Butch–femme identity and empathizing–systemizing cognitive traits in Chinese lesbians and bisexual women

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies documented that butches showed a masculine profile and femmes showed a feminine profile in gender roles. This study examines the association between butch or femme lesbian identity and empathizing–systemizing (E–S) cognitive styles among 588 lesbian and bisexual women from multiple cities in China. Empathizing and systemizing were assessed using two different abbreviated 8-item scales drawn from longer original scales. There were significant differences in systemizing among butch–femme identity, with butches scoring higher than femmes, but no significant differences in empathizing. The discrepancy in empathizing–systemizing scores reflects individual differences in dispositional cognitive style. A higher proportion of femmes exhibited an E > S cognitive profile, while a higher proportion of butches exhibited an S > E cognitive profile. Sexual stereotyping based on masculinity/femininity, or biology, may be related to butch–femme difference in cognitive style. In studies on sexual orientation, researchers should pay more attention to butch–femme subgroup differences among lesbians.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Butch–femme identity

Sociological and psychological studies have documented the existence of *butch* (masculine) and *femme* (feminine) subgroups among lesbians and bisexual women. Despite the widespread discussion of butch–femme identities in both popular and academic work on lesbians and bisexual women, little consensus exists on how exactly to define butch–femme identity (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Levy-Warren, 2009), which may be multidimensional rather than unitary. Although potential defining characteristics, such as masculine or feminine personality characteristics, appearance, partner preferences, and sexual behavioral roles are not as strongly tied to butch or femme identity as might be expected (Rosario et al., 2009), butches do tend to show a more masculine profile, while femmes show a more feminine profile.

Lesbian erotic classification of butch–femme is controversial in the contemporary United States, but is commonly used by lesbians in other countries such as Brazil, Peru, the Philippines, and El Salvador (Whitam, Daskalos, Sobolewski, & Padilla, 1998). For example, in Brazil, the term for masculine lesbians is *radicias*, while the English word *lady* is used for feminine lesbians. Peruvian

lesbians refer to masculine lesbians as *activa* and to feminine lesbians as *passiva*. Butch–femme identities are common among Chinese lesbians (Zheng & Zheng, 2011). In China, the terms *butch* and *femme* are signified by upper-case English letters; *T* refers to lesbians with masculine roles, *P* refers to lesbians with feminine roles, and those who prefer both roles equally or self-label as androgynous are denoted by *H*.

Butch–femme identity is often characterized by differences in physical appearance, such as dress and hairstyle. As a result of these differences, some butches are likely to be mistaken for men, while femmes are more likely to be perceived as heterosexual women (Loulan, 1990). Higher waist-to-hip ratios (WHR) have been measured among lesbians who identified more strongly with butch, while femme and heterosexual women tend to have lower WHRs (Singh, Vidaurri, Zambarano, & Dabbs, 1999). Both butch and femme women reported that their masculine or feminine appearance made them feel more comfortable and helped them to attract partners (Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, 2003; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004).

Butch–femme identity may be associated with gender roles, although findings have been inconsistent. One study found that butches and femmes did not differ on measures of masculine or feminine personality (Singh et al., 1999). Loulan (1990) found that the women sampled did not differ with regard to 51 adjectives used to assess masculinity or femininity, but that butches were more likely to rate themselves as *masculine*, *aggressive*, and *dominant*, while femme women were more likely to rate themselves as *feminine*. A study recently conducted in China found that

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butches scored higher than femmes in *instrumentality* and self-ascribed masculinity or femininity; femmes scored higher than butches in *expressiveness* (Zheng & Zheng, 2011). Butch–femme identity is also related to Big Five personality traits, with butches scoring higher on *conscientiousness* and *emotional stability* than femmes (Zheng & Zheng, 2011). Butch–femme identity is also associated with gender-typical behavior, with butches reporting more gender-atypical activities than either heterosexual women or femmes in childhood, and a lack of interest in gender-typical behaviors such as "playing house" and wearing jewelry. Conversely, heterosexual women and femmes both reported higher interest in gender-typical behaviors than their butch-identified counterparts (Singh et al., 1999). Young butch women (aged 14–21) reported drinking alcohol more frequently and in greater quantities, smoking more cigarettes, and using marijuana more frequently than young femmes (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2008).

Butch–femme identity is also related to sexual and reproductive variables. The most commonly reported sexual practices among lesbians were oral sex, digital vaginal penetration, and mutual masturbation (Bailey, Farquhar, Owen, & Whittaker, 2003), but butches and femmes differed in terms of sexual style, with butches rating themselves as significantly more *top* (sexually dominant) and significantly less *bottom* (sexually passive) than femmes. Compared with femmes, butches were less desirous of giving birth, took the sexual role of bottom less often, had more sexual relationships in the two years before being surveyed, were more willing to raise children, and more often acted sexually as the top (Singh et al., 1999). Femme women reported sexual pleasure in being the object of desire, while butch women took pleasure in pleasing their partner (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005). A recent study found that sexual identity was related to butch–femme identity, with nearly all butches identifying themselves as lesbians while only about half of femmes identifying themselves as lesbian, with the rest identifying themselves as bisexual (Rosario et al., 2009).

Several studies have examined the impact of butch–femme identity on partner preference. Bassett, Pearcey, and Dabbs (2001) found that, in terms of partner preference, butches are similar to heterosexual men and femmes are similar to heterosexual women. In selecting potential partners, femmes were more influenced by a person's financial resources than were butches. Further, femmes were more jealous of physically attractive rivals, while butches were more jealous of wealthy rivals. In contrast, other studies have determined that butches and femmes are more similar in what they look for in potential partners (e.g., Bailey, Kim, Hills, & Linsenmeier, 1997; Smith, Konik, & Tuve, 2011). Regardless of whether they identified primarily as butch or femme, lesbians in Bailey et al.'s (1997) study preferred partners with a more femme appearance. Several studies agreed that honesty is an important trait for both butches and femmes (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004; Levitt et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2011).

Butch–femme differences in physiology, sex typical behavior, sexual acts, and partner preferences may be related to biological factors. Brown, Finn, Cooke, and Breedlove (2002) found that butches and femmes differed in terms of the ratio of the length of the second finger (index finger) to the fourth finger (ring finger) (2D:4D) on the right hand. Butches have a lower 2D:4D than femmes; this ratio has been related to prenatal androgen exposure (Manning, Scutt, Wilson, & Lewis-Jones, 1998). Butches, unlike femmes, may have been influenced by early exposure to androgen in-utero. Butches also have higher salivary testosterone levels than femmes (Singh et al., 1999), but this difference may be influenced by environmental factors (Pearcey, Docherty, & Dabbs, 1996). Further, testosterone levels are related to butch–femme identity only within the context of individual couples.

1.2. Empathizing and systemizing

Baron-Cohen et al. have proposed an empathizing–systemizing (E–S) theory of psychological gender differences (Baron-Cohen, 2003; Baron-Cohen, Richler, Bisarya, Gurunathan, & Wheelwright, 2003; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). *Empathizing* is defined as the drive to identify another's mental states and to respond to these states with appropriate emotions (Baron-Cohen, 2003). The empathizer intuits how people are feeling, and how to treat them with care and sensitivity. *Systemizing* is defined as the drive to analyze and construct rule-based systems (Baron-Cohen et al., 2003; Wheelwright et al., 2006). The systemizer intuits how things work, and what the underlying rules are controlling a system. Systemizing and empathizing account for a number of observed gender differences (Nettle, 2007). The E–S theory of psychological gender differences claims that, while the female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy, the male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems (Baron-Cohen, 2003; Baron-Cohen, Knickmeyer, & Belmonte, 2005).

Empathizing and systemizing have been assessed via the self-reported Empathy Quotient (EQ) (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004) and Systemizing Quotient (SQ) (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Baron-Cohen et al., 2003). On average, women score higher than men in empathizing, and men score higher than women in systemizing (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Baron-Cohen et al., 2003). This E–S discrepancy highlights individual dispositional cognitive styles and differentiates between typical males and typical females (Baron-Cohen, 2003; Baron-Cohen et al., 2005). A person is labeled as having a particular "brain type" according to E–S discrepancy. There are three common brain types. The first, Type E, is characterized by stronger empathizing than systemizing. This type has been called the "female brain," because more females than males show this profile. The second type, Type S, is characterized by stronger systemizing than empathizing. This type has also been called the "male brain," as more males than females show this profile. Individuals with Type B, the "balanced brain," are equally strong in their systemizing and empathizing.

1.3. The present study

E–S has been proposed as a theory for gender-related psychological differences (Baron-Cohen, 2003; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Baron-Cohen et al., 2003). Systemizing and empathizing account for a number of observed gender differences (Nettle, 2007). On average, women have higher scores than men in empathizing, and men have higher scores than women in systemizing (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Baron-Cohen et al., 2003). Previous research has indicated that butches are similar to heterosexual men, and that femmes resemble heterosexual women in terms of appearance, personality, and partner preference. This study aimed to uncover possible correlations between butch–femme self-identification and E–S cognitive style, which has been shown to differ significantly by gender.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study was conducted online via a Chinese survey website (http://www.sojump.com). Participants were recruited on a number of Chinese websites that cater to lesbians, including lesbian forums and QQ (a popular chat software in China) groups. Table 1 shows the demographic composition of the sample. The sample included 588 female participants from 166 cities across over