusions**

This thesis has addressed theoretical questions regarding the potential for developing ways of studying sexuality which draw on the different strengths and insights of queer theory and empirically based sociology. A range of theories have contributed towards developing a body of work in which the social construction of sexuality is theorised. While acknowledging the different epistemologies these employ, I have argued that these approaches can be seen as complementary in important ways, and have identified areas of intersection between them which suggest potential ways of developing a queer sociology. Poststructuralist and queer theorists draw upon Foucault's work to argue that discourses of sexuality are historically and culturally contingent. The links between discourse, knowledge and power emphasise the political nature of these, and the need to theorise discourses of sexuality in relation to wider social and discursive structures. Discourses of sexuality are performative and constitutive of subjectivity so that it is only by virtue of assuming a sex that one becomes a subject. However there is insufficient attention to agency within this work. While Foucault (1978) argues that resistance is central to his work, there is little sense of an informed agency. While there are problems with the concept of the subject typically employed in interactionist work, I have argued that queer theory needs to be supplemented by a theorisation of knowledgeable and reflexive agency. This does not need to imply a fully self-aware subjectivity positioned outside discourse. What is useful in the concepts of performativity and habitus is the sense of change and flux combined with the compulsive aspects of normativity as part of an unreflexive process. Gender may be materialised through normatively governed reiterative practices but this is a process that is permanently incomplete, leaving it unstable and vulnerable to contestation through resignification. At the same time there is room for intentionality and this need not be contradictory. The concepts of habitus and practice include a sense in which people can be seen as strategic improvisers able to negotiate their way through various situations. This may be shaped by particular dispositions. Bourdieu (1990, 1992) stresses that agency and structure

should not be seen as opposed but are bound up with each other. Individuals are also able to draw upon various forms of cultural and subcultural capital. Consciously subversive and transgressive gender performances, although framed by the dominant discursive formation, may have some transformative impact, establishing new subject positions and a degree of [sub] cultural space.

Jackson (1999) argues for recognition of the multi-layered nature of the social and openness to engagements with different approaches.

At the level of meaning sexuality is constituted as an object of discourse and through the specific discourses on the sexual in circulation at any historical moment. However, meaning is also deployed within and emergent from social interaction and hence finds its expression at yet another level- that of our everyday social practices, through which each of us negotiates and makes sense of our own sexual lives. Here, too, sexuality is constantly in the process of being constructed and reconstructed by what embodied individuals actually *do*. Finally, sexuality is socially constructed at the level of subjectivity, through complex social and cultural processes by which we acquire sexual and gendered desires and identities. (Jackson 1999, 5.8)

Performativity as theorised by Butler has also been criticised, misread and caricatured as casting identities as not only unstable and shifting, but as a kind of theatrical performance, so that one may wake up in the morning and consciously choose a gender for the day. This kind of view is then criticised for privileging intentionality and the view of white middle-class gay men whose only 'difference' is their sexual identity, and therefore for ignoring the very real effects of the operations of race, class and gender.

[...] your life is materially affected in ways you may not be able to control, despite your wish as a Chicana lesbian, for example, to claim a white-heterosexual male persona. (Shugar, Dana R 1999: 132)

This type of voluntarist reading has been strongly refuted by Butler. While there may be a conscious, intentional and even playful aspect to gender performance, neither gender nor performativity can be reduced to this. I argue that poststructuralist work on sexuality and gender can be used to develop a view of subjectivity as not only shaped by social and cultural processes but also as fundamentally contextual and structured by the intersection of various formations

(of race, class, age). For Jackson, Butler,

... discusses [the] enforced “materialisation” of “sexed” bodies almost entirely in terms of norms - but with no sense of where these norms come from and how they are constituted (Ramazanoglu 1995), and with no discussion of how they intersect with everyday social relations and practices. The social is thus reduced to the normative and what is normative goes unexplained. (1999 6.6)

The debates in lesbian and gay studies and the recent critique of queer theory are similar in some respects to debates in cultural studies and particularly subcultural theory. Within the UK academy and activist communities generally, poststructuralist ideas were taken up by those with a Marxist background, familiar with Althusser’s work on ideology and structuralism more generally, familiar with thinking in terms of social construction and critical of naturalising ideologies. Poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory suggested ways of theorising the processes by which structures and subjectivities are linked. Particularly with regard to gender and the critique of heterosexuality this offered a more complex theorisation than work on the internalisation of sex roles (Jackson 1999). Much of the work on subcultures in the late 1970s and 1980s was based on reading styles as texts and developing transgressive and subversive readings from this. As in cultural studies more generally there has been something of a paradigm shift towards a more ‘ethnographic’ style of analysis or to the recognition of the need for some empirical grounding for textual analyses. In lesbian and gay studies similar arguments have been made about queer readings of cultural texts and subcultural practices which are barely related to any social context or subjective interpretation. This is not to argue in favour of empiricism or to play down the role that queer theory has made to theorising issues of gender, sexuality and identity more generally. Jackson’s insistence on the role of empirically grounded work tends to privilege sociological access to an authentic ‘reality’ that stands in contrast to the discursive. My use of the concept of interpretative repertoires has enabled an operationalisation of queer theory which is grounded in empirical data but which refuses such a privileging.

The thesis addresses a number of substantive research questions about lesbian

genders and identities as they are articulated and lived through in everyday life. Queer theory has enabled a radically different way of theorising butch and femme as specifically lesbian genders and has challenged the heteronormative logic that presumes a continuity between sex, gender and desire. By questioning the assumption of 'real' and 'imitation' gender, Butler's work in particular has enabled a radically different way of theorising butch/femme as transgressive gender practice with the potential to reveal the contingent and performative nature of all gender. This thesis grounds these issues in a study of everyday gender performance, investigating the ways in which identities are articulated, constructed and managed while acknowledging that there is an involuntary aspect to these embodied processes. Identity accounts are theorised as performing a particular type of work in specific social and discursive locations, and I outline the ways in which these are positioned and strategically used. The concept of interpretative repertoires is used to theorise the ways in which lesbians are both positioned by and actively negotiate particular discourses. Identification as lesbian, and as butch, femme or androgynous is theorised as a complex and shifting set of practices.

The identification of repertoires of choice and performance, and the reluctance of the participants to use essentialist repertoires in an unqualified way challenges the assertion that the queer critique of identity as shifting and unstable is counterintuitive, and that at an everyday level identity accounts would be shaped by a 'folk essentialism'. At the same time the relationship between lesbian genders and heterosexuality in the accounts acknowledges the ways in which the two are interdependent, while seeking to disaggregate the two and claim butch and femme as authentic lesbian genders. This reinscribes a difference between and seeks to fix down lesbian and heterosexual genders at precisely the points at which queer theorists have complicated the inside/outside distinction. Without seeking to reinforce these boundaries, I argue that it is possible to identify particular butch and femme subject positions and interpretative repertoires. The grounding of the study in everyday practices and discourse enriches the understanding lesbian genders, sexual identities and enactments.

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## Appendix 1

### Participants

Annie, late 30s anglo-Irish, butch, working-class background B-F3/4 B6 F3.5  
 Beth, 30s white British, femme, working-class background B-F 9 B1/2 F 7/8  
 Carmen 30s Asian/European/Australian, butch, working-class background B-F 3 B7 F3  
 Claire, 30s white Irish, femme, working-class background B-F 7 B1 F 4/5  
 Ellie, mid-teens white British working-class background B-F 7.5 B 1,2 F 7.5  
 Emma, 30s white British, femme, middle-class background B-F 10 B4 F7/8  
 Gabby, 40s white British, butch, working-class background B-F1 B10 F-  
 Gemma, early 20s white British working-class background B-F2/3 B8 F 1,2  
 Gill, 30 white British, femme, middle-class background B-F10 B5 F5  
 Helen, early 20s white British, femme, middle-class background B-F7/8 B1,2 F8  
 Jan, 50s white British, femme, middle-class background B-F7/8 B6 F7  
 Jay, early 20s white Scots, butch, middle-class background B-F1, B7, F0  
 Jean, 60 white British, butch, working-class background B-F 3 B8 F0  
 Jo, mid-teens white British, butch, working-class background B-F3 B5 F0  
 Joan, 40s white British, butch, working-class background B-F1 B9 F2  
 Judy, mid 20s white British middle-class background B-F8/9  
 Kate, early 20s white British, butch, working-class background B-F5 B6 F5  
 Liz, 30 white British, butch, middle-class background B-F2.5 B6/7 F 2/3  
 Luisa, 30s black British, butch, middle-class background B-F3/4 B7 F7  
 Maria, 40s white British, femme, middle-class background B-F 9/10 B7 F10  
 Maya, late 20s black British, femme, working-class background B-F 4/5 B5 F8  
 Michelle, 30s white British, femme, middle-class background B-F10 B 3,4 F8  
 Nancy, 40s white British, middle-class background B-F4 B6 F3  
 Nicky, late 20s Jewish middle-class background B-F5 B5 F5  
 Paula, mid-teens white British working-class background B-F5 B4 F5  
 Seni, 30s Chinese, butch, working-class background B-F-B7 F3  
 Sheila late 50's white British, femme, working-class background B-F 8 B0 F10

#### Pilot interviews:

- \*\*\*\* 30s white British butch working-class background
- \*\*\*\* 20s white British butch working-class background
- \*\*\*\* 40s white British feminine middle-class background
- \*\*\*\* 30s white British butch/androgynous middle-class background

## Appendix 2: Interview Questions

- \*1a: *So what name do you use to describe your sexuality?*
- \*1b: *Have you always seen yourself as a lesbian/dyke?*
- \*1c: *Do you imagine that you'll always be a lesbian/dyke?*
- \*1d: *Have you had sexual relationships with men?*
- \*2: *What do you like about being a lesbian/dyke?*
- \*3a: *What to the terms butch and femme mean to you?*
- \*3b: *Well do you think they're relevant terms to lesbians in general?*
- \*3c: *How far do you think that butch and femme are relevant terms for thinking about your sexuality?*
- \*4a: *What I'd like to ask you to do now is to try and put yourself on a scale of one to ten, where butch is one and femme is ten. Where would you be?*
- \*4b: *the other way of doing that is if you purely think about your butch characteristics, how butch you are, on a scale of one to ten where would you be with, one being the least butch? And then the same with femme.*
- \*4c: *how many marks would you give yourself on a femme scale?*
- \*5a: *would you say that you've always seen yourself this way or has it changed over time?*
- \*5b: *why do you think that is?*
- \*6a: *do you think butch and femme are related to the heterosexual male-female model at all?*
- \*6b: *What do you think is the difference between femmes and straight women?*
- \*6c: *Or the difference between a femme's desire for a butch and a straight woman's desire for a man?*
- \*7a: *Are the women that you're attracted to mainly butch or femme?*
- \*7b: *Has it changed at all?*
- \*7c: *Can you say what qualities you are attracted to, either physical or emotional mental?*

\*8a: *Would you say you were 'on the scene'?*

\*8b: *Do you think of yourself as being part of a particular group of lesbians?*

\*8c: *how does this affect you?*

\*8d: *When/where did you come out? Were you in contact with other lesbians there then?*

\*8e: *Did you ever consider yourself a feminist?*

\*8f: *Do you think your sexuality has a political meaning?*

\*8g: *Have you experienced any influence from other lesbians/dykes about the way that you looked or your sexual practices, or the sort of sexual language that you used? (Positive or negative)*

\*9: *Have you ever experienced any of these things:*

\*9a: *have you ever been called names in public?*

\*9b: *Verbal abuse in the street?*

\*9c: *Physical intimidation?*

\*9d: *Physical violence?*

\*9e: *Hostility at work?*

\*10a: *Are you ever mistaken for a man?*

\*10b: *Why do you think that happens?*

\*10c: *How do you feel when it happens?*

\*11a: *How do you think you're generally seen in terms of your sexuality by straight people?*

\*11b: *Well, do you ever pass as straight?..or do they generally spot you?*

\*11c: *So how do you feel when you pass as straight? Does that bother you? Do you feel relieved or annoyed?*

\*11d: *What about your partner (i a).*

\*11e: *Do you think you're more likely to be seen as lesbians dykes when you're together?*

\*11f: *Do you think you're generally spotted as a lesbians dykes by other lesbians dykes?*

\*12a: *Are you happy being a woman?*

\*12b: *So is there anything about being a man that appeals to you?*

\*12c: *Were you a tomboy when you were younger? Do you think that you decided that for yourself or did other people decide that for you?*

\*13a: *How would you describe the way that you look? Can you give a list of adjectives?*

\*13b: *What about if you had to describe yourself in a personal ad?*

\*13c: *What do you think influences the way that you look?*

\*13f: *Do you ever buy men's clothes?*

\*13g: *are you comfortable being seen in dresses or skirts?*

\*14. *How do you recognise other lesbians in straight situations such as work, or on the street? What signs do you look for?*

\*15. *How would you say that your sexuality influences:*

*how you look*

*where you work*

*where you go socially?*

\*16a. *Are there any situations where you feel uncomfortable about your appearance?*

\*16b: *Do you ever change your behaviour for particular situations? Or your appearance? When and why?*

\*17. *Job interview question.*

\*18: *Do you think it's possible for a lesbian to look too masculine? Is it also possible to look too feminine do you think?*

\*19. *Do any of these terms mean anything to you?*

soft butch

drag butch

old-style butch

stone butch

baby butch

lesbian boy

daddy dyke

drag king

stud

dagger

diesel.

high femme

femme top or bottom

butch top or bottom

<sup>i</sup> Four of the thirty-one interviews were transcribed and analysed as a pilot study, and while they contribute to the overall analysis they have not been directly quoted in the study, either for reasons of confidentiality or because the participants are too well known to me.

<sup>ii</sup> I am thinking here of the debates about 'reflexive modernisation' and 'de-traditionalization' in the work of Giddens (1991), Bauman (1992), Beck (1992) Heelas, Lash and Morris (1996) and others.

<sup>iii</sup> 'sexy persona' is used by Newton and Walton (1984: 245) to refer to 'erotic identity' and is distinct from specific sex acts and roles. they describe it as 'how one images oneself as erotic object' (1984: 244).

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