

“NO LEZBROS”: EXPLORING ATTITUDES OF STRAIGHT MEN TOWARD MASCULINE LESBIANS

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A 2009 study titled “Attitudes Toward Stereotypical Versus Counter-stereotypical Gay Men and Lesbians” tests whether heterosexual men and heterosexual women’s attitudes toward homosexuals “would vary as a function of three factors: (a) the sex of the participant, (b) the sex of the homosexual target, and (c) the homosexual target’s masculinity or femininity” (Cohen, Tuttle, and Hall 276). In the sample of fifty-three heterosexual college students, participants were asked to read the personality surveys of two fictitious homosexual students, either two men or two women. In each pair, one exhibited “masculine” qualities—“interests and extracurricular activities, personality traits, and an academic major that are more commonly associated with heterosexual men” (276)—and one exhibited “feminine” qualities—the same criteria, but those most often associated with heterosexual women. Though participants read only descriptions of either two women or two men, the descriptions were identical across “masculine” and “feminine” targets. The respondents were asked to rate the likability of each fictitious homosexual student from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). While the women studied showed a “nonsignificant preference for the feminine gay man over the masculine gay men” and a smaller preference for the feminine lesbian than male participants, the heterosexual men studied had a greater preference for gender role conformity, “strongly prefer[ing] the masculine gay man” and preferring the feminine lesbian (279).

Perhaps the study’s finding that straight men prefer men and women with traditionally gendered behaviors is unsurprising considering existing gender theory on men and masculinity (Cohen et al.; Halberstam; Pascoe and Bridges); however, the results were not entirely predictable. The straight men studied showed a higher likability rating for the feminine gay man depicted in the study than for the masculine lesbian, despite liking the masculine gay man more than the feminine gay man (278). Since neither feminine gay men nor masculine lesbians adhere to traditional gender roles, one would think men would default to favoring masculine behaviors supposedly like their own, thus preferring masculine lesbians to feminine gay men. Indeed, the authors suggest that research on similarity indicates that individuals would give a higher likability rating to those who are most similar to them: men to those who are masculine regardless of gender, and women to those who are feminine. In other words, wouldn’t straight “bros” enjoy having “lezbros” with similar interests and personality traits?¹ Why is that the straight men studied only seem to like masculinity when it’s in a male body?

Various gender theorists consider why people, men in particular, may believe there is an inherent link between masculinity and maleness. In “An Introduction to Female

Masculinity: Masculinity Without Men,” queer theorist J. Jack Halberstam notes how “complex social structures” have “wed masculinity to maleness and to power and domination” (348). Sociologist Michael Kimmel explains these “complex social structures” by showing how and why this link between masculinity and manhood—what Halberstam calls “maleness”—came to be in his essay “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity.” In this work, Kimmel refers to the classic Freudian Oedipal model to show how masculinity and heterosexuality become linked in the minds of young boys:

the fear of the father’s power terrifies the young boy to renounce his desire for his mother and identify with his father. . . . The little boy’s identification with father (becoming masculine) allows him to now engage in sexual relations with women (he becomes heterosexual). (34)

In this model, masculinity and heterosexuality are actually created together. The Oedipus complex necessarily links masculinity with heterosexuality; the same process creates both concepts. As Kimmel explains, the interdependency of these traits could explain why straight men might be uncomfortable with homosexuality.

It’s important to note that Kimmel defines homophobia as more than a fear of gay men; instead, homophobia is “the fear of being perceived as gay, as not a real man” (37). All men, Kimmel argues, live with the ever-present insecurity of being outed as feminine in some way, and, as a defense, resort to what he calls exaggerated masculinity (37). Kimmel writes that “Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of the feminine” (30) and “must be proved” (28). In this way, male gender role conformity is essential for asserting one’s manhood.

One of the ways heterosexual men “prove” their masculinity is by differentiating their identities from others perceived as less masculine. Kimmel notes that “Women and gay men become the ‘other’ against which heterosexual men project their identities” (37). In an attempt to further protect their status as masculine, straight men dominate women and gay men, whom they believe embody femininity. Kimmel also contends that “one of the centerpieces” of masculinity is “putting women down” (37). The feminine can be dominated because, as Halberstam argues, coming of age as a woman “is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression” (350). This circumstance gives men the perfect “other” to dominate and form an identity in opposition to. In this way, both male and female gender role conformity work in tandem to reinforce the fragile manhood of the straight male. So, masculine women, who are obviously not gender conforming, threaten the perceived link between masculinity and manhood. Female masculinities are dismissed, Halberstam explains, by being “framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing” (348). This notion that female masculinity is the antithesis

to male masculinity may help explain why the study revealed straight men's dislike of masculine women.

If straight men feel compelled to assert manhood through displays of masculinity involving dominance over women, the presence of masculinity in a female body poses an enormous threat to men's ability to do so. If female masculinity were more readily acknowledged, masculinity could lose its inherent link with manhood, leaving men with no way to assert it as their own—after all, “masculinity must be proved” (Kimmel 28). This perceived threat could explain the tendency identified in the study for heterosexual men to prefer the feminine gay man over the masculine lesbian; the presence of female masculinity is a potent threat to the straight men's sense of self. The feminine gay man, while perhaps slightly loosening the link between manhood and the repudiation of the feminine, does not threaten to erase the association of masculine gender performance with manhood, because masculine men can feel more like men by contrasting themselves to him. Although the study's straight male participants were likely unconscious of their bias, it is entirely possible that such insecurities made them uncomfortable with the thought of a masculine female and negatively affected their opinion of her.

Based on this analysis, it would seem that the heterosexual men who participated in the study directed a greater level of homophobia at the masculine lesbian than the feminine gay man. This runs against the conventional wisdom that in everyday life, straight men's homophobia seems to be directed mostly at gay and/or feminine men. Tristan Bridges and C.J. Pascoe state as much in their essay, “Masculinities and Post-Homophobias?”, citing studies by Herek and Moskowitz et al. to note that “Men are . . . more likely to direct this homophobia at gay men, rather than lesbians” (414). Why, then, would the straight men in the study by Cohen et al. seem to direct more homophobia to the masculine lesbian? The answer, perhaps, is that the mitigating factor in straight men's opinions of masculine lesbians is not homophobia, but misogyny.

If masculinity is associated with power and domination as Halberstam asserts, which would make anyone “masculine” harder to dominate, then female masculinity threatens the entire patriarchal system by jeopardizing men's ability to subordinate women. While both feminine gay men and masculine lesbians are subject to homophobia, the masculine lesbian is also subjected to misogyny. Although feminine lesbians are also subject to both systems of oppression, the misogyny they suffer manifests as sexual objectification. Bridges and Pascoe observe that men tend to be more “accepting” of sexually attractive lesbians; they quote a high schooler from their research who said, “To see two hot chicks banging bodies in a bed, that's like every guy's fantasy right there” (416). If the men in the study were picturing more conventionally attractive feminine lesbians—which is likely, due to a perceived cultural link between femininity and female attractiveness—then the higher likability rating for the feminine lesbians can be called into question. The tendency to sexually objectify

plus a perceived ability to dominate the feminine may have played a significant role in the straight men's opinion of her. However, the masculine lesbian, by virtue of her masculinity, is more difficult to oppress, dominate, and objectify, perhaps leading the men in the study to fear or despise her more than any other homosexual target. Because her status as a woman precludes her from appropriately exhibiting masculinity in the minds of the men studied, an aversion to female masculine lesbians may be more attributable to misogyny than homophobia.

Further evidence for this misogyny comes from the fact that the men in the study actually liked the masculine gay man more than the feminine lesbian. If the men in the study were indeed picturing conventionally attractive feminine lesbians, then they should have reported higher likability ratings for the feminine lesbian than the masculine gay man. After all, she is an object of potential sexual gratification to the male respondents while the gay man is not, and neither exhibits the masculine traits they would look for in a potential friend. The simplest and only obvious explanation is that misogyny accounts for why the results were the opposite of what one might expect based on cultural perceptions and previous research findings.

However, one could take this analysis of the study's results even further. If masculinity is linked with both manhood and with heterosexuality, and masculinity requires proof, then male heterosexuality must also require proof. Halberstam notes that "female masculinity seems to be at its most threatening when coupled with lesbian desire" (357). If female masculinity threatens to break the link between masculinity and manhood, then lesbian masculinity goes a step further: it breaks the link between masculinity and heterosexuality, preventing men from "proving" their straightness through sexual domination. This explains why lesbian masculinity may be more threatening than heterosexual female masculinity. While the presence of a masculine heterosexual female threatens the ability of men to assert their manhood, this does not get at the root of men's insecurities. Kimmel claims that it is a sexual, rather than a gendered, insecurity at the heart of why men feel the need to assert masculinity: "Homophobic flight from intimacy with other men is the repudiation of the homosexual within—never completely successful and hence constantly reenacted in every homosocial relationship" (34). Because the repudiation of the homosexual within is never fully successful, men spend their lives "exaggerating all the traditional rules of masculinity" in order to assert their heterosexuality (Kimmel 37). Taking this into consideration, a masculine lesbian is the most terrifying combination possible for a heterosexual man, as she simultaneously threatens both his gender and his sexuality.

The study's conclusion states that the goal of the researchers was "to shed new light on the attitudes that heterosexual men and women have about gay men and lesbians" and that the results show that while "tremendous strides have been made in recent decades to understand, accept, and embrace individuals of different sexual orientations, there is still more work to be done" (Cohen et al. 280). It's clear the brunt of this work needs to be taken on by straight men. As Kimmel tells us, "Peace of mind,

relief from gender struggle, will come only from a politics of inclusion, not exclusion, from standing up for equality and justice, and not by running away” (42). Rather than succumb to the insecurities that cause them to propagate oppression, heterosexual men need to find their sense of masculinity from within.

NOTE

1. “Lezbro” is an informal term popularly used online and in *Lezbro: Don’t Cha Know*, a short film that describes straight male-lesbian female friendships.

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