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Abstract

We develop a critique of the social psychological hypothesis that media images of women engaged in same-sex activity have a positive effect on heterosexual men's general attitudes to lesbians. A content analysis suggests that British print media usually represent lesbians either in news stories that also include gay men, or in entertainment stories. In focus groups, both gay and straight men were presented with photographs of 'heteroflexible' representations from the 'lad mag' FHM and photographs of 'real' lesbians from *Gay Times*. Men were asked to define what made a woman a real lesbian. Straight men rejected the formulation that there was a single 'stereotype' of lesbians in favor of the claim that the FHM images did not represent real lesbians. Gay men came to agree that the heteroflexible women were not identified as lesbian. Our analysis suggests that both gay and straight men perform bounded sexual identities in response to heteroflexible images which are scripted to be attractive to heterosexual men.

Keywords

attitudes, discourse, heteroflexibility, lad magazines, lesbians, stereotypes

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Lesbian feminists have long argued that psychological expertise is a form of oppression rather than liberation (Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993; Radicalesbians, 1997 [1970]). Famously, Kitzinger (1987) argued that the literature on 'homophobia' depoliticized sexual politics by recasting political dissent as variability in individual attitudes. Indeed, lesbian feminists who agreed that lesbians were a threat to society would be mis-categorized as 'homophobic' by attitude theorists (Kitzinger, 1987). This critique of the liberal values implicit in attitudes research vitally countered social psychology's 'up the mountain story' about its own ever-increasing scientific sophistication and contribution to the social good.

Here, we demonstrate why such criticism remains relevant. Psychological research on sexual minorities is largely androcentric (Lee and Crawford, 2007). However, Louderback and Whitley (1997) proposed a hypothesis specific to heterosexual people's attitudes towards lesbians. Those authors argued that the objectification of lesbian women explains why some straight men have more positive attitudes toward lesbian women than they do towards toward gay men. Among 58 heterosexual-identified American college men, the 'perceived erotic value' of lesbians (PEV-L) was correlated with positive attitudes toward lesbians, but not positive attitudes toward gay men. The authors concluded that pornographic images of lesbians, consumed by straight men, might socialize those men to like lesbians more.

If these authors were right, the new genre of 'lad mags' – which provides straight men with an abundance of 'hot lesbian' imagery – might be good news for lesbians (see Diamond, 2005; Gill, 2009; Jackson and Gilbertson, 2009 for discussion). However, Diamond (2005) noted that popular images of female-female sexuality represented a social advance as illusory as the progress in psychology that Kitzinger (1987) ironized. Diamond (2005)

described such images not as 'lesbian' but 'heteroflexible,' particularly when women performed sex with each other for a male gaze, and presented their acts as 'experiments' that were premised on the existence of stable heterosexual identities. Lad mags routinely display such images; one content analysis found six times as many articles about lesbians as about gay men in lad mags, but those articles were largely 'heteroflexible' representations involving a male spectator (Taylor, 2005).

Louderback and Whitley's (1997) optimism about pornographic representations of lesbian acts is then a new point where attitudes research and lesbian feminist thinking are at odds, a political tension that did not exist when Kitzinger (1987) penned her critique. We grew sceptical of Louderback and Whitley's (1997) analysis when we replicated their correlation between PEV-L and old-fashioned heterosexism, but also found that PEV-L was positively correlated with modern heterosexism, and that men with higher PEV-L scores showed more prejudice towards both lesbian and gay targets (Buechel and Hegarty, 2007). Contrary to Louderback and Whitley (1997), we concluded that eroticized imagery was not socializing attitudes that advantaged lesbians.

Louderback and Whitley (1997) urged researchers to attend closely to the media images that might be socializing heterosexual men's attitudes towards lesbians. [page 242] Accordingly, we next examined representations of lesbians in the British print media. In early 2006 we searched the LexisNexus database for all articles that included the word 'lesbian*' from the 30 October to the 5 November 2005. [Note 1] The resulting 135 articles were categorized along two dimensions; androcentrism and news/entertainment. Androcentric articles focused on lesbians and gay men (or gay men only), while non-androcentric articles included no references to gay men. News articles concerned news stories, largely about civil rights, while entertainment articles concerned plot lines in fictional dramas, documentaries, or other entertainment media. Female-female sexuality was a frequent theme in these articles, but was never mentioned in the news stories. As Table 1 shows, the distribution of articles was highly uneven, $\chi^2(1, N = 135) = 78.53, p < .001$. More of the articles were news stories than entertainment stories. Here, lesbians were discussed largely as a supplementary category to gay men. In contrast, articles where lesbians were discussed on their own were largely in the entertainment category. Thus, at least in contemporary Britain, when lesbians are represented on their own, separate from gay men, it is largely fictional lesbians who are in question.

Table 1: Articles Mentioning Lesbians in Print Media (30/10/2005 to 05/11/2005).

	News Stories	Entertainment Stories
Lesbians Only	6	37
Androcentric	85	7

These analyses led us to select two images from Gay Times and three images from the lad mag FHM to use as prompts in focus groups with young people; one conducted with gay men ($n = 4$), two conducted with heterosexual-identified women ($n = 7$), and two conducted with heterosexual identified men ($n = 8$). The participant groups were recruited using snowball sampling by the second author and were comprised of groups of friends. All focus groups were conducted by the second author. The women in the Gay Times images all had short hair and average build, were fully clothed, and were not engaged in any kind of sexual activity. The women in FHM were slim, had long hair, were naked or close to it, and were posed in sexual positions. After initial questions about their familiarity with the magazines (Gay Times and FHM) participants were asked to look at the pictures and to say what came to mind. Next they were asked "what do you think makes a woman a real lesbian?", if any of the women in the images looked more real than others, and what lesbian sex might look like (see Buechel, 2006 for the complete protocol).

A more complete analysis of this data focused on consistently heteronormative constructions of lesbian sex, concerns with the authenticity of lesbian identities, and explicit talk about the objectification of women (see Buechel, 2006). Here, we comment on two extracts relevant to Louderback and Whitley's (1997) hypothesis about straight men. We exploit the 'possibility for making the invisible visible and the silenced spoken' that Jackson and Gilbertson (2009: 202–203) have recently identified in young people's talk about representations of heteroflexibility. [page 243] Like Jackson and Gilbertson, we found that participants readily reached agreement that some women were 'real lesbians' while others were not. Straight men described the women in FHM as 'what blokes want lesbians to be' and 'a bit of a fantasy, I suppose'. The images were 'just the girl on girl fantasy thing' according to one gay man. 'I know that guys get turned on by two girls at it' said one straight woman. In Extract 1, some of the straight men encounter, and overcome, difficulty in precisely this matter of definition, when discussing an image from *Gay Times*.

Extract 1

Jan	Dykes
Boyd	Yeah, butch, ugly lesbians.
Oscar	And it's in black and white.
Ali	That's (.) I don't know if it, you know [unclear]. I don't know if it springs to mind; ugly, butch lesbians, but it's kind of like the normal lesbians. I mean what's made out in magazines (.)
Tim	Stereotypical is the word you're looking for.
Artie	No, not stereotypical. Stereotypical lesbians would be the beautiful blondes that are next to each other but =
Tim	= I'd say stereotypical is [overtalking]
Artie	That's the real life lesbians.
Jan	Yeah.
Boyd	FHM is fancy, but that's reality.
Artie	That's reality. Obviously you are going to get the beautiful girls but [unclear]. That's kind of your everyday, next door [overtalking]
Tim	I thought that was a man, the one on the right.

The women in *Gay Times* are jointly and unproblematically agreed to be 'dykes,' 'butch ugly,' and hence 'normal' lesbians. Yet trouble follows from Tim's offer of the social psychological term 'stereotypical' to elaborate on that normality. Artie counters that it is 'beautiful blondes' who are stereotypical lesbians. Tim interrupts, and then more overlapping talk than we could interpret occurred. Given the two very different constructions of lesbians in the British media, and Artie's assumption that 'stereotypical lesbians' could have only one referent, the straight men's difficulty in building consensus about what that 'stereotype' might be is not surprising. Consensus starts to rebuild when Artie suggests an alternative elaboration on lesbian normality: these are 'real life' lesbians. Jan agrees. Boyd offers 'fancy' as the opposite of reality, contrasting 'beautiful girls' and 'everyday next door' women as fanciful and real respectively. Tim's change of topic signals that this reality/fancy dichotomy has been accepted. Ironically, just as 'stereotyping' has been consensually rejected, the talk becomes most recognizably inflected by the 'implicit inversion' stereotype of lesbians that social psychologists often study (see e.g. Kite and Deaux, 1986).

This talk bears out Diamond's (2005) analysis of 'heteroflexibility' as an easily legible performance of lesbianism by women who are believed to remain really heterosexual. The ease of grounding consensus troubles Louderback and [page 244] Whitley's (1997) hypothesis that straight men who eroticize heteroflexible representations will extend their positive attitudes to lesbians that they cast as 'butch' and 'ugly.' Rather, these men appear to be particularizing 'fancy lesbians' from real ones (c.f. Billig, 1987), and using notions of attractiveness to do it.

Gill (2009: 153) has recently argued that 'the sexualization of "lesbian" bodies, then, seems to be constructed in relation to heterosexuality not as an autonomous or independent sexual identity' such that images of hot lesbians are constructed as 'exciting, fun, but, crucially, as entirely unthreatening to heterosexuality'. We would like to push this analysis one step further using the next extract in which talk among gay men about the attractiveness of women seems to threaten the performance of male homosexuality.

Extract 2

- Ken Well that's from FHM because that's not going to be in Gay Times.
Stan That's mainstream tabloid lesbianism
Lance It's so posed.
Ken Appealing to Burberry wearing straight men who want to ogle pretty, I mean you can't say they're not pretty, all of them are pretty, aren't they?
Terry Yes, they are.
Stan They're also feminine, aren't they, they're all women. Do you know what I mean?
Ken And they're just completely (.) it's either boobs or bums, isn't it?
Stan Aham
Ken Boobs, boobs, bums.
Terry Mh-hmm
Stan The word lesbian wouldn't come to mind, would it?
Ken No, not at all.
Lance Not what so ever.
Ken I would honestly, honestly say that not one of those girls would identify themselves as a lesbian.

Supporting our earlier critique of Louderback and Whitley (1997), these gay men agree that the women in FHM are nothing other than 'posed' for a 'mainstream tabloid' audience of ogling, Burberry-clad straight men.[Note 2] However, Ken fails to complete an utterance that he begins to formulate about such straight men. Instead, his talk becomes abruptly oriented toward soliciting consensus from the other men on the matter of the models' attractiveness. Terry agrees with Ken. Stan adds that the models are 'women'. Ken again solicits consent to his idea that the women are objectified in terms of the body parts he repeatedly mentions. Ken and Lance also give assent to Stan's claim about the unthinkability of these women being 'lesbian,' (troubling Louderback and Whitley's hypothesis still further). Finally, Ken constructs the honesty of his own speech on the ground that none of the 'girls' would identify as lesbian.

Transcripts do not always yield clear answers to the question of when people are, or are not, talking about their social identities (Stokoe and Sullivan, 2001). Why might we venture that Ken's gay identity was 'threatened' when he described [page 245] the models as pretty? Because privileged identities such as maleness and heterosexuality accrue power by virtue of their invisibility, there is something unsatisfying about failing to read Ken's final comment where he speaks for the 'girls' in FHM, without considering how his gay male identity is at stake in his claim to be speaking 'honestly'. Was Ken's identity undone by his public recognition of the models as pretty? Was it re-done by the group when they assented to his recasting of the prettiness as objectification? Was Ken speaking not only with honesty, but also with androcentric experiential authority 'as a gay man' as to which women would and which would not identify as a lesbian?

We know of no studies which examine how gay men might make sense of 'heteroflexible' images in lad mags. Yet, the men's talk in our focus groups may inform Gill's (2009) claim that 'hot lesbians' images are constructed in the service of heterosexual male identity. Admit for a moment that Ken's gay identity was threatened by recognizing heteroflexible women as pretty. If this is so, then how other than by 'heterosexism by omission' (Braun, 2001) can we not describe heterosexual identity as also being enacted in Extract 1 through consensus about the difference between 'fancy' lesbians and the (butch, ugly) 'real' thing. In other

words, just as men's talk of 'real' and 'unreal' lesbians particularize the women represented as 'heteroflexible,' that talk also maintains men's 'heterofixity' and 'homofixity.' This is not the only way that young people talk themselves back into sexual identity categories after seeming to cross their boundaries. Consider also how gay men and straight women friends 'fix' their sexual identities by constructing tales of snogging each other in public as merely parodic (Shepperd, Coyle, & Hegarty, 2010).

Conclusions

We are not the first to critique the severely limited range of representations of lesbians in contemporary mainstream British public media (see Cowan and Valentine, 2006). Nor are we the first to consider how 'heteroflexible' representations of lesbians are produced for straight male consumption (Diamond, 2005). Past survey researchers have argued, based on correlational data, that such images might socialize pro-lesbian attitudes (Louderback and Whitley, 1997). Our focus groups led us also to consider how men might use those representations to fix themselves in bounded sexual categories. Typically, such men will be heterosexual, but we have shown here that the recognition of culturally scripted attractiveness in these images can occasion identity-work for gay men too.

Together with our earlier work (Buechel and Hegarty, 2006), this paper suggests how social psychologists can move between experimental, content analytic, and discursive work in making sense of new phenomena in sexual politics. In modern Britain, lesbian rights have been secured in many domains, leading some sociologists to describe contemporary Britain as 'the world we have won' (Weeks, 2007). Neither of us identifies as lesbian, but we both consider lesbian feminist criticism of popular discourse and expert opinion to be as vitally necessary as ever. Neither of us can imagine a world to be 'won' when 'hot lesbian' images are actively celebrated [page 246] by psychological experts for helping straight men climb a few points lower in their attitudes to lesbian women.

Notes

This article is based on dissertation research conducted by the second author under the supervision of the first, and was written up primarily by the first author.

1. This date was chosen arbitrarily to fit within the larger programme of research work necessary to complete the MSc dissertation from which this data is drawn.

2. Burberry is a 19th century British fashion company that achieved mass appeal in the 1960s with its 'haymarket check' pattern. By the early 21st century, the wearing of this Burberry pattern was often associated with stereotypes of poor Whites, notably the stereotype of the 'chav' (Hayward and Yar, 2006). This article is based on dissertation research conducted by the second author under the supervision of the first, and was written up primarily by the first author.

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