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How to Look the Part: Implications of Body Image Issues for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Students

Nicole Chabot

This article examines the intersection between sexual orientation and struggles with body image and eating disorders. As people who live in a state of breaking gender roles, members of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community feel pressure from the heterosexual and homosexual populations to look like one or the other (Siever, 1994). This article includes a review of current and relevant literature, as well as implications for higher education and student affairs practitioners.

College students on all campuses today deal with pressures to look a certain way. Body image problems and eating disorders are some of the most problematic issues that plague students across the country. In fact, The Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness states that 91% of women surveyed on a college campus had attempted to control their weight through extensive dieting, 22% dieted often, and up to 19% of women suffered from a clinical or sub-clinical eating disorder such as bulimia or anorexia nervosa. One million men in this country are also known to suffer from eating disorders. If statistics on women are any indication, at least one in three of these men could be college students (Alliance for Eating Disorders).

It is rare, however, to find students with body image problems which are not coupled with other identity development issues and struggles. Among those least studied are people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and queer (LGBTQQ). The focus of this review will specifically be on lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. However, that is not to diminish the numerous body image problems experienced by those transgender, questioning, and queer individuals. As people who live questioning gender roles, members of the LGB community feel pressure from both the heterosexual and homosexual populations to conform to the ideal look of one or the other. Coming to terms with their bodies and sexual orientation are difficult and lengthy tasks that happen in many different ways depending on both person and environment.

Societal Pressures and Norms

Societal pressure seems to be driving the internal conflict for LGB people and their struggles with body image. Gay men and lesbians, while experiencing similar identity development processes, tend to feel different pressures and respond to differing personal and societal demands (Siever, 1994).

According to a study conducted by Siever (1994), “gay male subculture imposes similarly strong pressures on gay men to be physically attractive” (p. 252). He compares the internal conflict around body image and self-esteem of homosexual men to that of heterosexual women as they are both taught to have strong desires to attract and please men. Siever went on to assert that men, in general, are socialized to be focused more on the physical attractiveness of their potential partner rather than other attributes such as personality, status, or power. Thus, gay men show a much higher concern for physical attractiveness.

Lakkis, Ricciardelli, and Williams (1999) outline what they refer to as their “femininity hypothesis.” They claim that “the identification with characteristics typically labeled as ‘feminine,’ such as passivity, dependence, and unassertiveness, reflect a need of approval from others and low self-esteem,” (p. 3). Men who identify strongly with these traits may be more likely to use extreme weight loss measures to help alleviate their low self-esteem. Lakkis et al. also found that for men, sexual orientation was the number one predictor of body dissatisfaction: “This finding is consistent with the ideals of the male gay subculture because it places a great emphasis and importance on the lean and muscular body” (p. 11).

In comparison to heterosexual women, gay men tend to be less happy with their bodies due to the fact that they are dissatisfied in what Siever (1994) calls “two dimensions” (p. 257). While striving to be feminine, lean, and attractive to men, homosexual males are also attempting to live up to the expectation of men to have “strength and athletic prowess” (Siever, p. 257). Confusion surrounding which image to embody can be difficult and challenging, and the lack of ability to fit into either body role ascribed by society may cause heightened dissatisfaction and a higher chance for eating disordered behavior.

Body image problems in lesbians fall along similarly dichotomous lines, as they are struggling to please both heterosexual and homosexual communities. The focus of conflict and process of body image development is drastically different from that of homosexual males. While gay men act out similarly to heterosexual females in their issues of body image and self-esteem, lesbians seem to combine the experiences of both heterosexual females and males (Cogan, 2001; Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Strugel-Moore, 1997). Findings on this issue seem to be contradictory. Adopting feminist ideals frequently leads lesbians to care less about body image and weight; instead focusing more on the whole person. Other arguments indicate that it is impossible for lesbians, regardless of their beliefs, to ignore the pressure from media and societal messages that female beauty is synonymous with thinness (Cogan, 2001; Lakkis et al., 1999).

Siever (1994) stated that, "Lesbian subculture has been described as downplaying, even actively resisting the dominant cultural value placed on beauty for women" (p. 253). As mentioned previously, much of the desire to be thin and beautiful in women comes from the socialized desire to please men. Lesbians' desire to please men is minimal, if existent at all, thus the pressure to be the stereotypical woman a man is looking for is also absent. This allows lesbians the freedom to be less concerned with not only how they look, but how their partners look as well. In fact, Beren et al. (1997) found that, "Compared to heterosexual women, lesbians report: less concern with appearance and weight, higher ideal weights for themselves, less concern with partners' appearance, less concern with dieting, and less drive for thinness" (p. 432).

Cogan (2001) argues, however, that it is feminism, and not lesbianism, that enhances women's happiness with their weight and bodies. "Inherent in feminist philosophy is the value of women in all their diversity. . . . Many feminists challenge socialized female beauty mandates that serve to trap women into striving to attain the unattainable" (para. 16). While lesbians traditionally tend to identify as feminists, this is not always true. It is important to consider that feminism, not sexuality, could more strongly push women to accept and be satisfied with their bodies.

Contrary to the belief that lesbians or feminists are not concerned with their bodies is the argument that societal pressures carry such influence that, regardless of one's sexuality, one will feel the demands of gender norms. "All women irrespective of their sexual orientation are targeted constantly by media and societal messages that promote the thin ideal" (Lakkis et al., 1999, p. 12). Regardless of their convictions, it is difficult for women to escape the images the media makes available that epitomize what beautiful should look like.

Beren et al. (1997) interviewed lesbian women in hoping to gain some insight into body image and ideals in the LGB community. Many responses from these women spoke to external pressure that women face regardless of orientation. One woman stated, "I think that the media is a huge thing. I think that repeated images on TV and in magazines of skinny women, like sticks, just perpetuate the standard of beauty" (p. 437). Another woman spoke to the pressure that surprisingly, does not come from men but, rather, from other women to be concerned about her body.

I think a lot of social pressure from other women has really affected me because seeing other women always being aware of their bodies makes me really aware of my own. It's a complete awareness that never escapes you even when you are just with yourself. It's an awareness by yourself, about your own body, because you never escape your body. It's the kind of thing that you either have to deal with it or you're going to be fighting it. (p. 437)

It is clear that women are feeling pressure to be thin and to follow the mainstream media's standards of beauty despite their feminist or lesbian identities. Another form of pressure for lesbian women comes with the expectation to be strong, athletic, and muscular. Lesbians experience the pressure to be more masculine, similar to gay men feeling pressure to be thin and feminine (Beren et al., 1997).

Beren et al. (1997) point out the fact that within lesbian culture, "There [is] also a concern with physical fitness, and some indicate a dislike for a female body that appears too 'fem' or 'frail'" (p. 440). As some gay men look for men who are effeminate, some lesbians are similarly looking for women who have, to some extent, adopted masculine traits and behaviors.

Codes of Recognition

Within both lesbian and gay communities exist the stereotypes of *butch* and *femme*, epitomizing the image society typically maintains of a masculine lesbian woman and an effeminate gay man. To some extent, the traits that make these

stereotypes true become ways for people within those groups to *code* themselves and recognize others as members or people who belong. These codes can exist in external markers, language, or internal markers to help in establishing one's identity (Cogan, 2001).

A great deal of sources exist citing markers used by the lesbian community as beauty norms. Not as much exists surrounding beauty norms for gay men other than referring to the thin and lean look that gay men tend to adopt to attract other men as partners. The reason for this lack of specific markers is unknown; however, the text about the lesbian community should provide insight on the importance of codes and symbols in any community for cohesion and recognition.

Cogan (2001) cited Rothblum who stated that "lesbian beauty norms serve two specific functions: first, to allow us to identify each other; and second, to confer a sense of belonging to the group" (para. 22). Cogan shows examples of such outward markers of beauty such as triangle earrings or other jewelry, pinkie rings, Doc Martens, and certain haircuts. While others surely exist, this is a short list of items that lesbians recognize as codes of connection between themselves and other lesbians.

While these codes of recognition allow people the freedom to feel connected to and part of a group, they also serve as an agent of exclusion for those people that may not adhere to these codes but still consider themselves part of the community. Much of the research on body image notes the concept of LGB community members passing as heterosexual. For example, femme lesbians, those that do not adhere to the masculine code that delineates lesbians from heterosexual women, embrace their femininity and will often be mistaken for being heterosexual. The combination of these two images creates great conflict for both heterosexual and homosexual communities (Lenney, 2002; Lakkis et al., 1999).

Not only are femme lesbians commonly rejected by the straight community, they also risk a lack of acceptance by the lesbian community as they are often seen as avoiding the oppression and hardship experienced by those that are outwardly lesbian. In her dissertation, "Discontinuities: A Study of Lesbians and Body Image," Lenney (2002) stated that, "the femmes' ability to pass for heterosexual denied her [*sic*] an identity of her [*sic*] own" (p.16-17). Esterberg (1997), in a qualitative study of lesbian and bisexual women, spoke about lesbians' ability to tell if another woman is a lesbian. Esterberg stated, "women rarely suspected that those who were stereotypically 'feminine' were lesbian" (p. 88). A person in this category might go through life not feeling a sense of belonging in any group. The same may be true for gay men who appear very traditionally masculine. By appearing heterosexual, but being homosexual, they too experience the struggle of not belonging to one community or another.

In regard to body image and self-esteem, lesbians who pass as heterosexual adhere to the pressures to be thin more so than those that do not. Lakkis et al. (1999) suggested that "the more lesbians resemble heterosexual women on gender traits, the more similar their eating attitudes and behaviors" (p. 12). Therefore, the implications for coding and passing as straight are much more than group recognition and belonging.

Processes of Dealing with Body Image

Lesbians and gay men have very different experiences from each other with their body image and self-esteem development. The points at which they deal with their body image struggles differ frequently based on their coming out processes (Atkins, 1998).

Lenney (2002) stated that, "In many cases the women themselves had internalized homophobia which manifested in the form of compulsive eating tendencies or, in drastic cases, in the form of an eating disorder" (p. 21). Lenney also explained the natural tendency for lesbians to believe there is something inherently wrong with them. Rather than recognizing the ultimate reason for their feelings and the related discrimination and oppression, it becomes manifested as an eating disorder or problem with body image.

Atkins (1998) also spoke to this parallel world of body image and sexuality identity development. Atkins stated, "Lesbian and bisexual women were brought up with these appearance norms, many even developing eating disorders as young women; it is noteworthy that some of us began recovery at or about the same time as when we 'came out'" (p. xxxix).

The double freedom that Atkins spoke of revolves around the new found ability to embrace one's body and one's sexuality equally.

Prior to coming out, Atkins (1998) said it is also common for lesbians to turn to food or fasting in order to "submerge or deal with their own and other people's homophobia" (p. x/z). Whether it is to ignore their internalized homophobia or deal with others', lesbians' body image is greatly affected by their support community and their own development as they begin to come out and embrace their homosexual identity.

Gay men, on the other hand, have very different experiences. Atkins (1998) stated that "many gay men's body image seemed in worse shape after coming out than before. It seemed that gay men were pressured to look for and be looked at both for their appearance and their money" (p. xxx/x). Rather than feel a sense of relief to move beyond body image problems, gay men tend to plunge further into low self-esteem and negative body image issues as they begin to embrace the so-called perfect image of a gay man.

These opposite experiences show that societal pressures on lesbians and gay men, while fairly similar, have drastically different effects on their body image development. One group feels freedom upon coming out while the other merely begins its imprisonment with the same process.

Implications for Student Affairs

It is impossible to ignore that LGB students will continue to experience major issues of body image, readily leading to larger problems. Studies show that negative body image is a direct link to eating disorders. More impossible to ignore, however, are the populations of people considered members of the queer community that have been left out by most of these studies.

In most research used in this article, it was blatantly stated that bisexual populations were excluded so as not to cloud the results. The bisexual population is becoming more visible not only nationwide but on our college campuses, and it is imperative that we know how these issues of body image are affecting them. While it may be easy to assume that they would react similarly to lesbian or gay students, bisexuals already exist in a world where they do not belong on either side, therefore, the addition of yet another exclusion from belonging could cause them to react very differently.

There is also an absence of dialogue surrounding transgender and intersex students, as well as of ally development. These are all significant pieces of the LGBTQQ community that we should not forget.

It is also important to think about general college student development as we better address these issues. Many college-aged women are not in touch with the feminism that was once a traditional developmental piece of middle-aged women. They, therefore, may not understand the influence of the patriarchal society on their own self-worth; this also holds true for both older lesbians and bisexual women. While this may not be true for everyone, it is the responsibility of administrators on campuses to make sure that college-aged women and men understand the importance of societal body image pressures.

As we think forward to how to help students with these issues, it is imperative that we think about what areas of campus will be open for these students to voice their concerns. While there are many LGBTQQ offices, health and wellbeing centers, and women's centers, there are rarely places that combine the issues dealt with by all three. I believe that women's centers could be called Centers for Women and Gender, so that men dealing with issues of gender norm barriers feel that they have a place to get help and support. If this type of center is not appropriate for a specific campus, women's centers should at least recognize that their name might be a barrier and work with men in light of this challenge.

LGBTQQ offices should also have information readily available for students that may be dealing with eating disorders as they go through their development. Finally, health centers on campuses should have information about eating disorders directed toward different groups of students. Not only members of the queer community deal with these issues. Students dealing with other forms of oppression also have suppressed issues that manifest themselves in the form of eating disorders. Knowledge about this theory seems to be scarce and should be provided for students who may be dealing with these issues.

As college campuses become testing grounds for issues surrounding youth's sexuality, administrators must make themselves aware of the implications of societal pressures for all students especially those dealing with other identity developments such as homosexuality. As students try to develop in and amongst the multiple pressures and labels placed on them by society, it is our job to provide them with as many resources as possible.

While the research linking body image and sexuality is scarce, it is impossible to ignore the connection that exists. We must do our best to encourage students not to try to look the part that society implies as right but to simply look like and accept themselves. In recognition that this is a difficult and sometimes life-long challenge, we can at least give students the tools to guard against and free themselves from the societal pressures that make this so strenuous.

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