

NAIL POLISH AND POLOS: THE WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES OF OUT
FEMME AND BUTCH LESBIANS

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite recent promising changes in laws and attitudes about gay and lesbian workplace inclusion, sexual orientation discrimination persists. Sociologists have documented that lesbians face discrimination in the workplace, such as a lack of support and respect by bosses and peers, being refused promotions, and encountering hateful and derogatory speech. It is likely that femme and butch lesbians experience sexual discrimination, prejudice, and bias differently. Femme lesbians present themselves as stereotypically feminine. Stereotypical feminine presentation includes wearing dresses or skirts, exposing cleavage, wearing jewelry, wearing high heels, carrying purses, and applying make-up, while often engaging in nurturing and subordinate behaviors (Crawley 2001; Moore 2006; Rifkin 2008). Femme lesbians are often able to pass as heterosexual. Conversely, butch lesbians may not be able to pass. Butch lesbians often present themselves as stereotypically lesbian (i.e., wear men's clothing, a short haircut and no face makeup). This research includes similar and different experiences of "out" femme and butch lesbians. I conducted semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews with out lesbians who self-identify as femme and butch. I found that femme and butch lesbians negotiate their sexual identity differently, and experience sexual harassment differently. Femmes commonly experience varied forms of harassment, while butch lesbians frequently responded that they do not allow it to happen. Both femme and butch lesbians experienced discrimination, but felt the discrimination was most likely due to their gender, not their sexuality. Although there has been progress in local, state and federal

policies and legislation, there needs to be further research on the issue of workplace discrimination based on one's sexual orientation as experiences differ based on a lesbian's sexual identity.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Institutions, such as the workplace, shape and define individuals' lives. Those who identify as lesbian or gay often actively explain or deny their sexuality because they are not conforming to dominant sexual and gender norms. Studies demonstrate that attitudes and laws related to sexual identity are changing (Connell 2012; Lev 2008; Ragins and Cornwell 2001; Rifkin 2008; Williams and Giuffre 2011), which has reduced fear of discrimination and lessened the number of individuals who identify as lesbian or gay hiding their sexual or gender identities. There have been several recent changes regarding equality for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transsexual, intersexed, and asexual (LGBTQIA) workers. For example, President Barack Obama recently signed an executive order banning workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity for all federal workers (Miller 2014). Eighteen states have passed anti-discrimination laws based on sexual orientation and gender identity laws in the workplace (HRC 2014). Although not yet successful, a federal employment discrimination law (Employment Non-Discrimination Act [ENDA]) has been introduced to nearly every Congressional session since 1994, which indicates there has been a long-term identification of the issue (Connell 2012)¹.

Despite these promising legal changes, workplace sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination persists, which contributes to an environment where individuals need to present themselves in a manner to cover their identity, even if sexuality or sexual

¹ For background on the progression of laws for sexual orientation or sexual identity, see The Human Rights Campaign, www.hrc.org.

identity has been disclosed. Several studies describe how gay men and lesbians must negotiate their presentation of self and their identity, and how this varies by workplace context. For example, some gay male professional workers will remain closeted and even provide false clues that they are heterosexual because they fear repercussions for being gay (Woods and Lucas 1993). Likewise, school teachers who identify as lesbian remained closeted because of vulnerability to harassment and discrimination from members of the institution, and parents or guardians (Connell 2012).

Few studies explore the work experiences of out lesbians, and none have compared the experiences of out femme and butch lesbians. A femme lesbian might engage in a traditional and expected feminine presentation, which might include particular makeup, hairstyle, and wardrobe. On the contrary, a butch lesbian might engage in a more masculine presentation and be aggressive and assertive. As Denissen and Saguy (2013) suggest, butch women are sometimes accepted as “one of the guys” because butch women appear and often perform in a way that is accepted and applauded in some workplaces. Femme lesbians may experience discrimination differently depending on whether they have disclosed their sexual identity. In one study, a lesbian respondent stated that she got “hit on” by heterosexual men more frequently after they found out she was a lesbian, and felt she was more of a challenge as a lesbian (Giuffre, Dellinger, and Williams 2008). If femme lesbians disclose their sexual orientation at work, they might experience sexual harassment, including comments from male co-workers such as, “Just give me one night and I can change your mind,” or “You’re too pretty to be gay” (Giuffre et al. 2008). Femme lesbians are often able to pass as heterosexual, but butch lesbians are often unable to do so.

I explore the following research questions: How are workplace experiences for out femme lesbians similar to or different from the experiences of out butch lesbians? Why do femme and butch lesbians have different workplace experiences? Are femme and butch lesbians doing or undoing gender in the workplace? My analysis is shaped by sociological theories of dramaturgy (Goffman 1956), gender performance (Butler 1993; Deutsch 2007; West and Zimmerman 1987), and social construction of sexuality (Stein 1989). I will argue that femme and butch lesbians have different workplace experiences due to their gender performances. ²

² Workplace experiences for LGBTQIA will be different. That is, people who identify as transgender, queer, intersex, and/or asexual will likely experience unique forms of bias and discrimination. From here on, I will focus on work experiences of lesbians.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Previous research explores why homosexuals stay closeted, how heterosexism is the foundation of discrimination against homosexuals, and the experience of women and lesbians in regard to sexual harassment in the workplace. These themes fall under the umbrella of workplace discrimination, yet only explore workplace experiences of lesbians as a group, without taking into account their gender performances. Few scholars specifically address the variety of experiences faced by femme and butch lesbians.

Sexual Identity and Presentation of Self

Lesbians must often consider whether they present themselves and identify as femme or butch (Crawley 2001; Lev 2008). Rifkin's (2008) study on the butch-femme dichotomy argues that the sexual identity of femme and butch lesbians involve an identification process separate from heterosexual norms. Crawley's (2001) quantitative study analyzing "women seeking women" personal ads describes how butch and femme are a social construction that organizes personal identification and presentation of self for lesbians. Crawley (2001) quotes Rubin (1992) when describing the stereotypical lesbian categories of femme and butch as,

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... 'Femmes' identify as feminine within the larger culture; 'butches' identify primarily as masculine or prefer masculine signals, persona appearance and style (177).

A butch presentation comprises of a female who dresses, walks, and acts like a stereotypical man. For example, a butch woman may have a crew haircut, and wear flannel shirts, cargo shorts, a ball cap, and other outerwear traditionally viewed as

masculine. Inness and Lloyd (1996) note butch lesbians use clothing as signifiers of their sexuality, which is identifiable in both the lesbian and heterosexual cultures³.

In contrast, a femme lesbian presentation is similar to that expected of heterosexual and stereotypically feminine woman. Some femmes will be nurturing and subordinate (Crawley 2001; Moore 2006; Rifkin 2008). Crawley (2001) discusses femmes who conform to gender norms for women, such as performing as a stereotypical “girl” or “woman in the relationship.” If a woman is in a femme/butch relationship, being the “girl” can include wearing a dress when going out to dinner, while the butch partner wears a suit, or being subordinate when engaging in sexual activity (Crawley 2001). Moore (2008) details typical feminine gender norms as wearing dresses or skirts, exposing cleavage, wearing jewelry, wearing high heels, carrying purses, and applying make-up. Rifkin (2008) further defines a femme presentation as a lesbian who wears long hair, dangling earrings and lipstick. Lev (2008) notes that lesbians who are not masculine in appearance are invisible, and not considered lesbians, which leaves “femme lesbians to be a cultural impossibility” (130). Thus, if a femme lesbian does not fit the stereotypical lesbian appearance, which includes lesbians who engage in masculine presentations, it is difficult to “fit in” within the lesbian and heterosexual communities. There are some lesbians who like to wear a ball cap, polo shirts, and cargo shorts, which are often deemed as masculine or butch, and contrastingly wear makeup and heels, which are often deemed feminine. The categories, femme and butch, are not exhaustive and are increasingly on a continuum rather than a strict dichotomy.

³ Gay men will sometimes refer to other gay men as “butch” if they present or behave in a masculine manner. I will focus on the experiences of lesbians.

Studies about the experiences of femme lesbians show that they find themselves repudiated as a lesbian, both inside and outside the lesbian community (Eves 2004; Lev 2008). Both heterosexual women and lesbians police individual's femininity, and whether they are woman or lesbian enough. Some femme lesbians face bias from within the lesbian community because of their conformity to gender norms and expectations of a heterosexual woman (Williams and Giuffre 2011).

Sexuality and Workplace Context

Workplace subcultures vary. Workplace context can be an important factor in whether lesbians come out, which can contribute to different forms of harassment and discrimination. Experiences of lesbians who come out in a professional work setting might be different than in-service, blue-collar, or other contexts. Workplaces also vary from homophobic to sexually progressive.

Homosexuals are viewed as "other" in many workplaces. *Othering* refers to actions and words taken and spoken to classify individuals or groups as different from themselves (Bowleg, Brooks, and Ritz 2008; Driscoll, Kelley and Fassinger 1996; Embrick, Walther and Wickens 2007; Lucal 1999; Reed and Valenti 2012; Weichselbaumer 2003). The process of othering often stigmatizes individuals as immoral, deviant and sick (Giuffre, Dellinger, and Williams 2008; Seidman 2002; Woods and Lucas 1993). Homosexuals face discrimination in the workplace, such as lack of support and respect by bosses and peers, refusal of promotions, and hateful speech (Brower 2013; Denissen and Saguy 2013; Driscoll et al. 1996; Embrick et al. 2007; Rifkin 2008; Valocchi 2005). In some workplaces, heterosexual employees are concerned about hiring lesbian and gay workers. In a study by Embrick et al. (2007) a

heterosexual respondent stated that a current employee would not have been hired had the employee's sexual identity been known when interviewed. Another employee noted, "They'll let ANYBODY do this job" when referring to homosexual employees (Embrick et al. 2007: 762). Workplaces can shape an individual's coming out process, whether in individuals' professional or personal life (Connell 2012). Workers in Connell's study reported making strategic decisions about when, to whom, and how to disclose their sexual orientation in order to minimize negative reactions, and to prevent disruptions in the workplace. Therefore, non-heterosexual employees often refrain from disclosing their sexual identity out of fear of not being hired, losing their jobs, or being denied promotions. Hall (1989) found that 88 percent of the lesbians surveyed said they experienced one or more types of anti-lesbianism at work. In one study, a lesbian respondent stated she had the option of staying private and refusing to disclose her sexuality, or choosing to disclose her sexual identity at work. Staying closeted meant keeping her job, while risking being publically ostracized, and possibly losing her job if she chose to disclose her sexual identity (Williams and Giuffre 2011).

Not all workplaces are homophobic. Some are predominantly gay or lesbian, and others are "gay friendly." Workplaces that offer a "safe place" for lesbian and gay employees are said by Giuffre and colleagues (2008) to be "gay-friendly," which is defined as workplaces that strive to eliminate homophobia and heterosexism. Gay and lesbian workers negotiate their presentation of self and sexual identity depending on the workplace subculture. In some workplaces, gay and lesbian workers will not have to come out, while others may feel forced to stay closeted. Research by Lerum (2004), and Weston and Rofel (1984) indicate there are workplaces that provide a place of

employment for lesbians to be openly and proudly lesbian. Weston and Rofel (1984) conducted a case study of Amazon Auto Repair, which is a workplace where all the workers are lesbian. Lesbian employees claimed it was a liberating experience working at Amazon Auto Repair because of the reduced amount of stress from not having to negotiate their sexuality with co-workers or patrons. The owners helped create an environment and space where the employees were sheltered from heterosexism, and created a non-alienating work environment (Weston and Rofel 1997).

Lerum's (2004) analysis of sexual banter in restaurants discusses the consequences of sexualized interactions among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual co-workers. In her ethnographic study of two restaurants, Lerum finds that different workplace contexts promote different forms sexual banter. For example, at Blue Heron, a high-end restaurant where more than half of the employees were lesbian, gay or bisexual, Lerum observed the sexual banter between employees that was on the verge of "razzing" and sexual harassment. Yount (1991) described razzing as, "playful, humorous teasing that was kept at a level considered tolerable to the recipient" (400). Lerum also observed sexual banter at Club X, where the engagement of affection and sexualized attention was between female dancers and male customers. The sexualized banter took place in the view of the customers, whereas at Blue Heron, banter took place out of view of customers. Lerum's study demonstrates that workplace context can influence workers' experiences of sexuality at work.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment includes a variety of unwanted sexual comments and behaviors in workplaces (Schultz 2003). Kimberly, Ybarra, and Korchmaros (2013) define sexual

harassment as “unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and sexual comments or gestures that occur in any environment (281). Biaggio’s (2008) article on sexual harassment experienced by lesbians states lesbians often experience sexual harassment because they are women, but additionally as lesbians. Biaggio explains lesbians often encounter distasteful interactions and found

For the lesbians, not only is sexual harassment by a male experienced as exploitative or invasive, but also as an affront to her identity and preference, since some male harassers assume and expect that women should not only tolerate their ‘overtures,’ but even enjoy and be flattered by them (95).

Many forms of sexual harassment are based on heterosexist norms. Welsh (1999) states that heterosexual harassment is tied to “organizational norms of heterosexuality and power” (181). Thus, heterosexuality is hegemonic, and systemically supported within organizations. Lesbians encountering sexual harassment are susceptible to the pressure to perform heterosexual sexual norms.

Schneider’s (1982) study of sexual harassment of lesbians and heterosexual women used a behavioral assessment using seven behaviors as harassment: (1) sexual assault, (2) sexual proposition, (3) pinch or grab, (4) stare at or look over, (5) jokes about body or appearance, (6) touch or hug, or (7) request for a date. Schneider found that lesbians in her study reported a higher rate of these behaviors than heterosexual women. Also, younger lesbians in the study were more likely to report sexual harassment than older lesbians.

Studies suggest that workers have a difficult time distinguishing between sexual harassment and non-offensive, even pleasurable, forms of sexual expression at work. Lesbian and heterosexual women workers in Lerum’s (2004) article stated the sexual banter in their workplace was a form of “light-hearted terms of endearment,” which

diminishes the hurtful and degrading words exchanged in the workplace (761). Others reported that sexualized banter allows them to work quickly and efficiently as a team effort (Lerum 2004). Yet, in other cases, the bantering, sexual innuendos and puns offended the respondents. One respondent claimed the sexual harassment through sexual comments and behavior caused her increased stress. The differences may correspond to a woman's position within a company, working conditions, and personality (Lerum 2004). When actions, behaviors, and language are unwanted, it is considered sexual harassment. Some female employees do not have a problem with sexualized banter, or derogatory language, and any communication of a sexual nature, therefore, can be taken in a joking, rather than offensive manner.

Butch women can have a harder time hiding their sexual identity because of inaccurate assumptions and stereotypes that all lesbians engage in masculine presentations. They are often expected to engage and participate in a misogynistic work culture. Denissen and Saguy (2013) conducted a study of heterosexual women and lesbians who work in blue-collar trades. The authors interviewed a butch lesbian who stated that she sits with the men at lunch, and while the men engage in conversation about their last night rendezvous, she frequently gives them advice about how to have sex with a woman, which she says has helped grant her a higher status as a lesbian within her particular workplace.

Although butch women in construction work garner some status, the socially constructed gender hierarchy persists. Men are able to use sexual banter and sexist jokes to emphasize their dominant social position. Denissen and Saguy (2013) argue that men feel threatened if women challenge the masculine definition of work. When lesbians

threaten or challenge the sexual or economic subordination of women in the workplace, men typically fight back and often do so through sexualized or sexist “jokes,” and sometimes hostile behaviors. For example, one heterosexual respondent said one of her male co-workers responded to her outperforming him by stating, “What’s the matter with you? Are you one of those lesbian women?” (Denissen and Saguy 2013: 12). When women challenge masculinity and the gender hierarchy of power, they are often accused of being a lesbian and unfeminine. Just as when Denissen and Saguy’s respondent challenged her co-worker’s masculinity by outperforming him, she was faced with criticism and homophobia.

In or Out?

Sexual orientation discrimination can force individuals to stay “closeted” (Brower 2013; Connell 2012). Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen (1999) define “the closet” as a metaphor explaining a non-heterosexual individual who hides her or his sexual or gender identity. In Schneider’s (1982) study on sexual harassment among 144 heterosexual and 237 lesbian women workers, the author notes the social atmosphere of disapproval for lesbians in the workplace fosters fear, secrecy and anxiety about how their co-workers and superiors will view them.

“Coming out” is not dichotomous as “in” or “out.” Orne (2011) and Yoshino (2007) claim that coming out is a continuous process because there are always new people entering our lives. Stein (1999) notes coming out as a collective confessional for lesbians freeing them from sexual repression. When coming out, whether personally or professionally, the individual must strategize the best way to approach the conversation (Connell 2012; Orne 2011). Orne (2011) finds respondents’ strategies include a range of

different methods for coming out, such as partial disclosure and complete disclosure. When coming out, a lesbian or gay man manages different audiences, such as friends, family, community, co-workers and bosses. For example, Rasmussen's (2004) study examines the closet and the coming out process in an educational setting. Rasmussen details how homosexuals have the ability to continuously negotiate their identity, which is also mediated by varying circulations of power relating to age, family, background, economic position and race, and the intersection thereof. The author further notes, "The dominance of coming out discourses in lesbian and gay politics...believes the idea that coming out is not necessarily an option, or a desired objective, of all people who are non-heterosexual identified" (Rasmussen 2004: 147). An individual's sexual identity performance is in relationship to time and space to the individual's audience, and can often be a forced and uncomfortable position for closeted individuals. Individuals come out for different reasons and at various times of their lives, and often do not disclose their sexual orientation out of fear of discrimination (Brower 2013).

Heteronormativity in Workplaces

The metaphorical closets that restrain sexuality from fluid expression are part of a heteronormative culture. Reed and Valenti (2012) define heteronormativity as "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community...rendering homosexuality invisible" (704). Miller, Forest, and Jurik (2003) claim heterosexual norms permeate most work organizations. For example, lesbians must "pass" as heterosexual in some workplaces in order to prevent or avoid discrimination based on their sexual orientation (Williams and Giuffre 2011). Likewise, Ragins and Cornwell (2001) argue that heterosexism is in

various organizational cultures where heterosexual values continue to be the status quo. Conformity to hegemonic heterosexual ideals of masculinity and femininity has an impact during the employment process, including hiring, income, evaluations and promotions (Nell and Kwan 2010). Bowleg et al. (2008) found that 32 percent of the women they interviewed said they have experienced heterosexist challenges related to self-monitoring and self-silencing, which became relevant during discussions regarding family, relationships at work and outside at work functions. According to Yoshino (2007), it is important to “act straight” to prevent becoming stigmatized in the workplace.

Some lesbians perform femininity through their appearance to pass as heterosexual in the workplace. Wearing makeup often equates to heterosexual femininity. Trautner and Kwan (2010) find that organizational policies are implemented based on heterosexual stereotypes and norms for what femininity is supposed to look like, which includes women wearing makeup, high heels, and skirts. Dellinger and Williams (1997) find that women who do not wear face makeup appear unhealthy, lesbian, and less credible. One respondent in their study described her purpose for wearing face makeup as “avoiding negative attention” (Dellinger and Williams 1997: 157). The authors also note heterosexuality is built into professionalism, and a female employee must look “appropriately feminine” to achieve success. Employers monitor and regulate employees’ appearance (clothing and dress) to reach out to a particular audience or display a particular image, which is legally protected and encourages and maintains heterosexist norms (Trautner and Kwan 2010). These norms can present challenges to butch lesbians in some contexts. For example, butch lesbians report working twice as hard, expressing increased aggressiveness and assertiveness, and reciprocating sarcasm

and sexualized banter to be accepted in the workplace (Crawley 2001; Denissen and Saguy 2013; Rifkin 2008).

Dellinger and Williams (1997) note that most straight women are in a position of heterosexual power, which blinds them to the experiences of lesbians. Heterosexual privileges are granted to femme lesbians by passing, and sometimes when not passing, as a heterosexual woman. Some lesbians do not try to pass and are out at work, but still benefit from hetero-privilege because femme lesbians are often not considered “real” lesbians. Closeted femme lesbians are partaking in the heteronormative appearances and behaviors expected of heterosexual women.

Homophobia and heterosexism are pervasive in some work settings, particularly male-dominated workplaces. Miller and others (2003) claim, “police departments regulate heterosexuality in society, they exude exceptionally strong norms of compulsory heterosexuality” (359). For example, whether male or female, straight, lesbian, or gay, police officers project aggressive masculinity through behavior including toughness, assertiveness, forcefulness and physical strength (Brower 2013; Miller et al. 2003). Male-dominated workplaces are intolerant of homosexuals, which is elicited by the threat to men’s masculinity, also known as hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as the promotion of men and their position in society, as well as the social position of women as subordinate to men, which is the reason for homosexual intolerance in male dominated workplaces, triggering hostility (Connell 1995; Miller et al. 2003). Common terms such as *policeman* or *fireman* emphasize masculinity and heteronormativity. Women have increased their numbers in police and fire departments, but due to the heteronormative nature of the positions, women in such positions are

questioned about their sexuality (Miller et al. 2004). Although there has been a push to hire lesbians and gays into police departments and other fields, such as firefighting in a number of U.S. cities, hegemonic masculinity continues to dominate these fields through heteronormative ideals forcing homosexuals to negotiate their sexual identity in the workplace⁴.

Counterfeiting and Covering

Some homosexual workers negotiate their sexual identity in workplaces by eliminating, denying and decreasing their visibility or identification as homosexual. For instance, lesbian and gay police officers construct their heterosexual identity as traditionally masculine, which shapes their strategies for confronting a hostile work environment toward homosexuals (Miller et al. 2003). By monitoring speech, behavior, dress, hairstyle, makeup and mannerisms, lesbians and gay police officers are able to counterfeit their sexual identity to their peers and superiors and avoid further discrimination. Previous literature indicates many individuals hide their sexual identity through lies and deceiving others. Woods and Lucas (1993) describe these practices as counterfeiting, which is defined as constructing a false identity using whatever it takes, such as props, settings, and supporting players necessary to pass. For example, in Woods and Lucas' (1993) study of closeted gay male professional workers, one respondent, Ed, counterfeits by passing as a heterosexual fabricating and manipulating stories about his private life. Ed says he tells his coworkers a story about what happened the previous weekend by changing pronouns from him to her, and changing names from Sam to Sally, or without the gender of the individual he dated. Ed, along with other homosexual

⁴ Previous research is less clear about whether female-dominated work places are likely to be homophobic.

employees, adhere to expected traditional gender norms, which is often to avoid both direct and indirect sexual harassment.

In contrast to counterfeiting, Kenji Yoshino (2007) has identified “covering” as a way that lesbian, and gay men, and other marginalized groups, downplay their sexuality. Instead of falsifying sexual identity, lesbians and gay men attempt to appear “normal.” Individuals change their names, hide behind objects to cover their disabilities, keep their partners out of the public eye, and alter their bodies to assimilate to the hegemonic culture to prevent discrimination. Covering is a strategy of assimilation to heterosexual norms. Denissen and Saguy’s (2013) research on women in the building trade discuss how many non-heterosexuals will employ a hybrid strategy by speaking and discussing “half-truths.” By doing so, lesbians and gay men can manage their disclosure by revealing their sexual identity to whom and when they wish. Yoshino (2007) argues minorities must act against and break stereotypes by refusing to cover. Furthermore, the author states that as long as minorities are covering a stereotypical identity, the stereotype will persist.

Previous literature has explored the experiences of butch lesbians more than those of femme lesbians. Many studies neglect to define lesbian respondents as femme or butch when describing their experiences in the workplace. We know little about the experiences of femme and butch lesbians and the negotiation of gender. My research explores the workplace experiences of out femme lesbians as compared to experiences of out butch lesbians. The nature of homophobia, sexual orientation discrimination, and sexual bias that femme and butch lesbians experience at work likely differ.

Theoretical Frameworks

Three theoretical frameworks guide this study: Erving Goffman's classic theory of the presentation of self (1956), Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman's (1987) theory of doing gender, and Francine Deutsch's (2007) theory of undoing gender. The presentation of self refers to ways that individuals are like actors on a stage in everyday life. This dramaturgical model for social life allows us to see an individual as performing a variety of roles. Goffman (1956) refers to individual actors performing on the front stage or back stage. The front stage is where an individual formally performs, adhering to social norms and scripts, while completely aware of being watched. The back stage is where individuals have the freedom to be oneself without the expectation of performing according to gender roles or social scripts. Judith Butler's (2006) work builds on Goffman's dramaturgical approach. Butler states that identity is performative and is about the presentation to oneself and to others. When homosexual individuals perform on the front stage they are giving the audience a particular impression of themselves depending on the setting, and the appearance and manner of both parties. In contrast, individuals who are in the back stage can be themselves, removing expectations of social norms, shifting their role or identity (Goffman 1956). Lesbians often perform in everyday interactions by counterfeiting or covering their sexuality. Certain situations require particular social scripts, which are often preconceived and direct the presentation of self.

West and Zimmerman (1987) were influenced by Goffman's approach and presenting the theory of "doing gender." The authors define doing gender as "the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities

appropriate for one's sex category" (West and Zimmerman 1987: 127). The authors argue that women and men are hostage to doing gender, which emerges in all social situations and arrangements. They also note that individuals cannot escape gender as others are continuously applying sex categories to each person they come into contact with. Doing gender is attached to an individual's performance of expected gender roles, which are socially constructed, learned and enacted (Connell 1985; West and Zimmerman 1987). The terms *femme* and *butch* help to create expectations for how lesbians do gender through feminine and masculine behaviors, actions and speech. Actors are also held accountable for doing gender in a way that follows heterosexual norms. Butler (1993) argues gender roles and norms are forcible performances. For instance, individuals act in accordance to how they feel they are expected to perform based on their sex. Based on Butler's (1993) notion of the "heterosexual matrix," Kelan (2010) notes that women are often punished for not being woman or feminine enough, which ultimately contributes to gender discrimination. Butler (1993) defines the heterosexual matrix guiding assumptions about others based on hetero-norms. Butler further explains the matrix as a tool used to base one's sexuality according to the observer's assumption of an individual's sex, sex categories, and gender.

West and Zimmerman's "doing gender" is based on the three classifications: sex, sex categories, and gender. The authors define *sex* as male or female according to biological attributes, while *sex category* is defined as a characteristic assigned to an individual's sex based on attributes that are socially acceptable norms. For example, even if biological characteristics or attributes are concealed, individuals are presumed male or female, masculine or feminine.

Accountability is another key element to the West and Zimmerman's theory of "doing gender." Individuals are held accountable and judged for how well, or poorly, they perform gender as women or men. As individuals conform to gender norms and expectations, they are supporting the current gender binary. Likewise, if an individual defies gender norms, and the gender binary, the individual might endure social consequences, such as discrimination, prejudice and bias. For instance, a woman might wear make-up, lipstick and high-heels for her work attire. Irrespective of her abiding by the social norms and expectations of a woman's appearance, she understood, whether explicitly or implicitly, that her appearance will be judged based upon social expectations. According to West and Zimmerman (1987),

If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals – not the institutional arrangements – may be called into account (146).

It is through individuals' interactions with others that gender performance will be judged.

Francine Deutsch (2007) argues that "doing gender" is a perspective that does not allow for change. In proposing a theory of undoing gender, Deutsch focuses on the interruption, dismantling, and resistance of gender norms and expectations. Deutsch notes doing gender is used to describe individual interactions, and suggests there needs to be more discussion regarding institutions to gain a full understanding of "dismantling the gender system" (123). Deutsch stated "undoing gender" can be accomplished because gender is constructed, and simply implies that gender can also be deconstructed. For example, in Denissen and Saguy's (2013) study, butch women in building trades are performing masculinity. The respondents in this study are interrupting gender norms in the workplace, as jobs in building trades are male-dominated.

My research is further guided by sociological theories of sexuality. These perspectives maintain that sexuality takes many forms, but forms that deviate from the dominant heterosexual hegemony are viewed as unnatural or deviant (Epstein 1994; Valocchi 2005). Beach (1977) noted, “Every society shapes, structures and constrains the development and expression of sexuality in all of its members” (116). Societal, institutional and heterosexist norms determine what constitutes “proper” sexuality. According to scholars who study heteronormativity, heterosexuality is a critical building block of social life and social policy. Different institutions, such as religion, the legislature, the workplace, and education (which have power and force), reify heterosexist ideas and values (Stein 1989).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

In this project, I use a qualitative research method approach. Qualitative research is the most appropriate method for this project because I am interested in acquiring detailed femme and butch lesbians' personal experiences in the workplace. Interviews allow researchers to understand how people arrange themselves based on their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, and social and gender roles (Berg and Lune 2012; Esterberg 2002; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). It would be difficult to capture these experiences in a quantitative survey or questionnaire. Semi-structured in-depth interviews create a more open discussion for the participants to express their own opinions and freely discuss their experiences. They allow for flexibility in the discussion by having a set of structured questions to ask the participant, and also allow for spontaneous detours providing an opportunity for information to emerge that neither party anticipated. As Kleinsasser (2000) notes, interviewers are able to become intimate with their participants because it closes the distance as researcher and interviewee. Participants can share their distinct personal experiences and circumstances (Esterberg 2002). Each interview was unique and I was able to gain valuable information for the analysis, which is a strength to this study.

I conducted ⁵19 semi-structured in-depth interviews with self-identified femme and butch lesbians from a variety of occupations and workplaces. I recruited individuals through social media and snowball sampling methods, first contacting those who I knew self-identify as femme and butch lesbians. During the interviews, I asked the participants

⁵ I completed 20 semi-structured interviews. Only one respondent self-identified as closeted, therefore, I did not use the interview for this analysis.

if they knew other lesbians who self-identify as femme or butch, and who are, or have been, in the workplace. The in-depth interviews took place at a restaurant or coffee shop.

I digitally recorded the interviews using an electronic recording device. I transcribed each interview for analysis purposes. I analyzed the data by following standard inductive coding techniques, while highlighting emergent themes and categories found throughout the interviews. To maintain participant anonymity, I assigned pseudonyms and removed identifying language or characteristics from the transcripts.

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Information*

Name	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Butch/ Femme	Occupation
Amie	54	White	Femme	Professor
Cassidy	36	White	Butch	Insurance
Charlie	34	White	Femme	Intern
Chloe	39	White/ Hispanic	Femme	Graduate Assistant
Danielle	41	White	Butch	Nurse/ Supervisor
Gypsy	53	White	Femme	Unemployed
Jami	52	White	Butch	University Faculty
Jan	23	White	Femme	Organizer
Kathy	39	Asian	Butch	IT Support
Lee	29	White	⁶ Stone-Butch	Fire-Fighter/Paramedic
Leslie	58	Native American	Butch	Facilities Management
Lisa	22	White	Butch	Technician
Michelle	26	White	Femme	Research Associate
Naomi	26	Hispanic	Femme	Transportation Coordinator
Pam	42	White	Butch	IT Support
Sam	35	White	⁷ Soft-Butch	Technical Support Engineer
Shelly	63	White	Femme	Child and Family Development
Taylor	59	White	Butch	Library Assistant
Terry	52	White	Butch	Technical Supervisor

*Terms used to describe demographic characters were self-identified by respondents

⁶ Stone-butcht refers to a butcht lesbian who might pass as a male without trying. Stone-butcht definition also often has sexual reference, as stone butcht lesbians prefer not to be penetrated during sexual encounters (Crawley 2002).

⁷ According to respondents in this study, soft-butcht refers to a butcht lesbian whose appearance might be masculine, but their behavior, actions and mannerisms might be more feminine.

The interviews comprised a semi-structured questionnaire guide consisting of open-ended questions about the participants' experiences of being a femme or butch lesbian in the workplace (See Appendix 1). I asked each respondent about her general workplace setting and relationships, experiences of sexual orientation discrimination, heteronormativity and homophobia, harassment, and general questions, such as changes she has seen or would like to see in her place of employment.

Sampling and Recruitment

I selected individuals who met the criteria of the study, which did not include lesbians who self-identify as anything other than femme or butch. However, many of the lesbians with whom I spoke noted their hesitation to identify one way or the other. This study is based on respondents' own identities. I did not attempt to determine whether respondents were "truly" femme or butch, which is an impossible assessment.

Respondents were recruited using snowball sampling, email correspondence, and Facebook communication. Snowball sampling was the most beneficial way to collect my sample. By using a snowball sample, I obtained respondents who share similar characteristics. Once a connection was made with insiders of the lesbian communities, I received support finding additional volunteers due to the respondents' social connections to locate others who share similar characteristics as themselves. The respondents mostly reside in the South Central United States. A few respondents reside in the North East, including Massachusetts, and New Jersey. For those participants who were not within driving distance to conduct the interview, the interview took place over Skype. Nine respondents self-identified as femme and ten self-identified as butch. The respondents' age ranged from 22 to 63 years old, with a mean age of 41 years old. Fifteen of the

respondents were White, two were Latina, one was Native American, and one was Asian (refer to Table 1 for demographic characteristics).

Sociologists debate about the advantages and disadvantages of being an “insider” or “outsider” to the groups or individuals who are being studied. Although I had insider status among the respondents, there are some scholars who would argue an outsider might contribute to a more valuable and insightful discussion. For instance, an outsider might ask additional probing questions, while an insider might not because the respondents may assume the insider is familiar with the information (Adler and Adler (1996). Therefore, the respondent may neglect to disclose detailed descriptions or may leave out important details. During La Pastina’s (2006) ethnographic study in Brazil, the author was forced to be an outsider because of his sexuality, but a native to Brazil. La Pastina had to counterfeit his sexuality and falsify his identity out of fear the respondents would not trust him or participate in the study. La Pastina suggested an insider might obtain more information from the respondent because the respondent might feel more comfortable talking with the researcher. Identifying myself as a lesbian was advantageous to creating a greater sense of trust and rapport with the research participants in this study.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Gender identity and sexual orientation discrimination shape and define workplace experiences for femme and butch lesbians. Femme and butch lesbian participants shared strategies used to tolerate various forms of inequalities in the workplace. I identified three main themes. First, femme and butch lesbians voiced the ability or inability to negotiate their sexual identity with co-workers and superiors, some of which is attributable to disparate presentation of physical appearances. Second, femme and butch lesbians experienced sexual harassment differently, with femmes commonly experiencing various forms of harassment, while butch lesbians responded that they do not allow it to happen. Lastly, both femme and butch lesbians experienced discrimination, but felt the discrimination was most likely due to their gender, *not* their sexuality. I will argue that femme and butch lesbians have different workplace experiences due to their gender performances.

Negotiating Sexuality Disclosure

Femme and butch lesbians negotiate the disclosure of their sexuality in the workplace differently. Femme lesbians do gender according to the socially constructed feminine norms, therefore, it is easier for femmes to hide their sexuality until they choose to disclose their sexuality to co-workers or supervisors. For example, Michelle, a femme lesbian, and research assistant noted:

I struggle with whether or not to cover my sexuality all of the time. Then I wonder why am I covering? Do I really need to? Why am I afraid? But I get to decide, unlike some of my butch counterparts, when I tell people I am gay.

Charlie, a femme lesbian who works as a case manager for HIV positive individuals, negotiates her sexuality when starting any job. She said, “I wait it out. I don’t introduce myself with my sexuality. I always make sure that it is acceptable.” Respondents voiced their concern with coming out right away at their places of employment, because they never know how other employees will react or respond. Chloe, a femme lesbian, and graduate student mentioned her experience with negotiating her sexuality similarly to Charlie. Chloe suggests that her coming out is an “organic progression,” and also said, “When I was coming out for the first time here, I was terrified. It is not easy coming out. I never know what the reaction is going to be, so that is always my hesitation.”

After femme respondents decided to disclose their sexuality, they felt pressure to dress and conduct themselves as straight women, which entailed monitoring their language, behavior, hairstyle, makeup and mannerisms. They also said that their co-workers or supervisors would *other* them if they did not perform, behave, or act as a heterosexual woman. Respondents felt they would be treated differently if they did not abide by the heterosexual norms. For example, Shelly described an encounter with a former co-worker after she cut her hair short. She said one of her co-workers had caught her in the elevator and began to ridicule her haircut. The co-worker said, “I like your hair and think it is really sassy, but if you cut it much shorter people are going to get the wrong impression. Shelly said the comment from the co-worker hurt her feelings, and made her fearful to disclose her sexuality to her co-workers or supervisors. From then on, she felt as though she was constantly being judged for her sexuality. Michelle also said, “I feel the need to pretend like I am straight. To pretend to be normal.” Michelle’s example is an illustration of how femme lesbians can be wedged in a balance of wanting

to liberate themselves from covering or counterfeiting their sexuality, but also feeling the need to abide to heterosexual norms.

Conversely, most butch respondents said once they had disclosed their sexuality, they felt more at ease with being themselves, rather than feeling the pressure to perform as a straight woman. Lee, a stone butch, firefighter/paramedic said “The guys I work with just treat me and talk to me like I am one of the guys. But, that didn’t happen until after I had completely stepped out of the closet. I partake in all their guy ‘shop talk.’”

Butch lesbians present themselves differently than femme lesbians. Butch respondents stated that they are unable to counterfeit or cover their sexual identity, whereas femme lesbians have the option to do so. Butch participants said their appearance was the primary reason for the inability to hide their sexuality from their co-workers. For example, Lee said, “I look like a dude, so it is hard to hide that I am a lesbian. I am the person that when I walk by, most think I am a dude.” For butch lesbians such as Lee, they are undoing gender. Lee and her butch participant counterparts are disrupting and resisting expected gender norms, which can yield a negative response from co-workers and superiors. Terry stated, “It is hard to be butch and not be out at work, because it is just obvious.”⁸ Lisa, a butch lesbian, expressed similar feelings when ze said ze⁹ fears going into interviews because the employer or interviewer might not hire hir due to hir sexual orientation because it “clearly shows.” Lisa also stated that ze is fearful for hir future due to hir masculine appearance, which ze describes as wearing

⁸ Respondent preferred the interviewer to use gender neutral pronouns, rather than the binary terms of he or she.

⁹ “Ze” and “Hir” are gender neutral pronouns preferred by some individuals who live outside of the gender binary (Lucal 2008).

male clothing, such as boxer briefs, cargo shorts, polo shirts, extremely short hair, and does not wear any girl clothes or act, in any way, girly or feminine.

Lesbians are hostage to doing gender in the workplace. Lesbians perform through their feminine or masculine behaviors, actions and speech, which are assumptions made based on heterosexual norms (Butler 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). Femme lesbians do gender through traditionally heterosexual feminine behaviors, actions and speech. Charlie was ridiculed by her co-workers when she cut her hair short. Her co-workers would say things like, “You look manly,” which is an example of her co-workers applying assumed and expected sex categories. Charlie’s co-workers were holding her accountable for her gender performance. She attempted to undo gender, which Deutsch says is the “interruption, dismantling, and resistance of gender norms and expectations” (123). She was held accountable for her feminine gender performance, therefore, she returned to her expected, socially constructed and learned gender role. Another femme lesbian, Chloe said, “I have done really well at managing my appearance as a femme lesbian. Most think I am a straight lady, and I don’t have to worry much.” Chloe is performing the proper gender role according the socially constructed definition of heterosexual femininity.

Butch lesbians are also held accountable for their gender performance. The butch women I interviewed discussed their knowledge of the expectation to appear and behave more masculine, which includes being aggressive and assertive. Butch lesbians are aware that if they are to be accepted as “one of the guys,” or to gain respect from their co-workers, they must act and perform as masculine women. Leslie, a butch lesbian found that her co-workers had pre-conceived ideas of “stereotypes of dykes in manual labor,”

and also said, “They felt that I knew what I was talking about when it came to equipment and I could handle stuff. So, it is okay for me to look like this, but they don’t necessarily feel comfortable with it either.” Lee also feels that she is always being judged on her appearance and performance. She said:

I have a hard time being closeted...I know the guys have a hard time with it because I am woman, but also because I look like a dude. It is a male profession, so it is just the type of work we do that it is hard for the men to accept a woman as their Lieutenant.

Respondents are undoing gender by challenging gender norms. Butch lesbians are interrupting and resisting the expectations of traditional feminine behavior and appearances.

On the contrary, one butch respondent, Lisa, said “I tend to act a little more girly around the men. Even if I can do the task without help, I will ask them to do it because they are the guys and that is the only way they’ll interact with me at all.” Lisa is doing gender as a feminine woman, rather than undoing gender as a butch woman when at work.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is defined differently and broadly among the respondents. For example, Jami, a butch lesbian, and a professor replied that,

Sexual harassment can be a very broad definition...It could be anything from maybe I could have a really nice looking person on my computer screen and that offends someone. It could also mean that I could ask out a co-worker on a date...they could consider that sexual harassment if I didn’t have a good friendship with that person.

Due to the lack of a clear understanding of the definition of sexual harassment, I provided the respondents with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s (EEOC) definition (refer to the interview guide in Appendix 1). In addition to the definition of

sexual harassment as defined by the EEOC, I asked respondents to answer questions that referred to experiences of sexual harassment due to their sexual identity.

Femme lesbians I interviewed were sexually harassed by heterosexual male co-workers. Just as Biaggio (2008) suggests in her article on sexual harassment experienced by lesbians, femme lesbians appear heterosexual, so many of the respondents found they were hit on more because their male-coworkers did not believe they were a lesbian. Jan, for instance, said she experiences sexual harassment all of the time by heterosexual men. She mentioned “Men are always hitting on me. One time at my last job I had this one guy comment when I was leaning over to get bread out of the warmer, ‘Mmmmmm, what I would do to be young again.’ Just super tacky.” Another respondent, Amie, a femme lesbian professor describes her experiences when she said:

Men often make very distasteful remarks. For example, I went on a work trip and, I swear, EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM tried in some way to hint around wanting to sleep with me. I think it is because they know I am unattainable. I am a challenge. They would constantly tell me that they don’t believe me that I am gay because I don’t look gay, so they would just continue with their sexual comments.

Amie’s comment is similar to many respondents’ experiences of derogatory sexual comments, as well as inappropriate touching. Another example includes an experience by Charlie who mentioned:

I had this one guy I worked with that would say something like, ‘Why would you be with a girl when you could be with a man?’ or he would say, ‘You know you need to have a penis.’ He would, like, all of the time say things like, ‘I can change you. It’ll only take one night.’ At the time I would laugh it off.

Charlie’s reaction of “laughing it off” was a common participant response after describing their experience of sexual harassment. I was given the impression that this response was the respondent’s way of letting it go. Some mentioned a fear of co-

workers' and superiors' retaliating and discriminating if they were to speak up. Femme respondents described unwanted sexual advances, sexual behavior, comments and gestures (Kimberly et al. 2013).

Butch lesbians, on the other hand, expressed their experiences, or lack of, sexual harassment differently. One example of how butch lesbians experience sexual harassment is not enduring direct slurs or derogatory language or behaviors, but engaging in conversations that objectify and insult women with heterosexual male co-workers. Similarly to the butch women in Denissen and Saguy's (2013) study, these women are taking part in these conversations to gain respect and to feel inclusive in the workplace. For example, Lee said:

It is like, locker room talk. They say things that are really rude about women, but since I look like a dude they treat me as such. I have had to work twice as hard to get along with these guys and gain their respect as a woman, which hasn't been fun. I don't enjoy listening to them, but I am forced to.

The language and conversations that butch lesbians are engaging in with male workers can be perceived by themselves, or the women they are speaking in reference to, as sexual harassment. The respondents tolerate "locker room talk" to make an impression on their male co-workers or superiors that they deserve the same respect as the men doing the job. As Lee said, "Sometimes it isn't about the job at all. It is about how they feel about you as a woman in a male-dominated field."

Some lesbians do not experience sexual harassment, and attribute that to not letting it happen. For example, Jami stated, "I don't let it happen...It is how I present myself...I don't project my sexuality on others. If I projected it would be a different story." Many other butch respondents said they do not experience sexual harassment from men. However, in contrast to femme lesbians, a few butch lesbians described

sexual harassment from heterosexual women. For instance, Sam, stone-butched lesbian who works in IT, described her experience of going to her supervisor to report a woman co-worker who she felt was extremely inappropriate with her language and touching, even after confronting her and asking her to stop. Sam goes on to say:

She would call me a pussy and all sort of other things. I would get my hair cut and then she would rub all over my head. I was like, 'Don't touch me.' Always commenting. She would leave me notes and comments on my desk. Card. A lot of it was just absolute craziness to me. She hugs people. She touches peoples' butts. Just inappropriate.

Sam's experience is different than most other butch respondents. Her experience allows for an understanding that anyone, no matter the person's sexual identity, can experience sexual harassment.

Femme and butch lesbians are doing and undoing gender, which provides different approaches of sexual harassment. If lesbians are doing gender, and are performing gender appropriate to the socially constructed gender norms, sexual harassment occurs similarly to that of a heterosexual woman. In contrast, butch lesbians undoing gender, or defying the gender norms, experience sexual harassment from heterosexual women, as they are performing as a masculine individual. Sam said in response to whether her co-workers treat her differently because she is butch, "I think the straight women hit on me because I look like a little boy. So, they think it is okay, and cute to flirt with me and say things that really aren't cool." Sam feels she is reinforcing masculinity, which she claims is why the heterosexual women co-workers are attracted to her.

Sexual harassment is a serious issue that many lesbians experience, and rarely report, possibly creating a hostile work environment. One respondent stated, "When I

was being sexually harassed, I felt vulnerable and defenseless making it uncomfortable to work with these people.” Comments or actions presented in a sexual manner can come back as evidence of sexual harassment, when some offenders thought they were “just joking.”

Gender Discrimination and Bias versus Sexual Orientation Discrimination and Homophobia

Many respondents revealed discrimination experienced in the workplace was thought to be due to their gender, not sexuality. The EEOC defines “Gender Stereotyping” as being illegal for an employer to deny employment opportunities or permit harassment because, (1) a woman does not dress or talk in a feminine manner, (2) a man dresses in an effeminate manner or enjoys a pastime (like crocheting) that is associated with women, (3) a female employee dates women instead of men, (4) a male employee plans to marry a man, and (5) an employee transitions from female to male or male to female.

Not only do lesbians experience or fear discrimination because of their sexuality, they have an additional layer of stress and fear they will experience gender discrimination, as well. Respondents, femme and butch, mentioned their fear of both, but are unsure of which form of discrimination was potentially taking place. One respondent, Gypsy, a femme lesbian expressed her belief that she was passed over for a mechanic job because she was “too girly.” She went on to say, “So, it was more about my gender. A butch lesbian might have gotten the job, but that is because they typically perform and look like men.” Whether femmes or butches are doing gender appropriately or inappropriately according to the socially accepted gender norms, co-workers and supervisors still see gender, therefore, discriminate accordingly. Lee echoed Gypsy

when stating, “Being a woman is a bigger deal...I think a lot of it [discrimination] is gender based, not sexuality.” Lee’s response is an example of Acker’s (2006) argument, which is that workplaces reproduce and perpetuate gender inequality. Acker also states that some managers may intentionally, or unintentionally, discriminate, and sometimes there is a lack of awareness of discrimination toward employees.

Other participants mentioned some overt sexual orientation discrimination. Sam discussed her experience with her co-workers who are of a different ethnic background. She said:

Due the majority of the employees who work here being from Indian descent, who sometimes persecute and are sometimes even violent with gays. They are the ones that seem to have a real issue with me being out and open. I don’t hide who I am. So, yeah, they seem to be closed off with me, and will go to other people to ask questions even if I am the ‘go to’ person.

She also said that she believes it had a lot to do with religion. She felt if it were not for the religious aspect of the discrimination, they would get along just fine. Leslie, a butch lesbian mentioned that she also experienced sexual orientation discrimination. She said:

I work in housing, and I’ll even ask others to take care of the paperwork if I have to come into contact with people, because I always get the hesitation, and the look when I walk in. They will even sometimes go as far as to exclude me from the conversation.

Butch lesbians were the only respondents to confirm experiencing sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace. Butch lesbians undoing gender, by resisting gender norms, had consequences for these respondents. They encountered discrimination because of their sexuality, which might have been avoided if they adhered to the gender norms and expectations of female presentation. Nevertheless, the lesbians I interviewed mentioned their lack of proof of sexual orientation discrimination, therefore, attribute their gender as the source of their workplace discrimination.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This thesis examined similarities and differences between butch and femmes' workplace experiences. Often lesbians endure discrimination due to their sexual identity as well as their gender. Femme and butch lesbians frequently have to make life-altering decisions to come out of the closet, which can have both positive and negative consequences. Research shows that lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered, queer and intersexed individuals have been influenced by gay-liberation movements that encourages individuals to come out and fight against social inequality (Connell 2012). Recent progressive changes have occurred, such as the increased number of states that no longer ban same-sex marriage, which increased to 37 states in 2015 (HRC 2015). As this thesis was completed, the Supreme Court ruled June 2015 that it is unconstitutional to ban same-sex marriage. Also, President Obama has shown support for lesbian and gay communities by signing an executive order protecting federal workers from discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Respondents in this study were completely, or partially out at work, which is a testament to the positive changes for sexual equality. Yet many of the respondents in this study stated they continue to fear discrimination and repercussions from being an out lesbian at work.

Workplace contexts can alter workplace experiences for lesbians. Most of the femme lesbian respondents revealed they work at female-dominated workplaces, while butch lesbians mentioned working at typically male-dominated workplaces. Perhaps this is because butch lesbians perceive and experience less sexual harassment in male-

dominated jobs, and femme lesbians experiences less harassment in female-dominated jobs. This type of occupational segregation reproduces the gender divide.

Butch women who are in male-dominated workplaces can sometimes be revered and more easily obtain positions of power. They display qualities associated with men, which is how most of the respondents in this study characterized themselves. Masculine qualities are highly regarded in most workplaces. Masculinity is typically associated with leadership and competence. Femme lesbians, on the other hand, do not have the same privileges as butch lesbians. Femme lesbians who are in positions of power are perceived differently, or one respondent said, “I am seen as a real bitch because I am aggressive and have a real sense of urgency.”

The consequences for doing and undoing gender differ for femme and butch lesbians. Femme lesbians can cover their sexuality by doing gender appropriate to social norms, which can be advantageous in the workplace. Butch lesbians challenge gender norms, which can grant them access into the male hegemonic hierarchy within the organizational structure. By challenging gender norms and undoing gender, butch lesbians do not have the privilege of covering their sexuality as easily as femme lesbians. It is often difficult for butch lesbians to pass as heterosexual, as most of the respondents mentioned they look like “dudes.”

Deutsch’s (2007) theory of undoing gender has triggered a debate among scholars. The debate is between whether individuals are truly undoing gender, or are individuals reinforcing the gender being performed? For example, it might be argued that butch lesbians in this study are interrupting gender norms, therefore, undoing gender in the workplace by performing masculine work in male-dominated workplaces. Others

would argue butch lesbians are reinforcing masculinity. Butch lesbians performing masculine jobs are seen as subverting the hetero-normative paradigm (e.g., female mechanics, female fire-fighters, and female technicians). Moreover, femme lesbians also undo gender. For instance, two respondents, Charlie and Shelly, cut their hair short, challenging feminine gender norms, which also led to experiencing homophobia and ridicule by co-workers. The questions remains as to whether femme and butch lesbians are rejecting, or emphasizing gender norms.

There is little research on the similarities and differences of femme and butch lesbian experiences in the workplace. The literature discusses the experiences of sexual harassment and appearance norms of femme lesbians, which explains the invisibility inside and outside the lesbian community, but the research does not focus on the different forms of workplace discrimination experienced by femme and butch lesbians. As Yoshino (2007) states, women are increasingly pressured to cover and often reverse cover at the same time. For instance, Yoshino describes this performance as a woman who must be masculine enough to be respected as a worker, but femme enough to be respected as a woman. Therefore, femme lesbians are doing gender, while butch lesbians are undoing gender to be recognized as a legitimate and hardworking women.

Previous research explores lesbians' workplace experiences in general, whereas I specifically explore the workplace experiences of femme and butch lesbians. In this study, I obtain unique experiences, and an understanding of femme and butch lesbians' experiences in the workplace, as well as how the implications of these experiences alter and influence their lives. This study also examines how femme and butch lesbians help

create their experiences by doing and undoing gender. My findings contribute to a growing body of literature regarding sexuality, and lesbian workplace experiences.

One limitation to this study is the over-representation of White respondents. To achieve a more intersectional approach, it would have been beneficial to obtain a more diverse sample. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) explained the importance of intersectionality in research, and how the theory of intersectionality generates diverse lived experiences and social realities. Collins defined intersectionality as an, “Analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and age form mutually constructing features of social organizations.” It is important for researchers to use intersectionality as a foundation for research, and to be cognizant of the different forms of inequalities constructed by not doing so.

Furthermore, this study has a small sample size. With a larger number of respondents, additional or different themes could possibly emerge regarding the workplace experiences of out femme and butch lesbians. Consequently, this analysis is not generalizable to the larger population, as it is only representative of a particular moment in time, relevant to this group of lesbians, and limited to the 19 participants’ experiences.

The sexual identity of the interviewer may influence respondents’ answers. As Catania (1999) found in his study on self-presentation bias in interview situations regarding sexuality, participants will give socially desirable responses. I share a common characteristic with the respondents, therefore, there is a possibility the participants provided answers to “maintain or enhance their social image” (Catania 1999: 25). Due to

my sexuality as an interviewer, respondents could have been influenced, therefore, could have affected their answers about their workplace experiences.

My study includes only out femme and butch lesbians, but future research could include closeted femme and butch lesbians. A comparison between closeted and out femme and butch lesbians would provide an additional contrasting layer of analysis to offer insight into their workplaces experiences. Also, future research should include the experiences of heterosexual women compared to femme lesbians, as I suspect they will have similar experiences of discrimination, such as lower pay, the motherhood penalty, and the glass ceiling.

Companies are continuing to add workplace discrimination policies to protect LGBTQIA employees, but there is still much work to be done before equality is reached within the United States. Hooks (1994) said it best when she stated, “The moment we are willing to give up our own ego and draw in the being and presence of someone else, we’re no longer “Other-ing” them, because we are saying there’s no space they inhabit that cannot be a space we can connect with” (216). In other words, an individual who is “different” or “othered” should be embraced rather than merely accepted, and in return both individuals become more whole.

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. Background/Demographic Questions

1. How long have you worked for your current employer?
2. Why did you decide to work here?
3. Is your place of employment male or female dominated?
4. Please describe a typical day at work for you.
5. What are some positive experiences you have had while working here?
6. What are some negative experiences you have had while working here?
7. Is your place of employment “gay-friendly?” Please describe why/why not.
8. Do you work within a group or independently?
9. Are you “out” or “closeted” at work?
 - a. If out: Have you always been out, or did you come out after working here for a while?
 - b. If closeted: Can you talk about why you are closeted at work? What do you do to stay closeted (i.e., how do you make sure no one knows you are a lesbian)?
10. What attributes or characteristics do you feel identify you as a femme/butch lesbian?
11. Do you think butch/femme lesbians are treated differently at work (compared to butch/femme lesbians)? Do you think butch/femme lesbians are treated better or worse than butch/femme lesbians at work (generally)?
12. What is your relationship like with your boss or supervisors? Do you believe they treat you any differently because you are a butch/femme lesbian?
13. (if applicable) What is your relationship like with coworkers, in general? Do you believe they treat you any differently because you are a butch/femme lesbian?
14. Do you feel like you ever change your appearance or mannerisms when interacting with certain groups at work? Do you ever feel like you have to change who you are as a femme/butch lesbian at work?
15. In general, what are your experiences as a butch/femme lesbian like with men at work? And with women?

II. Experiences with sexual orientation discrimination

1. For women who are out: Do you feel like you have been treated differently (better or worse) at work because you are a lesbian?
2. Do you ever feel like you have been treated differently (better or worse) because you are butch/femme?
3. Have you ever experienced anything that would be defined as discrimination?
4. Have you experienced sexual discrimination differently from a male or female co-worker or boss? If so, can you please give me an example of how the discrimination was different?
5. Do you fear discrimination because of your sexual orientation?

6. How has fear of discrimination changed or altered how you approach conversations with co-workers or superiors?
7. How does fear of discrimination affect your work productivity?
8. How does fear of discrimination affect your workplace relationships?

III. Experiences with heteronormativity

1. Have you experienced heterosexist challenges from your co-workers or superiors? If so, how did you react or respond?
2. Do you feel there are expectations within the workplace to conform to heterosexual norms?
3. Have you ever feared being discriminated against for not conforming to heterosexual expectations for how one is supposed to look or act?
4. Can you describe your experiences of homophobia at work? How do you deal with them?
5. How would you describe the difference between heterosexual femininity and lesbian femininity/heterosexual masculinity and lesbian masculinity?
6. Do you feel comfortable talking about your partner at work? Why/why not?

IV. Experiences with sexual harassment

The EEOC defines sexual harassment as, "Harassment of a person (an applicant or employee) because of the person's sex. Harassment can include "sexual harassment" or unwelcome sexual advances, request for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. Harassment does not have to be of a sexual nature, however, and can include offensive remarks about a person's sex. For example, it is illegal to harass a woman by making offensive comments about women in general. Both victim and the harasser can be either a woman or a man, and the victim and harasser can be the same sex. Although the law doesn't prohibit simple teasing, offhand comments, or isolated incidents that are not very serious, harassment is illegal when it is so frequent or severe that it creates a hostile environment or when it results in an adverse employment decision (such as a victim being fired or demoted). The harasser can be the victim's supervisor, a supervisor in another area, a co-worker, or someone who is not an employee of the employer, such as a client or customer.

1. Describe any experiences of sexual harassment you have had by customers?
 - a. What was your reaction to the situation?
 - b. Did you report the incident?
2. Describe any experiences of sexual harassment you have had by co-workers or superiors?
 - a. What was your reaction to the situation?
 - b. Did you report the incident?
3. Does your employer have a sexual harassment policy?
 - a. If so, do you feel your employer adheres to the policy?
 - b. Can you give me an example of ways your employer ensures their employees are aware of the policy (i.e., poster, email, newsletter, etc.)?
4. Have you ever been harassed because you are a lesbian?

V. General questions

1. If you had the opportunity, what changes would you make to improve your workplace environment?
2. How do you feel attitudes toward homosexuality have changed in the workplace?
3. Do you feel these attitudes will continue to change?

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