



# Gender Maneuvering in Lesbian Contexts

Morgan Justice, Dr. Christina Steidl

Department of Sociology, UAH

## Introduction and Background

- **Gender** refers to the social and cultural roles assigned to individuals based on biological sex.
- **Gender identity** refers to an individual's awareness of their own conformity to gender roles.
- **Dress, performance, and attitude** serve as key indicators of gender identity. How these indicators are perceived/interpreted differs by context.
- **Heteronormativity** is a framework that assumes that people fall into distinct genders, men and women, with natural social roles (e.g., men hold more power).
- **Gender Maneuvering**, a term introduced by Mimi Schippers, is the process by which an individual moves between two spaces and reappropriates the meaning of their gender identities depending based on context.

## Research Questions

- Is heteronormativity reflected in or imposed onto lesbian gender identities?
- Do power dynamics within lesbian relationships operate in a heteronormative way?

## Methods

- Conducted 20 in-depth interviews with women identifying as lesbian, bisexual, or queer in three southern U.S. cities.
- Transcribed and coded interview recordings using MaxQDA.

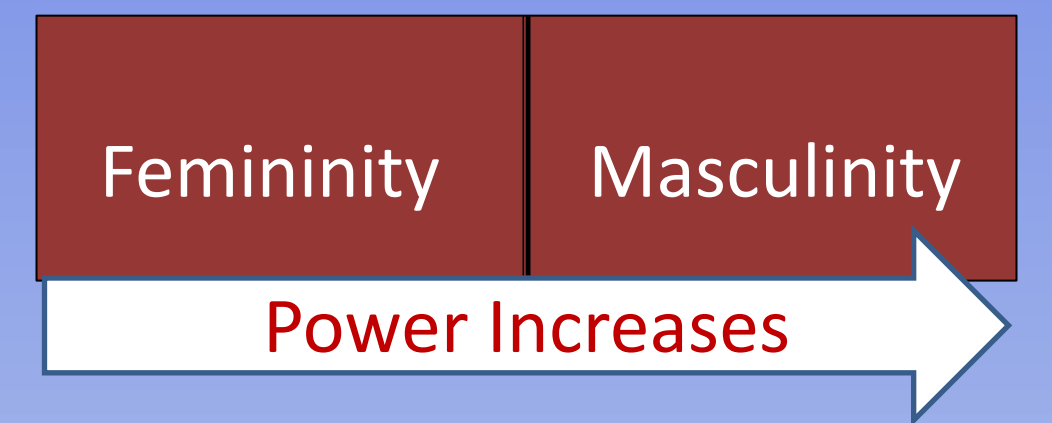
## References

Finley, Nancy J. "Skating Femininity: Gender Maneuvering in Women's Roller Derby." 2010. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. 39: 359.  
Schippers, Mimi. *Recovering the feminine other: masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony.* 2007. *Theoretical Sociology*. 36: 85-102.

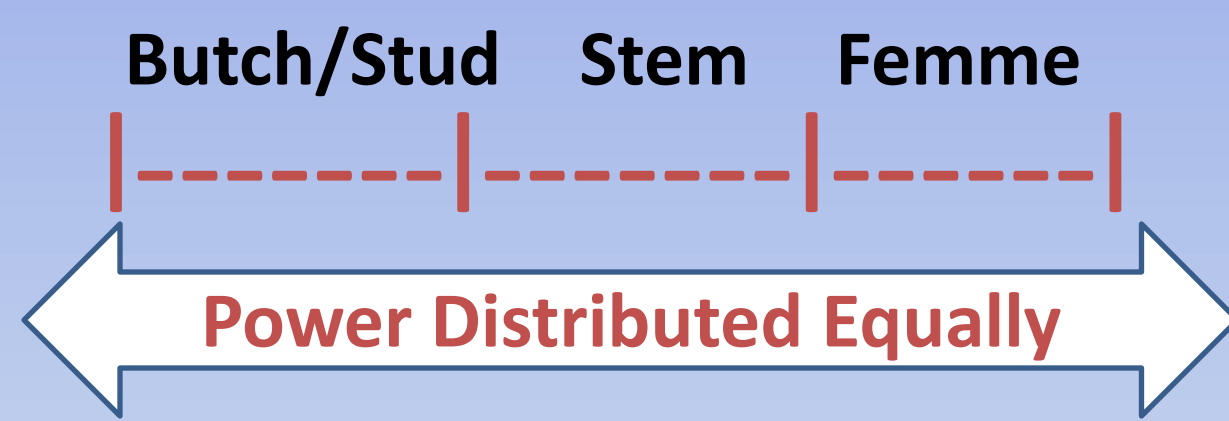
Perception	Indicators	Quotes	Conclusions
Hetero-normative Contexts	Dress	"And if I would have the cargo shorts on that day, 'cause my first girlfriend, we would reverse roles and it was just like fun and I would be the man for the day and they would give me the check. We would go to the same restaurant and it would be the same server and they would give me the check."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dress and attitude are perceived as stable indicators of gender identity, such that masculine dress and confidence are associated with power, access to financial resources, and dominance in relationships.</li><li>• Gender performance is assumed to be binary, with partners filling complementary roles. This often leads third parties to try to identify "a man" and "a woman" in a lesbian relationship.</li></ul>
	Performance	"They would have trouble identifying people, 'Who goes to work and which one takes care of the house?'...usually, the man goes to work and sometimes very hard labor type work. The woman stays home and tends to the children and cooks and cleans." "But, like I don't, like I think people assume that I'm going to pay for the meal. Like I'm going to do what they guy does. And I'm like, I, yes, I'm a hopeless romantic. I will buy her a flower, or I'll make her a flower from origami, but that doesn't make me the dude. Because last I checked, I'm a woman."	
	Attitude	"...and maybe my attitude, too. I'm not cocky. I'm confident. And I'm not, okay, that sounded cocky. I don't know...it seems it could be not as feminine as a straight girl's would be." "Yeah, like how to ask the person to be your girlfriend and dating. I didn't understand any of it. And when I would ask people they would be like, 'You're the dude.' 'Because I don't know?' 'Yeah, the guy's always clueless.'"	
Lesbian Contexts	Dress	"And, um, I'll, normally, I'll wear a T-shirt and jeans, um, but...I embrace the fact that I have breasts and the fact that I have hips...so when I wear dresses people are like 'Oh my god, I never thought I would have seen you like that.' Why not? Why limit me to the things that I can and cannot do?" "And, I don't know, when I figured out I was gay and it was, like, so you know what does that mean to my, you know how I appear. And then I realized that it didn't have to mean anything. I could just be what I wanted to be when I wanted to be it. "	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gender is perceived not in binary categories, but along a continuum with individuals identifying themselves between masculine and feminine.</li><li>• Dress and attitude are perceived as fluid and flexible choices and <i>not</i> as indicators of gender identity. As such, masculine and feminine dress and attitude are not necessarily associated with power or dominance.</li><li>• Gender performance is dynamic and regularly (re)negotiated within partnerships.</li></ul>
	Performance	"...and she, she can have a dominant role sometime, and then sometime she can have that, 'I want to be the one taken care of.' That's basically what a Stem is." "...because it's like whatever you appear to be is not necessarily what happens during sex. But I think, I mean, all the relationships I've been in that, that type of stuff switches all the time. So, it's not like I always assume one role."	
	Attitude	"I mean on the outside world, on the outside world, they're going to see me as the more dominant, but in reality we are both equal. Because we're both girls and we both... and some days I have attitude and some days she has attitude. Just that girl comes out when you're in that relationship together and it kind of, you kind of, you know what role you're playing, but it kinda goes out the window because at the end of the day you are both girls..."	

## Perceptions: Gender & Power

### Heteronormative



### Lesbian



## Conclusions & Contributions

- In heteronormative relationships, power tends to be distributed in a hierarchal way between two distinct and fixed genders.
- In lesbian relationships, power is distributed and negotiated within relationships in a way that is not based on gender identity.
- Our research provides evidence of the social construction of heteronormativity and illustrates its influence on the lives of LGBT individuals.
- Our research adds to existing literature on gender as a spectrum and the dissolution of gender as a dichotomy.

## Acknowledgements

- Research and Creative Experience for Undergraduates (RCEU)
- Dr. Bernhard Vogler
- UAH Provosts Offices
- UAH Vice President of Research
- UAH Chemistry Department
- The Alabama Space Grant Consortium