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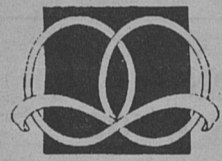
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by Esther Rothblum

"Lesbians are women who wear comfortable shoes"
— Robin Williams in the film "Good Morning, Vietnam"

Being female means being told how to look. The overwhelming majority of television and magazine advertisements are related to products that improve the physical attractiveness of women. How are lesbians affected by U.S. society's emphasis on physical appearance for women?

Appearance standards for women include most facial features, body parts, weight, skin color, age, clothing, make-up, and posture. As bisexuality researcher Sari Dworkin has stated, "Women and men in our society undergo a different socialization process. From early childhood, women are taught that their appearance is a crucial aspect of their lives, whereas men are taught that their accomplishments are what counts."

Lesbians, too, are socialized as girls and women to value physical attractiveness. Most lesbians work and socialize with heterosexual people, and are influenced by appearance norms in the media. Thus, lesbians may be as restricted by the appearance mandates for women as are heterosexual women.

Lesbians differ from heterosexual women in one crucial aspect, however: they are not involved in sexual relationships with men. This is true for all women who are exclusively lesbian, no matter how closeted they are and no matter how integrated they are into occupational and social roles with heterosexual people.

The psychological research on physical attractiveness has found that the reason why physical attractiveness is important, particularly for women, is that it is related to being found socially and sexually attractive by men. Men's social status often results more from the physical attractiveness of the women they are with than with their own attractiveness.

The fact that lesbians are sexually independent from men would argue that societal pressures regarding physical attractiveness may be less salient for lesbians. For example, lesbians may be less concerned with body weight. Several years ago, two colleagues and I speculated that heterosexual women and gay men (two groups that are sexually involved with men) would be more concerned with their weight than lesbians and heterosexual men (two groups that are not sexually involved with men). Our results provided some partial support for this speculation, as we found heterosexual women and gay men more preoccupied with their weight and reporting lower "ideal" weights than did lesbians or heterosexual men.

Surveys indicate that society at large holds extremely negative attitudes towards lesbians. Many people in the U.S. consider "homosexuals" (including lesbians) immoral, unhappy, and harmful. The negative attitudes about lesbians include negative stereotypes about the appearance of lesbians. For example, lesbians are viewed as too ugly to attract a man and as women who don't wear make-up, don't shave their legs, or who look masculine.

Most lesbians function in two environments: the heterosexual macrostructure and the lesbian community. The two authors of a recent study described how members of minority groups become bicultural within the majority and minority cultures. The authors pointed out that lesbians and gay men differ from members of other minority groups in this process. Most minority groups first become acculturated within their own group and then later are socialized (by schools, the media, the church) within the dominant culture. Lesbians and gay men, however, are first socialized by the dominant culture and later identify with the minority culture.

One of the factors that aids in bicultural socialization is physical appearance. Because many (but certainly not all) lesbians and gay men can "pass" as heterosexual, they need to find ways to make themselves identifiable to others. Many lesbians and gay men need to learn how to look like and recognize members of their minority culture.

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

The lesbian community has always had norms for physical appearance, and these norms have changed with times just as norms for women's appearance changed in the dominant culture. Appearance norms in the lesbian community have had two functions: 1) to provide a means for members of an often invisible and oppressed group to identify one another without being identifiable by the dominant culture; and 2) to provide a group identity and thus separate norms from the dominant culture.

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

There has been little written on the impact of physical appearance on lesbians. How do lesbians perceive attractiveness? Is it important? Does it include physical attributes as well as personality characteristics (e.g., sense of humor, warmth)? How does physical attractiveness affect lesbians over the life span? How does it change for lesbians once they come out? How does it affect multicultural lesbians and lesbians from specific minority cultures? To what degree do lesbians change their physical appearance (e.g., clothing) when interacting with the dominant versus the lesbian cultures?

In this column I've presented six models that might explain the role of physical appearance among lesbians. Hopefully this will lead to some discussion about the relative importance of these models in affecting physical appearance in the lesbian community. ▼

Esther Rothblum is Professor of Psychology at the University of Vermont and Editor of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. "Dyke Psyche" will be a monthly column in *Out in the Mountains*. This piece was excerpted from her article "Lesbians and Physical Appearance: Which Model Applies?" that appeared in the annual *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Issues*, 1994, Volume 1, pp. 84-97. For a full copy of this article, write to Esther Rothblum, Dept. of Psychology, John Dewey Hall, University of Vermont, Burlington VT 05405, or e-mail e_rothbl@uvm.edu.

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