



Politically Incorrect Lesbian Humour*

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Humour gets defined as politically incorrect if it has certain easily recognizable characteristics. A key one is the use of a comic script that can be related to demeaning stereotypes of excluded, marginalized or low status groups. The level of political incorrectness is even higher when the humour itself is perceived as a kind of put-down of that group, particularly one that emphasizes the low regard in which its members or patterns of behaviour are held by society and seems to endorse this view. The most incorrect humour of all implies that the negative qualities assigned to the group and its members are innate and unchangeable and perhaps even biologically determined. This article is an empirical study of lesbian jokes from lesbian websites and of longer humorous items published by lesbian authors writing in English which demonstrates that a substantial part of lesbian humour is politically incorrect. This lesbian humour is not mere benign self-mockery but a case of the members of one group of lesbians savagely poking fun at those from a quite different group. A large part of such humour emphasizes the distinction between “butch” and “femme”, thus defying the politically correct feminist ideology of androgyny. Those who occupy these two contrasted categories are also treated by the humourists as unequal and their differences as rooted in nature, a position that defies the politically correct emphasis on equality and on the social construction of roles. There is also present in lesbian humour a strong class element with the more privileged and educated lesbians ridiculing the crude ways of their working class counterparts. There is a biting vitality to the best lesbian humour.

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In 2009 the greatly talented and openly gay Irish comedian Graham Norton was reprimanded and given an official warning by that most hierarchical and authoritarian of broadcasting organisations, the BBC (*Cleaning Up 1942*, Davies 1996) for making a politically incorrect joke about lesbians on his show on the television channel BBC 2. While showing drawings of a woman in a jumpsuit to the sprightly Welsh comedy writer and actress Ruth Jones, Norton commented: "I don't know why they've got some lesbian to be the model for this" (Geoghegan 2009). Ruth Jones quite reasonably pointed out that despite her appearance the woman in the drawing might well not be a lesbian and Norton riposted "You're right; she could have gone to a very bad hairdresser." Somebody made a complaint and the BBC pompously ruled that Norton had grievously sinned against the gospel of political correctness by making a wisecrack that "perpetuated an offensive stereotype" (Geoghegan 2009).

Given that Graham Norton is in his own estimation a splendid flaming queen and a camp comedian and one who spent more on his hair in a month than most straight men do in a year, it is difficult to see why in context his humour was even the slightest bit offensive. Hair and hairdressers are at the very core of gay and lesbian humour.

Three gay guys in San Francisco [...] stopped a straight woman in the street. Well, two held the woman while the third one did her hair. (UCBFA File Gay and Lesbian J6 Jokes 1994; see also Tibballs 2005, 196 Joke 984)

To talk about stereotypes is to indulge in misleading PC-speak. Let me instead make some testable suggestions about hair, ones that could in principle be tested against market research data. The first is that in modern Western societies women pay far more attention to and money on the appearance of their hair than men do. Second, that though most lesbians do not differ from straight women in this respect, a substantial visible minority of lesbians, sometimes deliberately and defiantly, sometimes out of indifference, choose to have ungroomed hair. If this be true then why is it offensive to laugh at lesbian hair along with Norton in the same way that we were and are amused by Norton's attempt to disguise his then incipient and today more than incipient male pattern baldness with an overly neat expensive hair-do? Do not women joke about the high proportion of ladies' hairdressers who are gay males? Many of the posted comments made by lesbians proud of their bad hair on the on line article by Geoghan (2009) reinforce my point. The world is always more complex than the politically correct think.

I am a butch lesbian, and there's nothing wrong with that. Okay? Yes it's a stereotype that people think all lesbians look like me. But being gender variant or transgender isn't a "negative" stereotype. It's not "offensive" to look butch. It's not a horrible image. For decades it has been butch gay women and effeminate gay men, the queens, that have been OUT there fighting. I would appreciate it if the gays and lesbians that can blend in with the heterosexuals would stop trying to make those of us who are visible disappear. (Michelle)

Speaking as a lesbian, with short hair and who wears men's clothing; I laughed out loud! Maybe the lipsticks will take offense, since it's so hard for straight society to believe them... but really, I find Graham hilarious! (Denise)

I'm a lesbian, but I really couldn't stop laughing while watching this. Truth be told, there are many lesbians that adhere to the negative stereotype depicted here

– they don't take care of themselves, they have a hard time dressing themselves and have a preference for bad fashion and really bad hairstyles. That's how they choose to look and that's their right. But, it seems that they're the only ones who find that presentation appealing. If Graham is pandering to a negative stereotype, it's a stereotype that has some basis in reality. (Samsonian)

The politically correct view is that gay and lesbian humour should be a force uniting these two sexual minorities against the hideously oppressive social world created by straight people. LGBT humour will never be like that. Gays and lesbians make fun of each other because they are in most respects very different groups. It is unlikely that men who want sex with other men will have very much in common with women who are sexually attracted to other women, other than that both groups are outside the sexual mainstream with the problems that that brings. Even the ways in which the two groups have suffered discrimination and persecution have been very different (Davies 1982 and 2004, 139-80). The politically correct thesis is that all "subaltern" groups have a common outlook and interests and are natural allies against an all-powerful established society. It is an easily falsified ideological view that ignores harsh realities such as the much greater hostility to gay men found among Britain's Muslim minority (over half of them would make sex between men in Britain illegal [Perraudin 2016]) and among the lower classes than among the general population.

In lesbian humour gay men may well be depicted as promiscuous and as displaying a gross misogyny towards women:

Once I stayed at an all-male hotel in Manhattan. It was fabulous. Every time I left my room an entire hallway of doors would open a teeny bit and heads would appear. As soon as they saw a woman, the heads would disappear and the doors would slam shut. The power was exhilarating. I spent hours roaming the halls and revelling in the slam, slam, slam that announced my arrival. All too soon the boyfriend who'd booked the room was called by the concierge who requested that the "tuna" staying with him find other accommodations. I retaliated by hanging a tampon on every doorknob in the building. My friend can no longer stay at this hotel. But hey, with all that door slamming, who wants to? Yeah, right. (Dugger, 1996, 68-9)¹

This sketch comes from American lesbian humourist Mary Dugger's book *The History of Lesbian Hair* (1996), whose politically incorrect title reinforces my earlier point. Lesbians are just as capable of humour at the expense of gays as the other way round. Straight men's jokes about lesbians usually speculate about lesbian sex acts, especially oral sex (Bing and Heller 2003) but they are not sufficiently interested in them to make them the subject of many jokes. A good part but by no means all of the pornography depicting lesbian sex has been aimed at straight men (Silverberg 2016; for the version aimed at a lesbian audience or readership see Balliett and Patton 1979; Healey 1996, 184; and Silverberg 2016). Straight men are far more likely to tell jokes about gay men than about lesbians because they are more visible and for men a greater source of tension. Straight female humourists such as Anita Loos (1925, 145, 193-5, 216) are more likely to make fun of lesbians than straight men are. Gay men's jokes

¹ "Tuna" and "fish" are gay slang for women on the grounds that they don't smell as sweet as gay men. It refers to the supposed vaginal odour of women (Baker 2002, 206), the creatures who some gay men at least may find sexually repellent.

about lesbians ignore their sexuality and make fun of those with a superficially masculine appearance.

Do you know what drag is? It's when a man wears everything a lesbian won't.
(www.funny-joke-rating.com)

There is no lower form of life than a bull dyke cop who arrests gay men for cruising (Curzon 2006, 240)

Do you know what the difference between a killer whale and a bull dyke is?
About fifty pounds and a flannel shirt (Goodwin 1989, 5; see also Witomski 1989)

Among both lesbians and gays are to be found those who behave according to the conventions of their sex, masculine gays and feminine lesbians as against, the butch lesbians and the flamboyant, effeminate queens who take on aspects of the gender roles of the opposite sex, whether by free choice or quite possibly as a preference as innate as the desire for one's own sex that defines them in the first place. Much politically incorrect lesbian humour is about the contrast between butch and femme. What makes such humour even more politically incorrect is that there is often an implication that the masculine version is the more active, dominant and superior version of the two. As we have already seen butch lesbians put down the "lipsticks", those feminine lesbians who have all the "weaknesses" of straight women and are quite possibly suspected of not being "true" lesbians but bisexuals capable of deserting the cause and seeking a man. There is no simple correspondence between these public images of masculinity and femininity and the question of who plays the active and who the passive part in sexual relations, and most will take turns, but they probably correlate. There may not be a perfect match between them and many individuals do not fit into neat categories but there is a degree of clustering and coherence.

Let us first consider the very considerable body of lesbian jokes and humour about butch and femme lesbians. The meanings of these dichotomous terms correspond to what you might expect. They are much used on lesbian dating sites not as a full description of the advertiser and who she is looking for but as a well understood starting point.

In the jokes one subset of the femmes (aka fems) are called lipstick lesbians since in the modern West the use of cosmetics is seen as a feminine attribute. For the same reason rouged and corseted gay men are the subject of mocking humour in male company (Melly 1978, 67). In a most politically incorrect way cosmetics signal feminine "weakness" in either sex.

Butch and Femme Jokes: politically incorrect lesbian jokes

Why don't fem lesbians go on diets?
Because it's hard to eat Jenny Craig when you've got Mary Kay on your face.
(Belge n.d. A, submitted by Carla of Portland, Oregon)

What can two femmes do in bed?
Each other's makeup. (Bing and Heller 2003, 174)

Two Lipstick Lesbians are on a plane when the engines start to fail. One of them runs back to the lavatory and opens the door and asks her partner inside if she shaved today. She says, "Yes, why?" "Whew, that's good! The flight attendant

told me to run back and get you because we'll be going down in less than two minutes." (Belge n.d. E submitted by Stacy, San Diego, CA)

How many femmes does it take to change a tire?

Two. One to call the AAA and one to whine about the grease on her skirt.

They are all butch jokes about the supposed "female inadequacy" of the femme. By contrast the femme jokes about the butch below are about their inappropriate masculine coarseness. Either way they are grossly politically incorrect.

How can you tell if a lesbian is butch?

She kick starts her vibrator and rolls her own tampons.

(Belge n.d. C submitted by Stacy, San Diego, CA; see also many in UCBFA)

Why does a butch have short hair?

So her hair won't get in her face when she is eating.

(Belge n.d. B submitted by Jade)

There are many other butch jokes but some feel as if they might have begun life as jokes about men, but perhaps this makes them all the more appropriate (see *Stupid Butch Jokes* n.d.).

What do you instantly know about a well-dressed butch?

Her girlfriend is good at picking out clothes.

How do butches sort their laundry?

"Filthy" and "Filthy but Wearable"

Why did God create butches?

Because a vibrator can't mow the lawn.

It is not just in jokes but also in longer more discursive pieces of lesbian humour, such as in those quoted below, that the butch/femme dichotomy is employed, sometimes with the implication that only the butch ones are the real thing:²

Lipstick Lesbians are on the whole a fun group. They will be impressed by any gift that glitters and will sincerely consider a relationship to be any situation that incorporates the sharing of Revlon products. Like simple natives in other cultures, shiny things and trinkets can be offered to the Lipstick Lesbian and traded for commodities ranging from sex to their place in the bathroom line. While not emotionally deep, a relationship with a Lipstick Girl is inherently a win-win situation for any dyke with a rhinestone collection. (Dugger 1996, 75)

"Ms Macha" or "The Plaid-Bellied Lumber-Jill Species": denims (baggy); overalls (especially with brass snaps); work shirts (muted tones); bill-fronted caps; backpacks (never, ever a purse); leather jackets with zip pockets, combat boots, hiking boots, tie-oxfords (scuffy); or in a rare variation, saddle-shoes or sneakers (ancient, especially in snow); keys in a bunch on a belt-loop clip; never, ever any make-up; short hair; short fingernails (unpainted), middle fingernail especially

² For further good examples of such humour see Dugger 1996, 74; Harper 1994, 14-20, 61, 75; Orleans 1992, 21-3; Orleans 2001; Roberts 1992, 70; Roberts 2000, 42, 72; Schwartz 1990, 19-20.

short. Habitat: Often seen posed against a wall in a bar, at the pool table, can of beer in hand, or next to a motorcycle. (Schwartz 1990, 19)

You should not consider yourself lesbian impaired if you do not own a chain saw. (Roberts 1992, 91)

I always get women coming up to me after shows and saying crap like "I'm not butch or femme... I don't like to be labelled. Oh please!!! Look around the room! All I am saying is that there are some of us that like tools more than the rest of us. Butches get all weird about their tools too. My girlfriend asked me to get her a screwdriver the other day, so I got her my screwdriver... a butterknife! Boy was she pissed! Why you would have thought I had told her I wanted to be on top. (Shaw 2002, 103)

This obsession with tools runs throughout lesbian humour. After an orthopaedic surgeon had operated on her left hand the lesbian humourist Laura Jimenez wrote:

Orthopaedic surgeons are the car body repairman of the medical community like the stuff I buy at Home Depot, things like glue-guns, hammers and when they get really crazy, little saws and cordless drills. (2001, 84-5)

How many straight female humourists would have written about their operation in that particular way? Where are the individual people and their feelings? Where is the empathy? How very politically incorrect to compare orthopaedic surgeons to mechanics when it is exactly this image that leads other doctors to make fun of them, much to their chagrin (Davies 2011, 22-24). Has she no thought for the orthopaedic surgeons' sensibilities?

When I met a likely woman in my canoe class (denims, sweats, a Holly Near T-shirt), she turned out to be interested in men. Oh Great Goddess is nothing hallowed any more? [...] When in doubt, cast eyes to the ground and remember the One Infallible Rule: "You can always tell a dyke by her shoes." (Schwartz 1990, 21)

For the lesbian humourists sensible shoes represent a repudiation of the silly, impractical, uncomfortable, often high-heeled shoes, even stilettos, worn by straight women who, according to these amused lesbians, seek to be fashionable in the eyes of other straight women and appealingly helpless and incapable in the eyes of men because they cannot run or change a tyre in them. Worse still they are willing to endure tormented feet to display their legs to better advantage. Lesbians dissociate themselves from all this by wearing Birkenstocks or Doc Martens. Yet shoes, like a lack of fashion sense or bad hair, may mislead the lesbian in search of a mate.

[...] women who wear yellow and green on Thursdays may only be color-blind. Comfortable shoes may only tell you there's a transit strike going on. (Harper 1994, 5)

The criteria for picking out a lesbian suggested above constitute a politically incorrect form of humour that places all lesbians towards the butch end of the spectrum where fashion is scorned, the very point that led to the attack on Graham Norton.

According to Shelly Roberts the only real test is pussy. Roberts concludes that the only way to be certain is to check whether the woman under observation keeps pictures of her cat in her handbag. “Ask to see the prints in her wallet... should she produce prints of her pussy cats, Hepsibah and Egregious, erase all scintilla of a doubt from your mind” (1992, 15). Shelly Roberts’ book *The Dyke Detector* (1992) is humour but there is a reality behind it. How can a lesbian find a same sex partner in a world where the overwhelming majority of the women she meets are heterosexual and might be offended if propositioned?

In another humorous sketch Kim Ficera (2003) tries to make the butch lesbians seem old-fashioned, which seems to be the line taken by upper middle-class lesbians, but in extolling the virtues of adopting fashion to the point of near-femmeness she portrays the stubbornly butch in a very mocking unPC way, turning them into an unwanted and embarrassing minority.

These days, a lesbian who wants to get a second look on the beaches of Provincetown and Rehoboth has to work very hard. In order to increase the number of waders in her dating pool, she has to consider getting a manicure and wearing lipstick and she absolutely must don just the right sunglasses. She has to spend fifty bucks at a good salon and stop cutting her hair with a dull hedge clipper. She must learn how to properly use hair care products. Of course, there are lesbians who fight this notion, tooth and nail. They are the ones giving CPR³ to the stereotype many of us are determined to overcome. You can spot them a mile away. They still have braided “tails” and carry their own pool cues everywhere they go. (Ficera 2003, 223)

Most lesbians are invisible in that they do not live at the extremes described above but so long as visible minorities do and it is linked to an identity then it is an open invitation to lesbians in general to use them as a source of humour. Both mocking the butch and mocking the ultra-fat lesbian are ways of making fun of women who are defying conventional female behaviour in Western societies. It is hardly a politically correct inclusive humour. Besides is not Ficera implicitly giving support to the oppressive beauty standards of the wider society?

Butches are also mocked by gay men and by straight women and men because they are so far out of line with the conventions as to how women should look. By contrast a femme passes as straight and there are straight men who will even drool over her, not knowing her identity and preferences. In recent decades straight women may well choose to wear unisex clothes and men’s items of apparel and have short hair but they avoid what they see as markedly lesbian items such as a tuxedo or combat boots. Like gay men, straight women are often obsessed with dieting to avoid becoming fat (Myers and Taub 1998, 18-19) and in consequence appearing old and unattractive. Physical appearance is all. Straight men and lesbians are less likely to share this obsession. They can enjoy the luxury of being slobs. It is not the mere fact that there exists a sub-set of lesbians who are very fat that is funny, fat people are ubiquitous and so is their fat. What is funny is that they make a virtue of it because they know that conventional women strive to be slim.

³ CPR = cardiopulmonary resuscitation, first aid after a heart-attack [Author’s Note].

The PC Wommobyn⁴

Is there an inverse ratio between her surface area and its covering?
Cracked by the strain of having lived too long “under the male-dominated fashion industry that condemns women to a Madonna/whore status by subjugating them to the role of the anorexic”, PC Dykes revel in showing their fat to the world. They are proud to pendulate in any wide open space including your apartment. If you’re tempted to have one over, cover and reinforce the furniture. (Dugger 1996, 74)⁵

I have used butch and femme as dichotomous categories but the lesbian lingo finesses them, so that there are many subsets. At the butch end of the spectrum we find the Diesel Dykes, the Bulldaggers, the Strict Butch and the Studs who are dominant and aggressive and then the Stone Butch and beyond her the Granite Butch who will pleasure another lesbian but not allow her partner to touch her anywhere intimate. Their opposite is the Pillow Queen who wants to be touched but will not reciprocate. At the femme end come the Blue Jean Femme, and the Lipstick Lesbian and in the middle the Soft Butch, the Stem (mixed stud and fem) the Chapstick Lesbians and the Kiki (Belge A, B, C, D, E n.d.; Halberstam 1998, 120-4; Ward and Kassebaum 1966). Only gay men have an equivalent proliferation of terms that categorise both by particular sexual preferences and by who has a masculine or feminine style such as bears and twinks, arse-bandits and brown hatters (Baker 2004, Melly 1978). In either case it is a great source of humour.

The only way to tell a Stone Butch is in bed. She’s the one on top. Just when you think it’s her turn, she’ll be the one who has:

- a. Acid indigestion.
- b. A meeting in the morning.
- c. Only thoughts for your happiness and satisfaction.
- d. Her T-shirt, boxer shorts and motorcycle boots still on.

(Roberts 1992, 70)

Lesbian humour about the dichotomy between the butch and the femme is politically incorrect for many reasons and not just because it is using humorous scripts that employ negative stereotypes which are “reinforced” by the pleasure given to the listener or reader. It should be stressed at this point that the jokes have been generated by lesbians themselves and that the humour has been written by lesbians for a lesbian audience. For an outsider some of the humour may be comprehensible and funny only if it is approached with a kind of anthropological curiosity. It appears to pass one often iterated politically correct test, the doctrine that decrees that “stereotype” jokes are only OK when members of a group tell them about themselves but become offensive and censorable if relayed by outsiders, as Mr Norton found out to his cost, though who objected to him is not known. He was the victim of a Renaissance Italian style anonymous denunciation. Defining humour as objectionable just on the basis of content is mistaken, for its impact is always dependent on many other factors, such as tone, context, gloss and intention (Davies 2011, 5-6). Joseph

⁴ “Wommobyn” is a neologism by Dugger (1996, 64) [Editor’s Note].

⁵ Similarly, writing about a lesbian gathering Harper mocks a “400 lb woman in an anti-fat oppression workshop” (1994, 75).

Goodwin (1989, 5) provides a sensible discussion of this point in relation to jokes told about lesbians by gay men.

However, the humour about butch and femme is un-PC because it is not told about lesbians in general but divides the ‘oppressed’ group into two factions who mock each other. There have been serious tensions between the upholders of androgyny and the butch-femme subculture with the latter suffering severe discrimination in consequence (Myers and Taub 1998, 21). If we were to apply Bergson’s (1924) still much cited theory that humour is a corrective instrument to the humour about Butch and Femme it could be inferred that they are being mocked in order to force them to conform with a PC ideology of androgyny. They are both ‘deviants’ from an androgynous ideal in the same way as lesbians and gays ‘deviate’ from conventional sex roles. If we were to take a Bergsonian view then what we have here is an un-PC humour being used to enforce a PC ideology. There is a further layer of mocking disapproval of their seeming roles of dominance and submission which are anathema to PC egalitarians. The most extreme case of this lies in the intense, unjust and at times physically violent rejection of Sadomasochist lesbians by lesbian ideologues (Rubin 1987, Samois 1987, Silverberg 2016); they are often excluded from lesbian gatherings for exactly this reason. The lesbian humourist Jorjet Harper (1994, 75) jokes about the SM lesbians having to hire a plane and drop leaflets on a lesbian festival in Michigan to get themselves heard. Androgyny is oppression and so is the forceful exclusion of SM lesbians merely because they like forms of dominance-submission sex that look like assaults but in fact are not. It would be better to take seriously and stop being secret about a topic that is too unPC even to mention let alone to joke about, the high level of domestic violence in lesbian relationships (Glass 2014, Ristock 2002). It is not a product of playing with unPC images of dominance and submission but of the rapid, impulsive forming of new partnerships between two women which has given rise to many, lesbian jokes.

What does a lesbian bring on the second date?

A U-Haul

(Bing and Heller 2003, UCBFA File IJ6 1991, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2003)

The U-Haul, a hired self-driven truck, is filled with the furniture and moveable possessions of a lesbian who is moving in with a new friend rather more rapidly than seems sensible. It also shows the lesbian-lauded macho qualities of self-sufficiency, physical strength and an ability to calculate how to manipulate awkwardly shaped objects around obstacles in a constrained space. Lesbian humourist Ellen Orleans further comments that lesbians under thirty “lose dyke points” (1992, 49) if when moving they engage a professional haulage company rather than enlisting “a minimum of 8 friends including at least one ex-lover, one borrowed truck, three compact cars, 28 boxes of books and one frantic cat”. The “ex-lover” and the “frantic cat” are both staples of lesbian humour and indicate the importance yet also the instability of home, emotions and relationships. U-Haul in haste leads to a humour of break-up.

The average interval between lesbian relationships is a *minus* 3.7 minutes. (Roberts 1992, 4)

[I assume she means that the new one started 3.7 minutes before the previous one ended. A rather abrupt supplanting.]

It is possible to spend more time breaking up than you actually spend being together. (Roberts 1992, 129)

What are the first questions you ask another lesbian?
How many cats do you have and how long have you been living with your ex-lover? (UCBFLA 1997 File I J6)

After experiencing problems in a relationship Jorjet Harper wrote in 1994 that in future her significant other was to be her vibrator.

At least my vibrator isn't going to break my heart. My vibrator isn't going to scream at me in public places. My vibrator isn't going to leave drunken abusive calls on my answering machine. (Harper 1994, 46)

Lesbians who rush into cohabitation or indeed marriage as distinct from doing so after careful consideration, presumably do so to escape loneliness, to find a same-sex heart in a heartless world, a world that denies and discriminates against lesbians. Most people seek the pleasure of having a partner but are more cautious because they are located in a general pattern of supportive personal relationships provided by conventional society. Lesbian cohabitations may well be more fragile than cohabitations between men and women and especially marriages because they lack general social support, recognition and approval (Strohm 2011). There are no legal or social barriers to breaking up. The relationship may have had to be kept secret from disapproving family members on both sides, the very people who put pressure on heterosexual couples, particularly those with children, to stay together. With the very welcome arrival of same sex marriage in many Western societies, all this may change but if so then those who tell U-haul jokes are guilty of perpetuating an out-dated and regressive negative stereotype, a dreadful crime against political correctness.

In the 1940s and 1950s Butch and Femme were the standard styles of working class lesbians in America and Britain. But from the late 1960s onwards upper middle class feminists tried to impose androgyny on women in general. It was this ideologically dominant group that sought to enforce androgyny on lesbians (Halberstam 1998, 113-4, 121; Healey 1996, 31-2, 70, 85). Lesbians were now expected to live out the fantasies of straight feminist women who were discontented with conventional sex roles and saw androgyny as a means of escape. Some of them even claimed that lesbianism was a choice and that since they were escaping from male power into a brave new all-female world, they too were choosing to be lesbians. They were making a typical PC mistake, the idea that you can change reality by altering the meanings of words. It is obvious that being a lesbian is about felt sexual desire and not ideological choice or the will to power. Surveys in modern Western societies (Laumann *et al.*, 1994, 295; Wellings *et al.*, 1994, 209) regularly show that the proportion of women who report sexual contact with another woman during the previous five years is very low and that most of these have also had male sexual partners. Over a lifetime the proportion who have had any lesbian experience is higher, but it is still under 5% and much of this behaviour is due to having been segregated in a single sex environment such as a boarding school, a prison or a convent (Curb and Manahan 1985, Laumann *et al.* 1004, 291; Ward and Kassebaum 1966, Wellings *et al.*, 1994, 206). The key question that defines a lesbian is "do you consistently seek out a same sex partner when both sexes are available?"

Most lesbians when asked say they see their orientation as innate or due to a mixture of factors. Very few see it as chosen. On average butch women say that they knew they were lesbians before they were fifteen years old and also that they already preferred toolboxes to dresses. The femmes grew up having conventional feminine interests and styles and on average only realized their sexual orientation aged twenty-two (Levitt and Horne 2002, 34). The very suggestion that butch and femme are innate and essential categories is of course a threat to the politically correct ideology that asserts that all differences in behaviour between men and women are socially constructed rather than essential.

Such a view is contradicted by good experimental evidence. On average the female brain is hard-wired for empathy and the male brain for understanding and building systems. Even one-day old babies differ markedly in this respect (Baron-Cohen 2003, 1-5, 29, 36, 69, 85). Most people are close to the average for their sex, but the span of difference between individuals is very large and some of us will have the perceptions and preferences usually associated with the other sex. Some of the latter will be gay or lesbian but others merely heterosexuals with atypical interests and styles. Biology is destiny but it is also diversity. The complexities of the interactions between our genes and pre-natal hormones mean that many individuals do not and cannot fit in with the oppressive conventional view that insists we should all be manly men and womanly women. Those who are different have a right to be different and this includes transsexuals and SM lesbians too. Even if sexuality is fluid, it is viscous.

Let us consider the butch and femme jokes and humour in the light of these observations. The butch is laughed at in lesbian humour because of her association with heavy motorcycles and chain-saws and she is shown carrying a cue with which to play pool (billiards, snooker). The key point is that only seriously keen players choose not to use the house cue to knock the balls around with but bring along their own personal cue. Snooker requires no great physical strength and both men and women play it, but it is an archetypal male game since it requires a capacity for envisaging and manipulating spatial systems and a high level of skill in the game requires an obsessiveness close to Asperger's, both of which are qualities that characterize men far more than women (Baron-Cohen 2003). The butch is born not made (Brown *et al.* 2002), something that makes the politically correct very uneasy. There is in consequence a rush to explain that butch and femme are not mimicking imitations of conventional gender roles but are generated from within lesbian culture. This is one of those statements that is true but intended to mislead. No one doubts the authenticity of the butch and the femme and it is quite obvious that the butch is not trying to be a man. Nevertheless the raw materials out of which the roles are constructed are largely taken from the conventional world, and when it comes to pool, the politically correct are snookered.

Lesbian humour at the expense of the femmes is politically incorrect for a quite different reason. The humorous image of the cosmetics and cheap jewellery-obsessed femme is very like that of the bimbo, the sort of woman who in Britain is the butt of Essex girl jokes. Essex girl jokes are very much like blonde jokes, but also contain a strong element of derision of the lower classes (Davies 2011, 65, 263, 270). It is a reminder that running through lesbian humour at the expense of both butch and femme is a strong politically incorrect put-down of the working classes by upper middle class lesbian humourists. The comedy butch is shown wearing overalls, work

boots and a flannel shirt which associate her indelibly with a particular class. Let us compare the lesbian humour with American ethnic jokes about Poles.

How do you tell the bride at a Polish wedding?
She's the one in the clean overalls.
(American 1970s; for an analysis see Davies 2002, 151-99)

The core creed of the politically correct is that you should not joke at the expense of those lower down the social order, such as female Polish blue-collar workers. Yet that is exactly what lesbian humour about butch and femme does.

What I have tried to do throughout is to discern the strong if inconsistent assumptions and preconceptions that underlie the political correctness directed against Norton and his joke and then used in his defence and to apply them to a broad selection of lesbian humour about lesbians and to show that a significant portion of it is politically incorrect. In particular lesbian humour makes extensive and divisive use of scripts related to negative stereotypes about internal minorities: butch, femme, and fatties. It mocks the excluded and those of lower social status. It endorses narrow and constraining views of what it is to be a lesbian.

Anyone who thinks I am being unfair in producing such an analysis is invited to study the history of the frantic rows and exchanges of fatwas between particular factions of lesbians as to what was the politically correct position on any particular occasion during the past (see Dugger 1997; Gomez *et al.* 1998; Halberstam 1998; Harris and Crocker 1997; Healey 1996). Nothing I have suggested even approaches the extremity of these dogmatic disputes.

The example with which I began – Graham Norton being censured for joking about lesbian hair – reveals the foolishness, the obsessiveness and the triviality of politically correct objections to humour and the threat to liberty and to humour that arises when the objectors are endorsed and supported by those who hold power, particularly in education and the media. The critical responses to the censuring of Norton revealed the inherent internal contradictions in political correctness. The objector on politically correct grounds who was offended by lesbians being associated with bad hair was being politically incorrect, for she or he was denying the existence and validity of those lesbians for whom bad hair is a badge of pride and identity. She or he was taking away their right to defy the norms of the straight world in matters of hair and thus upholding hair-oppression. It constitutes a strange piece of hair splitting.

The substantial sample of lesbian humour that I have assessed contains a great deal of material that the BBC, the powerful institution with which I began would regard as politically incorrect. It certainly deals in negative stereotypes that the politically correct of whatever gender or orientation would regard as offensive and implies that they are innate. If the politically correct were to portray such humour as a form of relentless self-mockery then as has happened with Jewish humour they might well accuse the lesbians of masochistic self-hatred, a self-destructive response to external hostility (Grotjahn 1970; Saper 1993). However, it is clear that as in the Jewish case (Ben-Amos 1973) the humour is often produced by members of one subset of what is a very far from homogenous group about another; nonetheless it is clear that much of this involves the mockery of those lower in the pecking order, notably those who deviate too much from the conventions of the external social world, the femmes who are represented as lacking in “male” competence, those who are fat and those who are working class. All of this defies the politically correct precept that we

should not mock those who are in some sense disadvantaged. All the people I have cited are of course humourists and their work can not be construed as or reduced to *bona fide* discourse (Raskin 1985). But this is not going to deter the politically correct from imposing censorship.

It is likely that the BBC, an institution which I have quite reasonably used as the moderator of what is and what is not PC (Davies 1993), would be quite unwilling to let a script-writer use much of the lesbian generated matter I have quoted regardless of its origins. In addition, no group has secure ownership of its own humour, it is open to outsiders to adopt it and turn it. It is even possible that this is what Graham Norton did. But it brought a swift reprimand from on high.

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