

ManShape: Conflicts and ambiguities regarding the embodiment of Hegemonic Masculinity among Gay Bears

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Para Mamá, Pepino, Abuelita Pita, René, Diego y Faby

Por enseñarme a amar y soñar

Preliminary instructions:

This dissertation consists of films and text. Both address the same research topic and intend to add knowledge to the understanding of the embodiment of Hegemonic Masculinity among Gay Bears.

The portfolio of five films (available as DVD and online) is the main source of information for this research, and the text was conceived merely as a companion element. However, both were designed as a dialogue with the text adding some fieldnotes and theoretical discussion about the research.

I have included specific instructions to read and watch this thesis. The starting point is the text, but in it you will find indications of when to watch the films.

‘I am not camp, or effeminate...

I am just a regular guy, who happens to like men”

(Ben Hockman, participant interviewed for this research. 2012)

ABSTRACT

ManShape: Conflicts and ambiguities regarding the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity among Gay Bears

In this dissertation, I explore the ambiguities and contradictions regarding the discourse and embodiment of hegemonic masculinity among the gay Bear subculture in Manchester, United Kingdom. People who identify themselves as Bears in Manchester are often white gay men from working-class backgrounds who adopt a masculine aesthetic as a reaction to the ‘mainstream gay scene’. Bears perform as ‘straight’ gay men in order to distance themselves from any kind of effeminate behaviour. However, while following this idea to resist homonormativity, they create a discourse nourished by hegemonic masculinity that reinforces discrimination and places them in an ambiguous position. The model of hegemonic masculinity instead of liberating them, seems to create anxiety, frustration and isolation. I look at their strategies of belonging and exclusion, and approach Bear performance as a point of intersection between class, gender and identity

My ethnographic research focused on few working-class gay men who are part of a music band called Bear Explosion. I use collaborative participation, interviews and documentary filmmaking to explore their narratives and performances while following their dream to become the best Bear boy band in the UK.

Introduction

Ben is a white British man of 38 years. He is wearing a rugbyshirt and has some tattoos. He smokes a cigarette outside a bar near the gay village in Manchester. Ben is tall and big, with a prominent belly. Behind his beard, he looks self-confident and tough. He is homosexual but does not define himself as gay. "I am not gay. I am just a regular guy who happens to like men... This is what Bears are" Ben states.

Bears are homosexual men who embody a model hegemonic masculinity which permeates almost every aspect of their everyday life. They celebrate a unique form of hegemonic masculine embodiment in tension with their taste for men. They perform a conventional masculinity, and highlight with their big and hirsute body an opposition to what they consider a homonormative camp performance, resisting a stereotypical model of effeminate homosexual. What they explain as 'to be a real man' is their main concern, for this reason, they display their vision of what a real man should be according to a model that fits with hegemonic masculinity. However, by following this model they confront issues such as self-acceptance and socialization. As described by Hennen (2005) they are one of the most intriguing groups to appear on the queer cultural landscape in the past 30 years. This research will attempt to locate the ambiguities and contradictions of this embodiment in a specific group of British Bears.

The main contribution for this research was made by Bear Explosion, a Bear boy band who collectively compose Bear-themed songs and make their own musical videos. Bear Explosion is formed by five self-defined Bears: Alan, Andrew, Ben, Seamus and Steve, who want to become the biggest Bear Boy Band in the United Kingdom. This anthropological research is the product of a fieldwork that lasted six months during their preparation to perform in Northern Ireland.

This research started with a curiosity for their masculine performance and so I felt compelled to understand where their idea of 'masculinity' could be traced to. From my first days with them their understanding of the relation between masculinity, sexuality and identity was refreshing to me. I had the sensation that they tried to locate themselves in a fascinating place, neither hetero nor gay. It was clear that by highlighting their masculinity as a key element, they sought to separate themselves

from the mainstream gay scene. Bearded faces, fat bodies, checked T-shirts, low tone of voice are the main physical characteristics of the Bear men gathered in their men only environment. They dismiss association with any kind of effeminate behaviour present in the gay scene, because they associate gay identity with camp performance, and this is seen by Bears as a degradation of man.

Masculinity is a powerful word in our western culture, because it is usually associated with what constitutes a 'man'. As Weston has pointed out many people continue to use the terms 'man' and 'woman' as synonymous of masculine and feminine, 'as though the meanings of these categories were uncontested' (Weston 1993:43). Masculinity is strongly permeated by the social, cultural and economic milieu, creating a particular set of symbolic 'ways of being' that are at the centre of what is expected from a man in a heteronormative society. During my fieldwork it became evident that there is a fundamental understanding of masculinity across all the Bear testimonies, but at the same time there are particularities in each subject that embody the Bear model of masculinity and these aspects will be addressed by this research.

The way we do gender is not an automatic response to our biological sex. It is part of our personal story, the way we designed ourselves in front of others and finally impacts on our social negotiation. Whilst these ideas are clear for a few, a majority of the public still think of masculinity and femininity as static concepts of men and women. Masculinity is at the core of the Bear identity and from this premise I seek to study the Bear performance as a gender narrative, using participative filmmaking methods. However as Connell (2009) has stated, masculinity and femininity are ways of living certain relationships, but not essences: static typologies of sexual character have to be adapted considering the individual psychological forms in order to replace histories. Ultimately, there is not just one way of being a man or woman, because the performative aspect of masculinity is not a pre-determined part of the individual. Masculinity in a man's body can be a source of power, in opposition, femininity is understood as a weakness when embodied by a man. However, with the inclusion and recognition of new sexualities, the binarism of man/masculine, woman/feminine has been blurred, in particular with the emergence of feminist and Queer theories that challenge directly the oppressive and normative structures of gender and beauty. In

this scenario, some questions emerge in relation to the present subject of study: How do Bears understand and embody masculinity?; Are they following patterns of a hegemonic model? and finally, to what extent does hegemonic masculinity influence their everyday life? However, this unresolved encounter of homosexuality and hegemonic masculinity leaves unanswered questions. A model of hegemonic masculinity, as embodied by Bears, implies the acceptance of just one sexuality, the heterosexual. Under this scheme, a man must behave manly, must perform sex with a woman by penetrating the female body in order to maintain the reproduction of the species. For a man, to have sex with another man is not allowed, even worse for a man to play the role of a woman by being penetrated. In the context of hegemonic masculinity, homosexuality is understood as a degradation of manliness, and this is what Bears were taught to believe in their upbringing (this relation will be explained in detail later).

I would argue that not choice, but coercion and fear are important driving forces to embody hegemonic masculinity in the Bear scene. Conditions such as class, cultural background and a strong social cohesion lead to those who self-identify as Bears to resist and oppose any effeminate or camp behaviour. I do not mean by this in any case that they are hiding an inner feminine Bear, because I do not consider masculinity and femininity as separated or in opposition, but rather I propose that they construct themselves as manly individuals in order to stay alive, maintain some amount of power, and survive in a social environment, grounded in strong gender ideas. Even though these rigid foundations of socialization and acceptance are learned and interpreted during their whole life, the learning environment during their upbringing has a strong impact when they try to relate with others, especially when they still have not accepted their own sexuality. With this in mind, this research does not just intend to track the vestiges of hegemonic masculinity to a dialogue between their past and present, but also to identify how their ideal of being a man impacts their everyday life. In particular, how hegemonic masculinity can be negotiated by homosexual men, considering that they challenge some basic principles of the model?; and how do Bears negotiate homosexuality and masculinity in their construction of identity?

During the last decades gender studies has focused on subversive new models of sexuality and scholars have focussed intensively on performances that explore narratives in the frontiers of gender: transsexuals, transvestites, drag kings, butch femmes, crossdressing, especially queer research. On the other hand, very little is known about gay men who locate hegemonic masculinity at the center of their performance. And furthermore, less is known about men being proud to perform hegemonic masculinity in a gay milieu. This is what this research is starting to explore.

Methodology of the project

This research was conducted in Manchester (United Kingdom), the city that held one of the biggest Bear Bashes in Europe. Bears from around the world gather at such events to participate in social activities such as contests, comedy shows, Bear saunas and foam parties. This event brings together more than six hundred Bears every year, who gather in clubs such as The Eagle, The Outpost or Legends. Manchester is not just the background of an active Bear scene, but is also where all the subjects of this research reside and a large part of the fieldwork was conducted at their homes, spending time with them. Even though, Manchester is known for being a gay friendly city with a reputation of openness, it is also a place with a large industrial history and still preserves some working class tradition. Although this research is not about the Bears and the city, it is interesting to keep in mind that there is a large Bear scene in a city with such a tradition and where we filmed most of the sequences.

Towards the end of the fieldwork, we travelled to Northern Ireland where they performed in two shows. In Belfast, we lived together for five days of continuous filming, including some by them.

This research was conducted using participant observation, interviews and visual methods (film). Collaboration with the participants including pre-interviews, creative group sessions and footage made by the participants was used in order to destabilize the conventional relation subject/researcher. This research was planned using film as the main tool for research, since I considered it the most appropriate method in relation to participant observation to convey the performative aspect of the Bears' masculine performance. I filmed them over six months while they were preparing themselves to perform for the first time in front of a mixed audience, not just gay men or Bears, at Gay Pride event in Northern Ireland

Bears and I: a mutual curiosity

It was 2012 and I was in the middle of my first approach to Bears at the Manchester Bear Bash. Even though I have some friends who identify as Bears, I knew that it was not going to be easy to look for participants for this research among two hundred Bears. But then, I remember my work in difficult environments such as illegal migrants or jails in South America. How difficult could it be to invite them to talk to me?

I was wrong. It turned out to be really difficult. I was in the right place but in the wrong time. I thought that maybe going to a Bear Bash was a good way to have plenty of opportunities to meet some potential participants for my research. But as a woman, I was totally out of their interest zone. I tried to talk to them, but the conversations were short, they ignored me or simply walk away. Their eyes were on other Bears like them, examining their bodies, their sexual display.

- Are you lesbian? - One asked me.

This is how I met Andrew. He sells Bear T-shirts at every Bear event. Helping him to print and becoming his 'assistant' was the starting point of my involvement on the Bear scene and with the band I wanted to work. Andrew was one of the singers of a band called Bear Explosion, which became my group of collaborators.

It was a long way until they would trust me and start to call me Goldilocks, as in the fairy tale 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' It was a long way that involved more than 6 months of work in the field. 'What do you want to know?, what do you want us to do?', they asked me. They were anxious and I was doing my best to explain the project. I was proposing to make an experiment of observation and filmmaking, sharing their daily experiences and being part of their life. Understandably, as an ethnographer, I was a subject of suspicion. As a result of long conversations off camera, we developed some trust and shared work about what were our expectations with the research and the film. I answered all their questions, and they told me some intimate stories they thought were important for the research. Eventually, all the questions disappeared, and we started to work together. I filmed them and they filmed me, as part of their project of keeping a Video Blog for their

fans. I was doing a research about masculinity with them, but also I became their object of study. I perceived it as curiosity. A curiosity similar to mine.

From suspicion to Film

The members of Bear Explosion were curious about me and my ethnographic intentions and especially about the camera. The presence of it provoked different reactions, some of them did not want to appear too much, others enjoyed being observed and filmed. However, according to my observations, one of the most interesting consequences of placing a camera in front of them was a reinforcement of their discourse, in particular the one related to their Bear identity. The first dialogues in front of the camera were notable for their explanations regarding why they are Bears. They argued that there was a lack of recognition of the principles of their community, especially from a heterosexual audience. The film in this way was an opportunity to become visible and from that perspective they got involved in a process which required a clear articulation of what brings them together; in particular considerations of masculinity. Another distinct reason that brought them closer to the project was the idea of having an audio-visual material that could be screened in front of bear and non-bears audiences, helping them to be recognized as musicians.

Films about Bears have focused on sexual intimacy, considering this as the essential part of being a Bear. As a response to this perspective, I propose Bear identity goes beyond sexual practices. For this reason, one of the main strategies of this research is to convey observations about how Bears locate the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity as a key element, and how this impacts on their identity project.

Despite the fact that one film could guide me to various conclusions regarding Bear masculinity, it became important for me as researcher, to make a film about each of them and not just make one about the group, since a crucial part of their personal life is relevant to understand their particular Bear identities. Taking this into account, the project began to be conceived as a set of films, to allow room for their personal testimonies. With this in mind, I designed this project as a portfolio of five short films, which examine the concept of masculinity in the context of a hegemonic

display of manliness in a homosexual milieu. Part of this portfolio is what you are reading, a companion to the films that intend to make more explicit some points and to connect the films to a wider discussion of masculinity. This companion text also describes certain aspects of the fieldwork that are not included in the films, but the films can be understood without reading the text. A potential audience in the future could decide to watch some or all in no particular order, because the films were conceived as independent pieces of work that could be assemble in order to get a deeper perspective about the topic of study.

The five films address experiences, dreams and traumas that are part of the protagonists' stories and how these impact on their present daily life. The first film you will see is the collective one, it portrays their relationship as a band, what brings them together, what does the band means for them and what is their aim. This film creates a collective narrative that portrays social and collective interactions and leads us to an understanding of their performance.

The following four films are focused on their personal narratives and spaces. The aim is to access to their testimonies on sexuality, violence and masculinity from a more private perspective. From the filmmaking perspective, these testimonies were filmed considering their personal spaces as different visual and symbolic universe: mostly fixed camera, sequences of quotidian activities, use of closer framing and materials associated with their memory. I also took into account the dialogue between their private and public spheres and also the individual and private space, this became one of the main reasons to conceive of this project as a set of films rather than one entire film. I wanted to propose to the viewer a more complete analysis by filming sequences and interviews in different locations and situations.

This project is inspired by the concept of 'ethnographies of the particular', defined by the feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991). The author highlights the presence of the observer as a mediator, and describes the limitations of anthropology when it attempts to reach objectivity. She explains that anthropologists have to speak honestly about positionality: 'Standing on shifting ground makes it clear that every act of speaking is a speaking from somewhere' (1991: 468). Following her ideas, I could say that my eye, ear, skin, and all my cognitive, reflexive

being is giving an account of the research from a standing point that cannot be totally objective.

I am a woman studying men.

I am a Latin American woman studying white British men.

And my sexual identity is still an unfinished project.

Definitions like this can be conveyed endlessly and will never give an accurate account of the researcher since identity cannot be understood as a static condition. However, my purpose is not to attempt to define the mediator, but to be clear that the standing point of the researcher has a fundamental impact.

I want to invite you -the reader/viewer- to an ethnographic experience through film and text. I designed my research as a participative/ethnographic account of what was possible to observe during two years of studying gay Bears. I do not intend to define a permanent truth or to generalize. On the contrary, my aim is to offer research that considers the limitations and possibilities of observation and dialogue. From this perspective, anthropological experiences can be re-written and complemented by the viewer, the reader, the other, which finally will make unique sense of this research.

Narratives in motion

The most important input of data is produced by the participants, who I observed and analysed using methodologies of visual anthropology. For Taylor (2012), gender is done through the circuits of everyday life, which reproduce normative assumptions of class, sexuality and race. Applying Taylor's perspective, Bears' project of identity is permeated and constructed from these factors and its changes 'impact upon feelings of belonging, in benefiting or being 'left behind', as desires, hopes and resentments intersects with material (im)possibilities' (2012: 8).

As can be observed throughout this work, Bears must dialogue with conventional normative assumptions of what is expected for a white, working class man. This dialogue implies a negotiation in terms of appropriation or denial of cross generational models of how the role of a man is understood. This process will impact

past ideas of what it means to be a man and will redo several social configurations in their daily life (Taylor, 2012).

Plummer (1995) indicates human beings can be defined as *socially organized biographical objects*, as *homo narrans*: constantly telling stories. He conceived society itself 'as a textured but seamless web of stories emerging everywhere through interaction: holding people together, pulling people apart, making societies work' (1995: 5). In this way, the construction of identities is done through everyday narratives, through performance and storytelling. For Plummer, participants no longer simply tell stories but turn themselves into active narrators or even creators of the self: 'there is a sense of an identity hidden from the surface awaiting clearer recognition, labeling, categorizing. (Plummer, 1995:33). In the case of Bears, it is possible to observe that the participants while narrating, evoke reaffirmation, reflection and identification. In this context, the current research does not seek to find whether or not the stories are rooted in reality, but how the elements of storytelling have a meaning for the project of identity, on its never-ending construction.

Bear performance: A reaction to homonormative discourses

The Bears movement emerged in the gay male culture of the 1980's, when challenges to conventional gender norms became more visible allowing more freedom in relation to sexuality. However, alongside this openness, male bodies became more sexualized, and were even objectified. In parallel, a specific set of beauty started to become the norm: the 'clone' (slim man, with moustache, dressed in white) became the archetype of the attractive gay male accepted by the gay community. Many adopted this look in order to be part of the scene (Wright, 2001). As a result of this homonormativeness, other body shapes, forms and performances were rejected, in particular big bodies, which became less visible. Those who had bigger bodies and embodied a more conventional masculinity started to organize themselves in a parallel scene, where all those who rejected the dominant homonormativity could be part. This would be the beginning of a Bear movement whose main principle would be the integration of those who were not considered attractive or part of the glamorous gay scene (Manley, 2007)

As described by Monaghan (2005) Bears respond to a different set of aesthetic values within a contemporary gay culture that typically values conventional beauty and youth, because stereotypically, Bears are hirsute gay men, whose attractiveness is based upon an aesthetic of fatness, maturity and traditional masculinity.

On the other hand, another important socio-historical fact helped to consolidate the Bear movement. As stated by Wright (2001), in the 1980's the AIDS crisis struck and greater body weight became synonymous with good health. Big bodies in particular were thought of as non HIV carriers.

Towards the end of the eighties, the birth of Bear Magazine started to feed the Bear imaginary with more conventional masculinity and bigger bodies, marking one of the first times that larger and conventionally masculine men were eroticised in gay male publications (Wright, 2001). While becoming more and more popular, a definitive "Bear look" became clearer: a big bearded man, shaved head, Checked shirt, jeans and boots. Later on, a whole Bear visual culture became part of the scene and the market: Bear films, Bear Magazines, Bear Porn, Bear T-Shirts... What they call 'Bearafenalia'.

The idea of a masculine look was central to the definition of a Bear model. In this sense, key dimensions of masculinity are embraced, including self-confidence and assurance and also an attitude to accept the impact of age in their bodies (Wright, 2001). They do not pretend to be winning a battle for eternal youth, just accept the path of time in the form of grey hair, more weight, less muscles and baldness. The care of the body against aging is understood as a feminine concern, so it cannot be part of the Bear model. Considering that Bears welcomed a large group of men who did not fit in the homonormative model, because of their weight, age, or performance, the emergent Bear scene embraced as a founding principle the idea of welcome to everybody who did not find a place in the mainstream gay scene (Wright, 2001)

During the 2000's some Bears groups in cities from United States and Europe started to organize Bears events: clubs, runs, bashes; and a sense of a Bear community began to appear in different places; it became more visible and powerful. However with the consolidation and recognition of Bears as a stable community in the gay scene, another kind of normativity started to break into the scene. The exaggeration of the masculine performance became both a requirement and an obstacle by which Bears started to segregate others who did not fit into this parameter of masculinity. In words of Ben, one of the participants of this research, 'the worst thing that could happen to a Bear, is to become effeminate'. By creating a rigid set of rules based on hegemonic masculinity, they needed to apply the most dogmatic principles to themselves which created a conflict that exploded in the incompatibility of homophobia and being homosexual at the same time.

Butler (2004) stated that the morphologies masculine and feminine through which the western gender systems naturalized differences are always ideal constructions. Following this idea, one of the characteristics of gender models is the creation of images of beauty and correctness that almost nobody is able to reach because there is not enough room for bifurcations and personal narratives. Bears find themselves trapped in a model impossible to satisfy, however by embodying a more conventional pattern of masculinity, they feel closer to 'what a man should be' and therefore -by not approaching masculinity from a more personal perspective- they legitimize their conventional form of embodiment. From that position, they censure

any other approach to masculinity as impure, and tend to homogenise other gay men in their practice and discourses, characterizing others as camp and effeminate.

The practice of dismissal of any other project of masculinity has been largely described by Robert Bly (1990) when referring to an old fashion type of man, that he called 'the savage' in opposition to a more civilized man that has proliferated in contemporary times in the western world. Bly describes how the contemporary men needs to awake not the 'savage', but the 'wild man' in order to regain a more empowered attitude closer to the higher expression of masculinity. And for Bly this has to be practiced since childhood in social and familiar rituals that welcome the boy in the community of men. Bly describes how other embodiments of masculinity can impact upon the boy's social relationships with other men, producing rejection and isolation. Bly's ideas can be applied to the Bears when they recognize that their embodiment of masculinity responds to the need to fit in and to be accepted. For example, Ben one of the participants in this research, indicates how other boys punished him when he played with girls in a small town of Britain during the 80's.

However, Bly's conceptualization seems to be narrow to convey a broader and richer spectrum of embodiment because he seems to replace one model of masculinity with another. In this sense, Anderson (2009) offers a richer perspective when describing the different ways in which men enact and embody masculinities. He starts from a plural idea of 'Masculinities', and furthermore he conceives the vast range of possibilities of masculinities as inclusive. From his perspective, things are starting to change, since young men are moving away from the rigid model of Hegemonic Masculinity and therefore they are more open to other men's projects that can disrupt traditional ideas of manliness. In this sense, the participants of this research recognized it is much easier to be a gay man in contemporary times, in comparison with what happened 30 years ago, before the gay liberation movement during the 1980's. And this is still changing with new sexualities and movements creating awareness about the vast range of individual and collective projects regarding sexuality and gender.

This research argues that the participants are continuously engaged in dialogue, conflicting old and new ideas of masculinity in their own sexuality. However, by following a route closer to hegemonic masculinity, Bears even have to

confront internal homophobia, because this is what they learned as appropriate behaviour. For example, Ben said that he is still homophobic, but he likes men, even though he is aware that this is a fundamental contradiction. In a way, some of the Bears struggle to cope with the reality of themselves as homosexuals, and in order to distance themselves from their taste of men, they tend to homogenize gay men as camp or effeminate while they avoid using the term 'gay' or 'homosexual' to refer to themselves.

The question now is how do Bears create a discourse of identity combining hegemony and homosexuality? Furthermore, how do they establish relationships with those who are not part of the Bear community?

Please open the DVD case and watch 'ManShape'

Or go to the link: <https://vimeo.com/74978447>

Length: 22 minutes 34 seconds

I am a Bear and I don't wear High heels

This film has been created as a collective narrative in order to portray the impact of masculinity in the project of Bear identity. The idea is to locate the Bear Project in a gender system to analyse the potentiality and compatibility of that model in relation to their performance. To achieve this, we worked in collaboration, we discussed the project and its limits, they created sequences and even made their own footage (as Videoblog).

As I have shown in the film, Bears first recognize as a characteristic of their identity project the embodiment of masculinity in a gay milieu. The everyday practice of this embodiment leads them to a definition by opposition to those who do not feel attached to their idea of a masculine performance. The question of what is a Bear, can be answered from different perspectives. The most common makes reference to the body in an attempt to describe what the typical Bear looks like. But also, another answer can refute the idea that Bears are defined exclusively by their bodies (Hennen, 2005).

By considering fieldwork observations and the readings of literature on masculinity and sexuality, this research argues that the group of men who self-identify as Bears, seem to follow a model of hegemonic masculinity. Hennen (2005) stated that the hallmark of the bear identity is the adoption of a conventionally masculine appearance and the accompanying rejection of the stereotyped notion that gay men cannot demonstrate masculine behavior. In opposition to Hennen's ideas, this research demonstrates that the impact of hegemonic masculinity among Bears is deeper. I argue that a definition of a Bear cannot be solely in physical terms or appearance, but from masculinity as a concept learned in their upbringing, and during their adult life it turns against them, in the form of contradiction and oppression.

Bears search for what they call 'real men' or 'regular guys', referring to males that have a strong masculine performance, opposed to the stereotypical gay man, called by them: the *twink* (the thin, extrovert guy who embody a feminine performance). Hennen (2005) described this process as a substitution of models: Being camp is replaced by a sense of being an 'everyday guy' who also happens to be gay. But to be an 'everyday guy' means to embody a conventional masculinity as

Bears do? What does this understanding of hegemonic masculinity involve? To explain it, Donaldson (1993:4) recalls Patricia Sexton who, thirty years ago, stated that 'male norms stress values as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body' (Donaldson 1993:4). The idea of male norms is close to masculinity as a sexual ideology, strongly related with the idea of manliness. But Sexton's definition only identifies male norms in relation to men with other men. As argued by Donaldson, this definition does not consider a dialogue out of the male zone. As this definition may seem to be insufficient, we need to open this perspective by linking it with the concept of hegemony and putting them in dialogue. However, As Donaldson (1993) recognizes it is only recently that social scientists have linked Sexton's concept with the concept of hegemony, 'a notion as slippery and difficult as the idea of masculinity itself'. As he relates, in Gramsci's 'Prison Notebooks' the idea of Hegemony is enunciated in relation to Marxist thinking, as a strategy by which a ruling group maintain its domination above all others. We can understand that in this sense, hegemony must be understood in relation to power and control. Considering this theoretical framework, hegemonic masculinity can be defined as a strategy for the subordination of otherness; women being the first to be excluded. For this point of view, the term hegemonic masculinity carries the seed of its own critique, since no exclusion can last eternally, especially after the revolutions of the last century. In this way, we can consider the idea of power and domination stressed by Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and by this we can say that Bears have one ideal of men and using that model, they reject other kinds of masculinities. For hegemonic masculinity there is just one model of embodiment, making impossible any individualisations and adaptations.

In the film, we can observe how Ben, the most 'masculine' of them all – according to their parameters- tends to explain the concepts that guides the band. Even more, when Ben is not present, the group tends to talk less about 'masculine' issues, as it is possible to observe in the scene where they discussed the sexual attractiveness of the royal princes. It seems to be that under the control of their masculinity, the members of Bear Explosion tend to exacerbate their performance in order to fit to the model. In this sense, Ben has the power in the hierarchy among the others members of Bear Explosion by being the one who most embodies the model.

He can preserve the model and set up the standards of approval in terms of his own masculinity. In this way, there is an 'institutionalisation' of masculinity. Taking into account basic principles described by Connell (2005), Bear bodies are part of the collective masculinities with their own language and code of communication. Masculinities are not just embodied by individuals separated from each other, but are enacted in 'groups or institutions- ranging from street gangs to armies and corporations' (Connell, 2005:44). Taking into account the idea of everyday embodiment, 'engendering' is not just an individual experience, but also a collective one, that starts with the individual body, and involves the experience of other bodies at the same time. In the case of *Bear Explosion*, it is possible to identify a certain collective behaviour and hierarchies regarding the correct embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. When Ben is not around, Seamus is the one in charge to keep an eye on the observance of the model. This is captured on the film during the sequence when they discuss the sex appeal of the royal princes and Seamus corrects them saying 'Yeah, Bears are not bitchy'.

As has been argued by Connell (2005), in order to liberate gender issues from the dictatorship of fixed identities, instead of thinking in terms of one masculinity one should think in terms of numerous possible masculinities and femininities. For this purpose, instead of naming gender as a noun, it would be much more accurate to think of gender as an action, as a verb, as a process, as has been stated by most feminist theorists. Every individual has the ability to involve his or her body in the process of gendering. Masculinity for Bears, however, is conceived in one form, the hegemonic model. This model can be restricting when Bears deal with other individuals and identity constructions. In a model that celebrates a single form of embodiment, despite other experiences, and sets a system of hierarchies around its principles, it is highly likely that this model and the individuals who embody it can become exclusive, intolerant, radical and isolated. As Connell has stated 'hegemonic masculinity is not just about the subordination of women, but also about preventing alternatives gaining cultural definition and recognition as alternatives, confining them to ghettos, to privacy, to unconsciousness' (Connell, 1987:187)

According to Connell, in the interplay and dynamics of Western masculinity, the dialogue or the lack of it between heterosexual and homosexual men is central '

To many people, homosexuality is a *negation* of masculinity, and homosexual men must be effeminate' (Connell, 2005:736). Given that assumption, antagonism towards homosexual men may be used to define masculinity, as Herek (2005) declared; to be 'a man' in contemporary American society is to be homophobic. This might be an oversimplification, but it is possible to say heterosexual masculinity was historically produced along with homophobia (Connell, 2005).

In the gay culture of Manchester we find activists creating possibilities for multiple identities, rejecting conventional binarism masculine/feminine, however, the members of Bear Explosion do not challenge gender politics in this way. Instead, they intend to challenge homonormativity by embodying a masculinity that is not generally linked with homosexuality. They do not seek to question their perspective about men or masculinity or to challenge its boundaries, and this is why they do not often share experiences with other gay men, and their principles are never put under discussion. Instead they distance their social environment and place from other homosexual men who do not fit the Bear group. This practice to avoid dialogue and gather with others like them, allows them to not question and protect their discourse. However, the exclusion of others creates a conflict with their foundational principle of welcoming everybody, in an attempt to subvert the practices of exclusion they suffered during the eighties. Although Bears tend to have a discourse against segregation, they recuperate hierarchies and structures that are at the heart of hegemonic masculinity; and under its logic, they reject effeminacy in men and are not keen to create bonds with women.

As has been argued by Donaldson (1993), a fundamental element of hegemonic masculinity is that women exist as potential sexual objects for men while men are negated as sexual objects for men. Women provide heterosexual men with sexual validation, and men compete with each other for their attention. Homosexual Bears have no sexual interest in women, and since under hegemonic masculinity sexual interest is the basis for female and male contact, the possibilities are dramatically reduced. As Hennen (2005) recognises, their rejection of effeminacy signals a broader devaluation of the feminine. Comparing their relation with other men and women, I would argue that Bears are more homophobic than misogynist, because -according to their view- femininity is part of being a woman, but other forms of masculinity are just a degradation of manliness. I got a sense of this when I was not

allowed to enter some Bear venues. Discussing the issue with the participants of the research the problem was that women make them feel uncomfortable and less free, because some of them still keep a straight life in parallel and they do not want to be recognized. In everyday life, Bears feel proud of not being called gay, because for them the term 'gay' is associated with an effeminate homosexual stereotype. Rather, they preferred to be described as 'men who like men' as a strategy of locating themselves away from the mainstream gay scene.

Please watch film 'Ben' from the DVD

Or go to the link <https://vimeo.com/74977895>

Length: 06 minutes 45 seconds

Early Childhood, Gay Shame and Homophobia

As mentioned previously, Ben probably fits best the hegemonic model of masculinity Bears seek. He has the power to speak for all of them and no effeminate attitude will ever slip from him. He is the one with the lowest tone of voice in the band and he still has some issues related with homophobia. However, when Ben is asked about what Masculinity is for him, he cannot give a clear answer. 'That's a difficult one – it is part of what a man is... but...'- and he covers his face with two hands for a few seconds and says, 'Mmm... Can I think about it?'

A similar reaction is observed in all the members of the band. Questions about how masculinity is understood by the participants as problematic to answer. As Robinson has observed in her research about masculinity in the context of rock climbers, 'becoming a man was seen as a process co-ordinated by a succession of events, which they had perceived as marking their status as 'masculine' (Robinson, 2013:132). In the case of Bears, they can also explain events that potentiate their masculinity, however when asked to think reflectively and conceptualize this idea, they see this as a problematic task. I hear repeatedly 'Everybody knows what masculinity is' but it was difficult for them to describe this concept verbally. This aspect is interesting because it indicates that masculinity was learned in practice, in examples of appropriate behavior for a man, and not as an intellectual concept.

In dramatic terms, Ben's film is about the struggle to find the self, accept it and be accepted. It is about survival and coming to terms with who he really is. The obstacle to accept his sexuality is the strict norms he followed during his life, which he still thinks are acceptable. From that perspective, Ben describes that being gay meant for him 'feeling like the worst thing he could possibly be as a human being'. Anderson (2009) argues that homophobia directed at men has produced traditional and rigid forms of masculinity, making the expression of femininity taboo for men as is in the case of Ben. The experience of this process is something not just restricted to Ben. All the Bears in this research passed through the same path of self-doubt in different periods with different intensities. In this way, Alan, Seamus, Steve, Andrew and Ben had to confront themselves with the challenge of becoming somebody different from what was expected for them. First was anxiety and later melancholia for the one they would never be. As explained by Ben, there was no possibility of

being a gay man, families strong condemned those who ‘choose’ to be ‘deviant’, or those who were ‘degenerated, that will end up being effeminate, prostitutes and dying of AIDS’.

The background of all five Bears is similar. They come from working class British families with restricted perspectives on sexuality. In general, they lived in small conservative-minded towns with a strong social cohesion that allowed few opportunities for difference. Half of them come from a strong religious background and had difficult relationships with their father, who embodied a strong hegemonic masculinity. In some cases, this led to stories of violence during their childhood. The early childhood of this group of Bears was during the sixties and seventies. All of them were raised with a model of masculinity that makes it impossible not to think of homosexuality as the opposite of masculine. For their parents, raised with a more rigid model of masculinity, the possibility of homosexuality was unacceptable, because it implied not only a taste for men, but also to be feminine, a degradation for men.

For some scholars like Sedgwick (1991) and Halberstam (2005), gay shame is strongly related with early childhood experiences. From these early experiences ‘sexual shame has to be reclaimed, reinterpreted and resituated by a queer adult who, armed with a theoretical language about his or her sexuality, can transform past experiences with abjection, isolation, and rejection into legibility, community and love (Halberstam, 2005:220). In homophobic environments, like the ones the Bears experienced in their first childhood, the ‘sissy boy’ is punished and loses access to all the symbolic privileges that are reserved for ‘manly boys’. As Sedgwick (1991) points out the sissy boy is the incarnation of shame, and so we should not be surprised to find that the centerpiece of today’s gay pride movements has to do with reclaiming gay masculinity. Applying Sedgwick’s ideas, Ben is recalling memories of the young man he was, and by this he can create a strategy to appoint the self in terms of a ‘gay rejected or not’ identity. However, if this may seem like a straightforward route for other non-heterosexual men, for Ben it has been an inconclusive path, because he had appropriated all the material and symbolic meaning of being a man that his family taught him.

On television, the comedy image of gay men making jokes about homosexuality was traumatic in their childhood. On the one hand, the only 'gay model' they had available was on television, but on the other hand, they did not want to be effeminate as portrayed on television. Under a strong family and social pressure, the Bears of today were not allowed to make their sexuality an open issue. During fieldwork, just a very few cases of young Bears (in their twenties) were possible to find, the most common narrative is of gay men with a late come out, in their thirties or forties and in some cases older. With models of homosexuality they disliked, the majority of old Bears had a long period of denial and silence. In a sense, those who embody hegemonic masculinity are trapped by a nightmare of effeminacy and construct their identity in opposition to what they do not want to be.

All the participants have similar traumatic pasts and share some points in their narrative; an early denial of their sexuality, attempts to build heterosexual relationships that always failed, a silent struggle to keep the image of a strong and masculine man, isolation in emotional terms, frustration and hatred of themselves and others. This homophobic discourse did not help them as teenagers during the seventies and eighties. They lived the first part of their adolescence before or during the first public appearance of gay figures who claimed respect and equal rights for gay people.

Bears who embody an extreme hegemonic masculinity are more homophobic. As we see in the Ben's testimony, they are still struggling to accept their own sexuality following a socially rigid or religious based education. They struggle with their desire towards other men. However, since they cannot change their sexual drive, they put effort into embodying the perfect hegemonic man. In their tight local communities, the public opinion about LGBT rights did not change until later. As was described by Connell (1987), cultures in specific periods of history create different gender systems- and therefore different patterns of masculinity. These films are stories of men in their forties and over, so it is not so difficult to observe a difference between their understanding of masculinity and those of younger generations. As Connell (2005) and Robinson (2013) have argued Masculinities are understood as fluid and not static and in transition as continuously reconfigured in the project of identity.

After coming out and being displaced from their first home (their parents house), they had to reshape their identity but this time by having a sense of belonging. As have been pointed out by Harvey, 'The central question of identity formation – Who am I? – is recast as "Where do I belong?" (Harvey, 2000: 146). This enquiry of the self has a strong impact, and part of this critical question can lead to an urgent need to feel part of a group by fulfilling the requirements of acceptance. Although not all non-heterosexual men seek an emotional place to rely on, in the case of Bears this is crucial not only in order to empower themselves again. Men are not allowed to share feelings or emotions that make them appear weak. The idea to discover a group of friends who do not repudiate them, is a starting point to come to terms with a sexuality that can be problematic, given their homophobic upbringing. 'Finding community -said one of the interviewees in Weston's book - means discovering 'that your story isn't the only one in the world' (Weston, 1991:126). These individuals find themselves emotionally separated from their family, since they are not able to be honest about their sexuality and specific project of gender. When they find a place in the Bear community they find a place to feel more at ease and comfortable with themselves. Also in this environment they establish strong relationships creating a different structure of family that will be analysed later in the text.

Please watch film 'Alan and Seamus' from the DVD

Or go to the link <https://vimeo.com/74978446>

Length: 13 minutes 02 seconds

Please watch film 'Steve' from the DVD

Or go to the link <https://vimeo.com/74980614>

Length: 05 minutes 39 seconds

Bear (a) love(r). Bear (a) family

The 2 films you just have seen are testimonies of love and new opportunities in the life of these three Bears. The ethnography made during this period had two aims. The first was to understand the dynamics of a Bear couple from the experiences and practices of Alan, Seamus and Steve. The second one was to explore features of family and attachment after a difficult coming out. After seeing Ben's film, and all the social pressure that he experienced, I wanted to understand the impact of a late coming out, an experience that several Bears mentioned during conversations and interviews.

Both stories make us engage with very different narratives about love and its link with hegemonic masculinity. While Alan explains his own view about big bodies and manliness, Steve recalls his past remembering a former partner who abused him. Alan tried to hide his sexuality and pretend to be heterosexual. He got married and had a family, trying to fulfill the heterosexual dream. However before he reached his forties, he decided to come to terms with the sexuality he had hidden for so long. The sense of not being able to cope any more with the life he was living was the final straw, but his decision would impact what have been culturally considered the very foundation of life and society (Weeks, 1987). After overcoming a difficult coming out, Alan has found a partner who seems to fulfill his emotional needs. Alan and Seamus have been a couple for more than two years, and recently moved in together. They are in a monogamous relationship and are planning a future together. They may get married. This narrative about love is very similar to the experience that Steve is trying to reach. He is still looking for one man to love after the traumatic experience he lived with his first partner for more than ten years. As with Seamus and Alan, Steve is trying to live an experience of secure and long lasting love.

Following Foucault's inspiration quoted by Halperin (1995), the aim was to convey love stories between Bears and their relation with masculinity. 'Imagining a sexual act that does not conform to the law or to nature, that's not what upsets people. But that individuals might begin to love each other, That's the problem. That goes against the grain of social institutions' (Halperin, 1995:94). In this sense, as an ethnographer it was a bigger challenge to explore their narratives about love and from that point, portray in their own words how the embodiment of masculinity crosses

their experience of sexuality, body and desire. Deliberately, I tried to situate this audiovisual work as a response to those films that focused on the sexual aspect. This was crucial for the research, since the relation between emotionality and conventional masculinity has been denied. Everyday expressions such as 'boys don't cry' give us a glimpse of how the sensitive and emotional practices have been associated with femininity.

In Steve's film we understand how masculinity was a reason to deny the domestic violence he was living. He was afraid to go to the police and say he was a man who was beaten up by his partner. He thought that a claim like that would mean a denial of his manliness, because it would create doubts about his masculine strength.

As I have mentioned before, non-heterosexual sexualities challenge the relations among adult partners, but also pose questions about new ways of making family. They make us think about families not just as genetically related or biologically created, but also as partnerships of support, love and collaboration, that can be conformed by more than two. New conceptions of family are being more visible and are creating a set of new symbolic meanings, just after the crisis of the conventional structure of family. Even though interesting, this project does not pretend to investigate those meanings, but to explore some Bear practices about how family is created among Bears and what is the impact of hegemonic masculinity in the context of the specific group of Bears.

Generally, Bears do not have a close contact with their parents, and the Bear group becomes a family to them; 'a family of friends, or brothers, but a family after all,' says Steve. In response to a more conventional type of family created around genetic bonds, they created their own family. Although, hegemonic masculinity conveys the ideas of lack of affection between men and restricted emotionality Bears do tend to have close relations and show their affection. However is important to note that this emotional expressivity does not trespasses the physical boundaries of a fraternal affection. In the first film 'ManShape' it is possible to observe the strong bonds between Bear Explosion' members. This is a good starting point to examine how chosen families among gay Bears are permeated by the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. First, they are not linked by any biological tie. They met each other and became friends, close friends. With time they started to share more of their

lives together and more private stories providing each other with moments of happiness and enjoyment, and a place of freedom and emotional support.

Having lived a traumatic past with their biological families and unable to share their everyday life as gay men, friends are like family; or they are family which implies a transition from one set of norms –the conventional heterosexual, to another, a created. For Weeks (2004) the fundamental lack of support from the biological family seems to be central in order to seek a new structure of emotional protection. I agree with Weeks' idea that the desire to substitute the support expected from the biological family is not exclusive to non-heterosexuals. When individuals gain independence from their first family, they start to search for a new support network.

Family in this case, is strongly linked to members' desire to construct a family, as stated by Carrington (1999) any family, is a social construction, or a set of relationships recognized, edified, and sustained through human initiative. In the case of Bears it is based on love, acceptance and a shared world-view in gender and sexuality always permeated by the performance of masculinity, and by the oppressive nature of the biological family.

For Weston (1993), the tie that keeps families of choice together is a certain amount of 'unconditional love' that goes beyond friendship; gay families have created a cultural space in which people can love but also fight, without expecting their chosen kin to walk away, much less go off to organize a faction. Weeks (2004) goes further by extending this sense of protection using the term 'home' as the place where individuals and family members can be nurtured and 'be as they are' (Weeks, 2004)

Bear Explosion members have an internal code of family. First, they recognized each other as family and each one performed a role inside this family. Seamus, who was the creative leader of the band and one of the 'most masculine', was 'Dad'. Steve, who cared more about the domestic duties was 'Mum'. Ben and Andrew, the youngest were the 'kids'. Finally Alan, who had started a relationship with Seamus was the 'mistress'.

By analysing the distribution of roles in this family, we can address how this group of Bears seek to keep the same denomination of conventional heterosexual families such as mum, dad and child. Even, the term 'family' seems to work to refer

to the group. On one hand, we could argue that Bears are trying to reconnect the concept of family with a broader idea, where mum and dad can have the same sex, or the children are not biological descendants. This group of Bears is trying to subvert the very origin of the concept of family by breaking with the idea of the romantic love between partners. In this family, Mum and Dad do not love each other in sexual terms; they are not even a couple. Even though this is part of their creative and collective performance, it is interesting to understand how they use heterosexual and biological terms to play with them, subverting and broadening the understanding of the concept of family. As has been argued by Weeks (1991) these practices 'underline the poverty of our language in describing alternative forms of intimate life'. From another perspective, when analysed the use of these terms, and also the allocation of them, it is possible to observe that this responds strongly to the way Bears understand masculinity. The head of the family is the father, and this denomination has been given to one of the oldest, but also to one that closely embodies masculinity in its hegemonic shape. Seamus, is the one who controls all the creative input of the band and the most important voice within the group when a decision has to be made. The family considered Steve in charge of housekeeping, and as camp and feminine. Alan is regarded as the least manly but with no clear duty in the family, so he is called the mistress.

The desired body

Big bodies are at the center of the Bear visibility and are transformed into a sculpture in movement, as a visual statement of their resistance against the normativity of thin bodies as the ultimate model of beauty. In this sense, fatness is a declaration of manliness and also a form of resistance. Some of them have a biological tendency to be bigger while others just try to achieve this model of beauty as a form of resistance or trying to attract other big men. No matter how the body was crafted or how they got bigger, in all cases there is a conscious decision to develop the body into bigger sizes.

Deliberate care is taken for the body to resist the norm and to be sexually attractive. One of the main ideas behind the celebration of big bodies is that this makes them more of a man. "Men do not care about food, dieting is a woman's concern", says Seamus. Body shape is not just a form of resistance, among the Bear scene bodies are also important when it comes to negotiate hierarchy and power. And this can be observed in the set of categories of physical characteristics that Bears have created; Chubby Bear (obese bear), Cub (younger bear), Otter (less hairy bear), Chaser (somebody who is attracted to Bears, but is not part of the bear culture), Muscle Bear (an exercised version of a Bear), Panda (A bear of Asian origin), Daddy Bear (an older Bear), Polar Bear (an older bear with white or grey hair).

When a new individual arrives on the Bear scene, he receives a categorization under these parameters from those already on the scene. The majority of those who want to be part of the Bear movement identify themselves as working class, and are categorized or excluded by older members, applying -as was possible to observe from the categories described before- description of bodies from body weight to references about race. However they do not consider these practices as cruel or racist and use them widely.

This is not a ritualized event, is just part of the preliminary contact to put someone new in one of these categories. Each one category has a specific symbolic meaning and hierarchy within the Bear subculture. For instance, today Muscle Bears are the most popular of them all, so they are the most sought after as a sexual partner. A decade ago, Muscle Bears were not as popular as now, and their success has

exacerbated body concerns, stressing narcissism and frustration in a scene that was suppose to be the place to welcome all shapes or body sizes. Muscle Bears are also the most visible participants on the scene. For example, Chubby Bears (with at least 300 pounds) tend to be more silent than Muscle Bears, but this doesn't mean that they are excluded or segregated. Even though there is an emergence of a new generation, Chubby Bears still have their place on the scene and often in foam parties, they take off their t-shirts and dance shaking their bellies in synchronization with other chubby Bears. This implies the success of that specific party. In terms of negotiation of power, masculinity and body are relevant elements to consider in order to understand the internal social structure.

Body size is also relevant to highlight masculine features. As was stated by Connell 'the choice of a man as sexual object is not just the choice of a-body-with-penis, is the choice of embodied-masculinity. The cultural meanings of masculinity are, generally, part of the package' (Connell, 2005: 156). For instance, in the case of Alan, he has been attracted to bigger men since he was a child, even some men that fit the Bear look, such as his teacher or the priest, as he recalled during his interview. As Alan stated, the majority of Bears engage with another Bear as he does. "I really like big bodies. Seamus is perfect for me because I love his size. It's so good to hug him and to sleep together"

Versatility and I wash the dishes

Some research started in the 50's and 60's indicated that one of the members of a gay or lesbian couple took on the "masculine" role while the other member took on the feminine role (Carrington, 1999). Such a pattern conformed to the classical sociological distinction between "instrumental" and "expressive" roles within the family articulated by Parsons and Bales during the 50's, who argued that such a distinction of roles constituted an efficient division of labor within the family and provided for the wellbeing of all members. Following the Parsonian model, in a heterosexual couple the woman would play the expressive gender role of providing emotional support to the family, while the man must satisfy the economic and material requirements of the family. This dichotomy of instrumental and expressive

gender roles was put under question during the 80's when researchers stated that gay and lesbian couples often exhibit significantly more egalitarianism and less role-playing than heterosexual couples within intimate relationships. In accordance to this research, Bear couples tend to share the domestic work, and be egalitarian in term of economical and emotional responsibility in their relation. Bears understand the idea of partner as another but equally valid, not as somebody with fixed roles, as probably was understood by their parents. In this way, Bears hold an explicit opposition to the hetero-normative gender role play. They seek to subvert the relation of the material/expressive by sharing a commitment with the partner. That does not mean that they share in equal proportion all the housework and the responsibilities, but they have a fluid negotiation of duties. One may prefer to do more housework than the other, but there are no fixed roles regarding work and gender.

This fluidity in roles reaches into other areas of their everyday practice. According to my research interviews, Bears tend to enjoy a “versatile” sexual activity, which means they are not exclusively “top” (penetrator) or “bottom” (penetrated) but an active combination of both depending on the negotiation with the partner(s).

However, in the social and public sphere there is still a performance of domination of the more masculine over the other, and hierarchies are very much ruled by the hegemony of the stronger and more masculine. Hegemonic masculinity permeates not only the relation between masculine and feminine, but also the relation between different forms of masculinity, and as Connell (1987) has stated ‘this interplay is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works.

Please watch film 'Andrew' from the DVD

Or go to the link <https://vimeo.com/75001529>

Length: 11 minutes 17 seconds

Bear identity and the inconvenience of hegemonic masculinity

At the center of the Bear performance we find a model of hegemonic masculinity that permeates almost every aspect of the participants in a constant process. However, this persistence in embodiment of a rigid normative idea of ‘what a man should do’, brings several conflicts in their personal and public life and is in contradiction with some original ideas of the Bear movement. I will discuss some of this contradiction by analysing Andrew’s testimony and the whole set of films presented in this portfolio.

Andrew’s testimony goes into detail about some of the limitations of embodiment a model of hegemonic masculinity particularly when applied to social life. The norms on the body, exclusion of the different, the fear of being marginalised and so on give us a good view of their sense of belonging and exclusion. Andrew is afraid of losing weight because he wants to fit the Bear requirements of shape and size. In the first film, *ManShape*, he mentioned he was losing weight too rapidly; ‘I would be a twinkly clone’ he declared while waiting for an english breakfast. That statement was a joke revealing a real concern. While watching his testimony it becomes evident that he is anxious about weight because he wants to keep an unmistakable Bear identity. In this sense, questions about self-image pose direct questions about identity.

However a Bear identity cannot be embraced by just fitting with the Bear shapes and body requirements. As has been discussed earlier (in particular in Alan and Seamus’ film) the Bear identity starts from the acceptance of the foundational principles of masculinity and embodiment of its hegemony. Weight and shape are consequences of the acceptance of this model and its manly pride. A normative masculine performance, high weight and beard do not make a man a Bear. He needs to believe and articulate himself as part of the group. To answer this we start by applying Bornstein’s idea of the construction of gender and identity. ‘One answer to the question “Who is Transsexual?” might be “Anyone who admits it” (Bornstein, 1994:121). Under this conceptualization, an individual can become a Bear by admitting it, by recognizing himself as one. A gay man becomes a Bear when he defines himself as a Bear. In this case, as Bornstein indicated, he needs to admit it’. After discussing this issue with some Bears during fieldwork it became more and

more clear that in order to become a Bear, it is compulsory to recognise yourself as such. From this perspective, it is possible to say that the project of identity is an individual process. However, the sense of being part of the group is a product of a collective interaction where Bears are recognized by others as being 'one of them'.

In the case of Andrew his anxiety about weight-loss is double sided: Not seeing himself as a Bear, because he does not fulfill the physical requirements (identity) but also not being part of 'the Bears' since he may not be accepted as one of them by others (belonging). However, this persistence in embodiment of a rigid normative idea of 'what a man should do', brings several conflicts in their personal and public life and is in contradiction with some original ideas of the Bear movement, such as the idea of welcoming everybody. Hegemonic masculinity is a heterosexual concept, where the man must not just reproduce but also dominate the sexual requirements of his partner, a woman. Homosexuality cannot be conceived in a free dialogue with hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity can be embodied by gay men, but their focus of desire is in the homo, "the same" in the sense assigned to the Greek prefix, not the hetero, "the other" taking into account the biological differences. For hegemonic masculinity, non-heterosexuality is unacceptable. It is important to clarify that upon becoming part of the bear scene, a small number of people may embody a 'less manly' performance. As we saw in the case of Steve or Alan, who are the ones that satisfy domestic needs for the group. It is possible to observe in this case how domestic labour is related with femininity. As recognized by Connell, masculinities are not homogeneous, and this difference has a direct relation to the internal structure of socialization.

During the last period of fieldwork, Andrew had lost several pounds due to an increase in work at his T-shirt company. He was walking from his home to the city center spending all day printing, packing products and running to the post office to deliver the orders. With this new daily routine, Andrew started to notice that his loss of weight was affecting his Bear look. 'I look more like a Cub and I don't want to... I will be the thinnest member of the band! That's not good. I will end up being a twink!'

Andrew started to put a lot of effort into keeping more weight on, he was concerned about being rejected by the Bear community which meant everything to

him. He had even based his business within the community, fulfilling his dream of being an entrepreneur. Such close relations to the community are highly important for all of the active members of the Bear community. As stated by Manley (1998) the sense of belonging and acceptance was so strong that all of the participants indicated that their bear identity was more important to them than their identities as gay men.

However, weight is not just a matter about social hierarchy or popularity, it is also an issue affecting relationships and a sexual imaginary. For instance, Andrew does not want to lose weight because he wants to look like an older and corpulent bear to attract older Bears. Alan fell in love with Seamus at first sight because of his body shape. The question of body weight impacts on the sexual negotiation and feeds the desire to penetrate or be penetrated. In a large number of cases, Chubby Bears are the partner of a thinner bear who is the assistant and the main supporter of the Chubby Bear's fatness. In this type of relation there is a clear role for each one: the Chubby Bear becomes a gainer (somebody who is consciously trying to gain more and more weight) and the partner is known as the feeder (the one who provide the food to reach the objective of being bigger). The relation between these two is based around the importance of the body. The bigger, the better, no matter how many health problems this may cause to the gainer.

The body, in this extreme form of sculpting, is highly political and fetishist. This type of relation can be observed not just in Bear environment, but also among heterosexual partners. Weight is a concern for Bears. Whether losing or gaining, they are always body conscious and it is an important part of their social and sexual negotiation. Furthermore, it is their form of resistance to the mainstream homonormative gay scene. For all of Bears it is difficult to answer the question What is a Bear? For all of them it was very clear that the only way of being a Bear was through self-identification.

The embodiment of hegemonic masculinity has a various consequences on the everyday practices of Bears. At the same time it is important to consider how the impact of hegemonic may become problematic in a Bear environment. In its beginnings, the Bear community purported to integrate, not to segregate. However, the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity is not an inclusive model, it is a normative, inflexible and static concept that instead of offering inclusion and generosity,

excludes all those who do not fit with the model. In this sense, hegemonic masculinity cannot be thought of as broad-minded, but as an intransigent and oppressive normative for those who are not part of it and those who wish to be part of it and have to follow a cruel script that allows few escapes to creativity and individuality.

Hegemonic masculinity is a model based on power and control over others. As described by Connell is not the power of a gun, but the power of hierarchy. This model seeks to control others by imposing the superiority of those who embody masculinity. The Bear communities do not try to control others, they simply exclude them. The otherness for Bears is not a field where they should try to conquest or impose their rules; they do not cross their frontiers and do not pretend to extend their rules to everybody. They keep their distance from non-Bears, they disregard others, and often fear to expose themselves in non-bear milieus.

Conclusions

My research started due to curiosity, I wanted to understand what were the implications of 'being a regular guy who happens to like men', as the members of Bear Explosion identified themselves. At the center of this 'regular guy' was the defence of a model of hegemonic masculinity that permeated almost every aspect of their identity and everyday life. This model was described by them as 'the way a man should be' as if there is only one way to be. Through this acceptance and embodiment they dismissed any other gender appropriation. As stated, their particular understanding of masculinity was a reaction to homonormative models, as a form of resistance.

In relation to this, some may argue that they could not overcome a difficult upbringing, and finally embraced the definition of a 'man' given by the elder when they were children. However, this embodiment of hegemonic masculinity can also be understood as a defence of homosexual men who choose a more conventional masculinity. This can lead us to view their discourse as both a form of resistance to homonormativity, and a way to protect themselves from homophobia and discrimination, by not being recognized as gay. We could argue that they learned one way of 'being a man' and by defending and embodying this model, they intend to behave under conventional rules and not be segregated by their sexual orientation. Behind this, is the idea to not change what they were taught to do; that a man must be masculine in one way, as a woman must be feminine in the opposite way. However the restrictions that this model imposes over these men are unresolved, since one key element of this understanding of masculinity is the practice of sexual activity with women. The impossibility to fully achieve the model combined with their rigid understanding of it produces an awkward dialogue between their understanding of masculinity as hegemonic and their embodiment of it. This can be stronger when in contact with family or people outside the bear community.

A huge number of Bears still believe strongly in the binarism of performances when it comes to gender, and by not opening themselves up to discussions about personal and subversive embodiments, their understanding of other forms of doing gender become problematic. At the same time, we see that a new generation of Bears, who are younger and were raised under a different set of rules are opening the

boundaries of the community, whilst keeping the same basis for manliness. This is still unpredictable since they are a small part of the community, but will be an interesting case to analyse in the future.

In any case, the experiences of people in the bear community make interesting case studies that make it possible to examine the inadequacy of ideal models and rigid normativities which are central to gender studies.

Play credits from the DVD

Or go to the link <https://vimeo.com/75001530>

Length: 31 seconds

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