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## Sexuality and Larger Bodies: Gay Men's Experience of and Resistance Against Weight and Sexual Orientation Stigma

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND PUBLIC POLICY

SEXUALITY AND LARGER BODIES: GAY MEN'S EXPERIENCE OF  
AND RESISTANCE AGAINST WEIGHT AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION STIGMA

By

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A Dissertation submitted to the  
Department of Sociology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Degree Awarded:  
Fall 2012

Patrick B. McGrady defended this dissertation on August 31, 2012.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a number of people who deserve acknowledgement for making this dissertation possible. I would first like to thank my advisor and mentor, John Reynolds, who is the chair of my dissertation committee. From day one at orientation where he “welcomed me aboard,” John helped me organize my life as a graduate student, set high goals for me, and even stuck with me through a radical dissertation topic change. While writing this, his enthusiasm during our brainstorm meetings where we both scrambled to take notes that probably would not make sense to anyone else energized me and helped take a study about a subculture to something more general and methodologically savvy. Generally speaking, John kept me enthusiastic about this project. Of course I would not have chosen to study the bears had it not been for my qualitative methods guru Doug Schrock. This project started as a course paper and he encouraged me to take it further. Through countless meetings, encouraging emails, and general welcoming demeanor, Doug got me to think more complicatedly about my data and always had an answer when I hit a wall on the qualitative analysis. I also would like to acknowledge Koji Ueno, my other committee member, for the excellent methods training early in my graduate school career and his willingness to contribute his statistical genius—which became invaluable resources in this process. He deserves more thanks for selflessly taking time out of his sabbatical to help with this project and write countless recommendation letters for jobs. My outside members, both deserve thanks: Amy Koehlinger for encouraging me to travel to the West Coast to collect more data and Jasminka Illich-Ernst for stepping in late in the process to offer valuable feedback on my study. I also would like to acknowledge that this dissertation is supported by a Florida State University Dissertation Grant I received in 2011.

Of course there are people outside of FSU that were important to my success as a graduate student. Much thanks goes to my “Berea family” of supervisors, professors, and peers. In particular, my supervisors Heather Schill and Betty Hibler, who constantly encouraged me to connect my work in the service learning center to academic sociology. My sociology professors, Dianne Sykes, Jill Bouma, and Tom Boyd, who nurtured my aspirations in sociology and continued to be mentors to me after my time at Berea. And JoEllen Pederson, a fellow Berean and FSU sociologist, who has been my closest friend, roommate, co-author, co-conspirator, and social support throughout the past ten years.

The support of my family made my time at FSU possible. My father, who was somewhat a sociologist himself, taught me to think empathically about the condition of others and was the first family member to support my decision to go into sociology. My mother, who continually encouraged and supported me throughout my school career and was always just a phone call away when I felt homesick or overwhelmed. And Chris, for always being a great big brother and always being willing to “talk shop” about graduate school. I also owe much to Warren Lambert, my confidant and closest friend on this planet. He inspired this research, eased my anxieties around teaching and research, and always remained supportive of all my endeavors—even through my worst of moods. I count him as a member of my family and I am lucky to have such a gifted and empathic person in my life.

Finally, I would like to say thanks to all of the men who selflessly opened their homes and peer groups and shared their lives for this research. I hope my writing here effectively communicates their stories.

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## ABSTRACT

Being gay and being overweight are two stigmatized statuses in the United States. A range of work has considered the experience of being stigmatized and the consequences of stereotypes for overweight individuals and sexual minorities, but less research has examined the intersection of these two stigmas among larger gay men or collective efforts to resist such stigma. This dissertation extends this work by examining the joint consequences of being a sexual minority and having body dissatisfaction for men using a mixed methods design. In the first study, I contrast young gay men's weight dissatisfaction with that of heterosexual men to demonstrate the heightened risk of depression for overweight gay men using nationally representative data. But stigmatized individuals are not passive in their experience of weight and sexual orientation stereotypes. The second study qualitatively examines a subculture of gay men, the bears, to test theoretical models of stigma resistance. The results demonstrate the transferability of stigma resistance among multiple stigmatized attributes and the use of multiple strategies to resist one stigma. At the same time, it shows how subcultural dynamics both aid and undermine the resistance toward stigma, and the risk of reinforcing stigma's effect through criticizing others who embody a stereotype. The results also demonstrate how resistance strategies are both empowering and psychologically taxing for stigmatized individuals.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Obesity has become a top health priority in the United States. Over one-third of Americans have a Body Mass Index (BMI) score above 30, which classifies them as obese. In addition, childhood obesity has increased at an alarming rate in the past decade (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2011). The concern is also evident in statistics regarding health costs. In 2008, 147 billion dollars paid by individuals and insurance companies went toward obesity-related illnesses (CDC 2011). National campaigns such as Michelle Obama's *Let's Move* program aimed at reducing childhood obesity and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' *Healthy People 2020* plan to address a range of health issues that include obesity-related illnesses also show the imperative that many Americans have placed on reducing obesity. Such programs prove effective at educating families about healthy behaviors, building community-based prevention programs, and encouraging more physical activity at homes and schools. However, some organizations view the focus on weight, as opposed to general health, as harmful and stigmatizing to large individuals. After the launch of the *Let's Move* campaign, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) criticized the program as likely to increase the stigmatization of large children and for having a narrow focus of weight being a main indicator of health. This dissertation contributes to research that attempts to better understand the psychological consequences of having a larger body in the U.S.

The past decade has also brought more focus on the social rights and experiences of sexual minorities in the U.S. Many non-profit organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign and National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce have advocated for equal rights in the workplace, marriage laws, high school clubs, and adoption policies for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender folks. Several states have voted in favor of equal marriage rights while others have voted to block or repeal these rights. The increased focus is also evident outside of political movements with anti-bullying campaigns, increased resources for LGBTQ youth, news headlines of celebrities coming out, and the portrayal of prominent gay and transgender characters in popular television shows. Public opinion on LGBTQ rights have slowly moved toward greater acceptance with fifty percent of Americans agreeing that same-sex marriage should be legal and

54 percent agreeing that same-sex relationships are morally acceptable in a 2012 Gallup Poll. The continued battles related to LGBT youth and adults attest to the intransigence of heteronormativity and the social stigma related to same-sex relationships.

The social scientific literature demonstrates that overweight individuals must contend with stereotypes of having large bodies and sexual minorities experience social consequences of being gay. This work shows that cultural standards for men and women's bodies are often unobtainable, significant numbers of individuals try to manage their bodies to fit these ideals, and individuals' emotionally suffer when their bodies do not fit (Bordo 1993; Boyd, Reynolds, Tillman, and Martin 2011; Ge, Elder, Regnurus, and Cox 2001; Hebl and Turchin 2005; Jones 2001; Markey and Markey 2005; Wolf 1991). Research has also shown that sexual minorities experience stereotyping, discrimination, and greater social isolation than heterosexuals (Blashill and Powlishta 2009; Meyer 2003; Pascoe 2007; Smith 1998; Ueno 2005; 2010; Yeung, Stomblor, and Wharton 2006). Additionally, gay men grapple with body ideals imposed by an average body type of youthful, slender, and toned in gay male-targeted media and feedback from gay peers (Drummond 2005; Gough and Flanders 2009; Green 2011; Lanzieri and Hildebrandt 2011; Locke 1997). However, past work has not fully explored gay men's resistance to body ideals, nor has it fully explored the link between sexual orientation and body image. It is unclear as to how gay men simultaneously experience weight and sexual orientation stereotypes. Additionally, it is unclear if body size and weight perceptions increase gay men's mental health issues. This dissertation addresses these two gaps by examining how young gay men experience body image concerns using nationally representative data and qualitatively studying a subculture of gay men—the bears—that embrace larger, hirsute bodies.

While the majority of the work on body image has focused on women's experiences, body ideals are also salient to men and shape their self-perceptions and behaviors. Images of ideal bodies in popular culture put men at a risk for being dissatisfied with weight and engaging in unhealthy weight management regimens (Mikalide 1990; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000; Rohlinger 2002). Additionally, negative body image is attributed to overweight individuals being stereotyped by employers, teachers, doctors, and average weight individuals as lazy, lower intelligence, and having low self-control (Bordo 1993; Hebl and Turchin 2005; Puhl and Brownell 2006; Rothblum, Miller, and Garbutt 1988).

Studies examining gay men's body image have focused on how men present their bodies as masculine to fit in with gay cultural standards of the body and men's efforts to manage weight and physique (Drummond 2005; Duncan 2007; Gough and Flanders 2009; Slevin and Linneman 2010) and comparisons between gay men and women and heterosexual men (Sevier 1994; Peplau, Frederick, Yee, Maisel, Lever, and Ghavami 2009). More subtly addressing gay men's body image is work that examines the stratification of body types, age, and race in gay social spaces like gay bars, where older, overweight, and racial minority men are often ignored or rejected (Green 2008a; 2008b; 2011). Often, prevailing images and standards of men's bodies in gay culture are youthful, muscled, white, and fashionable (Levine 1998; Linneman 2008). Those who fail to embody such an image are likely to find themselves left out of gay media and on the periphery of gay culture (Saucier and Caron 2008; Gough and Flanders 2009). This dissertation adds to this literature by examining the uniqueness of gay men's body image concerns in contrast to heterosexual men. Additionally, it examines how some gay men resist such influences.

Body image concerns may be especially salient to gay men because sexual minorities in general also experience status loss simply for being gay. On average, gay men experience greater separation from family and friends and depression symptoms than heterosexual men as well as isolation from other gay men (Meyer 2003; Ueno 2005; 2010). In addition, gay men must contend with stereotypes of gay sexuality. Studies examining stereotypes have noted that gay men are often labeled as effeminate, having "gay hobbies", overly body-conscious, and enacting opposite gender roles (Blashill and Powlishta 2009; Hennen 2008; Slevin and Linneman 2010; Yeung et al. 2006). These stereotypes, along with the risk of status loss when coming out, contribute to some men concealing their same-sex romantic relationships from others (Connell 1992; Lapinski, Braz, and Maloney 2010) and altering their actions to not be perceived as "too gay" or "too effeminate" (Pascoe 2007; Yeung et al. 2006). Thus like overweight individuals in a weight-obsessed society, gay men grapple with the effects of being stigmatized.

In short, being overweight and being gay are both stigmatized statuses. Stigmas are "deeply discrediting" attributes deemed as atypical via cultural beliefs of what is normal (Goffman 1963:3) and often people are labeled, grouped, and stereotyped in accordance with these beliefs (Link and Phelan 2001). The effects of stigma are felt through discrimination, fear of confirming stereotypes, and deficits to health (Blashill and Powlishta 2009; Feagin 1991; Schafer and Ferraro 2011). Those with stigmatized attributes experience a negative

psychological impact, as individuals often evaluate their own self-worth from the perspective of others (Mead 1934). Additionally, inhabiting multiple stigmatized statuses increases the felt effect of stigma (Dowd and Bengston 1978). By inhabiting two stigmatized statuses, overweight gay men may be especially at risk for mental health problems that result from experiencing associated prejudice, discrimination, and negative self-evaluation.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that overweight individuals or gay men have no agency when it comes to their experiences of stigma related to sexuality, body image, or both. Much of the survey-based research can be viewed as implying as much, where differences in symptomatology between two groups are taken as evidence of status-related variations in hardship. Scholars such as Paul Willis (1977) challenge the static accounts of this sort of accounting of inequality systems. In his ethnography of working class boys, some males viewed their chances of getting ahead through the education system as unlikely. Instead of responding passively to their situation, the “lads” Willis interviewed viewed school and white-collar work as undesirable and their likely blue-collar futures as ideal. Similarly, subordinated individuals often resist the conditions of being stigmatized (Thoits 2011). This includes downplaying the stigmatized attribute, distancing one’s self from a stereotype, confronting stereotypes, educating others about erroneous stereotypes, and joining groups organized around fighting stereotypes. In doing so, stigmatized individuals may increase their self-esteem and feel empowered for taking action (Shih 2004; Thoits 2011). Additionally, when a group of individuals feel oppressed for a common attribute, they can resist by forming alternative subcultures with their own forms of power, hierarchy, and prestige (Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir 2000). For gay men with bodies that do not reflect the “average” body in gay-targeted publications, this includes selecting into a social setting or subculture that values their body type as ideal (Green 2011). In the case of body image, this means that participating in activist groups like NAAFA or joining the bear community helps overweight individuals reinterpret/redefine their bodies from unattractive to normal (Gough and Flanders 2009; Saguy and Ward 2011).

This dissertation asks: How do gay men experience and resist sexual orientation stigma and weight stigma? Drawing on theories of stigma and resistance and empirical research on the consequences of body ideals, and subculture dynamics, this dissertation examines broad trends in young gay men’s body image and depression symptoms and how some gay men resist gay and weight stigmas. To do so, I use a mixed methods design to examine stigma at the population and

individual levels. In the quantitative portion that assess population-level trends, I contrast young gay men's body image concerns with those of heterosexual men and investigate whether or not being gay and overweight doubly impacts mental health. This is followed by a qualitative study of individuals who resist stigma through participation in the bear subculture. The bears—described in more detail below—are a community of gay men that idealize bigger, hirsute bodies and resist narrow stereotypes of gay men's bodies and sexuality.

While there is an extant literature about how women make sense of and manage their bodies, we know less about how men, gay men in particular, perceive their own bodies. Psychological researchers have noted that men, in general, are stigmatized for having larger bodies (Hebl and Turchin 2005) and susceptible to cultural influences (e.g.-media representations) of ideal male bodies (Mikalide 1990). Other studies focusing on sexuality and gender have examined the prevalence of eating disorders, and note that gay men are susceptible to negative body image (Herzog, Bradburn, and Newman 1990; Boisvert and Harrell 2009). Additionally, we know less about how gay individuals simultaneously resist stereotypes of being overweight and gay. This dissertation extends the literature by addressing the uniqueness of young men's body image concerns and by analyzing a subculture of gay men who actively reject gay cultural ideals of slender, youthful bodies.

The analytic chapters of the dissertation are organized as follows. In Chapter Two, I analyze two waves of nationally representative data to examine how unique gay males are in their experiences with body image during adolescence and young adulthood. This chapter also investigates the combined effect of weight and sexual orientation in young gay men's depression symptoms. This analysis will extend this literature by assessing with a national sample whether gay male adolescents and young adults are equally vulnerable to ideal body pressures as are heterosexual males, and whether failing to fit mainstream ideals increases gay males' risk for depression.

In Chapter Three, I present a qualitative analysis of the bear subculture's resistance to weight and sexual orientation stigmas. During the late 1960s to the 1980s, the gay community in the U.S. was taking the national stage in the movement toward equal rights. Events like Stonewall riots of 1969, the change in interpretation of homosexuality as psychopathology by its removal from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973, gay pride events, and an unidentifiable virus, named HIV/AIDS in 1982, that was wrecking the gay

community, increased the visibility of the gay community. The gay mainstream of the 1970s was dominated by the “Castro clone” look that emphasized muscular physique, competition amongst gay men, and hypermasculinity (Levine 1998; Wright 1997b). Against this backdrop, the bear subculture grew from a small group of men in San Francisco, California, to a national network with bear groups, pride events, and circulation of bear-themed publications.

The bear subculture is a community of gay men that idealize larger, hirsute, and bearded men in reaction to general gay male culture’s emphasis on youthful, slender bodies. The changes in the gay community throughout the 1970s and 1980s described above aided the growth of the bear community (Wright 1997b). For example, the HIV/AIDS virus affected men’s appearance by rapid weight loss. The slender body that had been idealized in gay culture at the time became associated with illness while a fleshy body was perceived to be healthy and free of HIV/AIDS (Hennen 2005; Wright 1997b). However, the early bears also reacted against the “Castro clone” look and competition and created their own spaces that emphasized a merge of “rough, unkempt masculine iconography with the emotional nurturing lacking in the clone subculture” (Wright 1997b:29). The increase of gay men publicly coming out increased the visibility of other networks of chubby men and their admirers in major American cities and gave the bear community a network of men from which to draw its membership (Suresha 2002).

Currently, the bear subculture is a global community with its own events, branding, and pride flag. On almost every weekend there is a bear pride event or bear-themed gathering in various cities around the world, and most major metropolitan areas have several bear social groups. At bear events, men flaunt their bodies and host bear-themed pageants where men compete for various titles like “Mr. Cub,” and “Mr. International Bear”. The bears also have a presence on the Internet with bear-specific dating sites, media sites, bear-specific photography services, and bear-themed publications like *BEAR* magazine and *A Bear’s Life*. The community’s growth and inclusive nature is also reflected in the veritable “zoo” of labels for body types that range from bear and cub to polar bear, wolf, grizzly, and otter. I have provided a glossary of bear subcultural terms used in this paper in Appendix B.

The bear community is ideal for studying resistance to weight and sexual orientation stigma. The bears are an alternative subculture in the gay community that values huskier and more hirsute bodies (Schwalbe et al. 2000). In short, the community offers a place for men with larger bodies that are not as valued in mainstream gay culture to feel accepted and validated.

The community also prides itself on being the more masculine side of the gay community through resisting stereotypes of effeminacy (Hennen 2008). To study the bears, I collected a geographically diverse sample of life history interviews with men who identified with the bears and analyzed bear-themed media. This analysis provides a contrast to Chapter Two by elucidating how some gay men actively resist the stigmas associated with being overweight and gay. Not explicitly captured in the Chapter Two analysis is the effect of body discrimination that stems from the gay culture itself. Indeed, gay men exist in a gay culture that values certain body types that leave the average bear on the periphery (Green 2011). Evident in the stories from men I interviewed is knowledge of a devalued status within gay culture because of their larger bodies. As a means of transforming their bodies from unattractive to ideal, they join the bear community. This chapter also extends our understanding of how multiple stigmas are experienced and resisted simultaneously. Additionally, this chapter extends scholarship on the bear subculture by examining themes of change in feeling weight and sexual orientation stigma in bears' stories of coming out as gay, coming out as a bear, and their current lives as bears.

In closing, this dissertation contributes to literature on sexuality, stigma, and body image by examining gay men's body image concerns and how some men resist weight and sexual orientation stereotypes. The results of the quantitative analysis demonstrate that overweight gay men are at a greater risk for depression than heterosexual men and normal-weight individuals. This suggests evidence of being doubly stigmatized for being gay and overweight. The qualitative analysis shows how some gay men resist stigmatization through participating in a subculture that appreciates larger bodies and unpacks how weight stigma is experienced for some gay men within gay culture. In Chapter Four, I synthesize these findings and discuss the implications of feeling and resisting stigma more broadly. This chapter also offers suggestions for future research in regards to resistance, sexual orientation, and body image. Finally, this chapter closes by briefly discussing alternate routes of research more relevant to the bear subculture.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE EMOTIONAL COSTS OF WEIGHT AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION STIGMAS

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I examine the relationships among weight, body dissatisfaction, and depression to assess whether young gay men are more susceptible to body dissatisfaction than heterosexual men. Additionally, this chapter investigates the possibility of a combined effect of weight and sexual orientation on young gay men's symptoms of depression. As discussed in Chapter One, the majority of work in this area has focused on women's experiences, yet body ideals are also salient to men and shape their self-perceptions and behaviors. Images of ideal male bodies popular in media put men at risk for internalizing often unobtainable body ideals (Rohlinger 2002). For instance, Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia (2000) noted that a majority of men express dissatisfaction with their bodies.

Being a sexual minority and being overweight are stigmatized attributes in Western culture. Being stigmatized carries negative consequences for individuals via stereotypes, labeling, discrimination, and self-perceptions (Goffman 1963; Link and Phelan 2001; Mead 1934). Additionally, stigma's impact is increased when individuals possess more than one stigmatized attribute (Dowd and Bengston 1978). As evidence of the consequences of stigma, research finds that sexual minorities experience greater isolation from friends and family and greater depression than heterosexual individuals (Meyer 2003; Ueno 2005; 2010) and often, young gay individuals are the target of joking, threats, and violence (Pascoe 2007; Smith 1998). Overweight individuals are typically stereotyped as lazy, lacking self-control, and of lower intelligence (Bordo 1993; Hebl and Turchin 2005; Puhl and Brownell 2001) and, like sexual minorities, experience greater depression and social marginalization (Ge, Elder, Regnerus, and Cox 2001; Frisco, Houle, and Martin 2009). These attributes may compound each other, as gay men experience even greater pressure to match body ideals (Duggan and McCreary 2004; Locke 1997; Saucier and Carion 2008; Yelland and Tiggemen 2003), or overweight individuals in turn, face even greater discrimination if they are gay.

The following analysis examines how young gay men perceive their weight and furthers our understanding of how individuals with multiple disadvantaged statuses experience stigma.

While the studies reviewed in the following sections show a clear link between sexual orientation and body image for gay men in limited samples, no study to date has examined this relationship using nationally representative data. This study also contributes by considering the joint effects of weight and sexual orientation and how weight perceptions might condition the effects of sexual orientation stigma on mental health. Following a review of stigma and the negative consequences of weight satisfaction, I present results from an analysis of two waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. I find that young gay men are different from heterosexual men in their weight perceptions in early adulthood, but not in adolescence. Negative weight perceptions also increase depression symptoms and gay men on average report greater depression symptoms. This suggests that overweight gay men are at a greater risk of depression than heterosexual individuals.

### **Sexual Orientation and Weight Stigmas**

In his classic work on the subject, Erving Goffman (1963:3) defined stigma as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” that disrupts interactions with others. Cultural beliefs about what is normal have the power to label and stereotype those who are perceived as different. A stigmatized attribute can be visible, such as weight or physical disability as well as something that is not readily viewed by others such as sexual orientation or mental illness. Stigma works by distinguishing and labeling human differences and creating and maintaining negative stereotypes regarding an attribute (Link and Phelan 2001). Stigma also has a psychological impact, as labeled individuals are likely to evaluate their own self-worth from the perspective of others (Mead 1934). As a result, labeled individuals experience some kind of status loss via stereotypes and discrimination.

Sexual minorities are at a higher risk of status loss than heterosexual individuals in terms of mental health, social support, and risk of violence. Research in this area has suggested that sexual minorities are stigmatized and encounter stressors that include less family support, internalized homophobia, limited connections with other sexual minorities, and concealing sexual identity (Meyer 2003). As a result, gay men and women experience greater depression symptoms than heterosexual individuals (Ueno 2005; 2010). For example, young sexual minorities experience greater distress, report strained relationships with family, and attend schools where friend groups are primarily heterosexual (Ueno 2005). These individuals are likely to experience greater distress than heterosexual youth due to popularity dynamics in

schools as well (Payne 2007). Payne examined life history interviews with lesbian adolescents in high school and found that popularity in these individuals' stories was associated with being straight. Girls who expressed little or no interest in boys were described as unpopular and outsiders among high school students. Additionally, sexual minorities are often the target of violence, threats, and bullying in their schools (Smith 1998). Informants' described how gay individuals, or those perceived to be gay, in high school were subject to name-calling, isolation from other students, and teachers' complicit role by failing to intervene in bullying. As a result, some gay individuals—especially young gay men—may alter their behavior in public settings to avoid confrontation with others (e.g., avoiding eye contact with others and policing actions in front of others) (Pascoe 2007).

Being overweight or having a large body carries social consequences of stereotyping and discrimination. Weight stereotyping affects the expectations of overweight individuals and socially marginalizes overweight individuals (Hebl and Turchin 2005; Puhl and Brownell 2003; 2006; Puhl and Latner 2007; Rothblum, Miller, and Garbutt 1988). For example, Hebl and Turchin (2005) examined men's evaluation of others' weight and whether or not men stereotype other men for being overweight. Participants were given photographs of thin and overweight male and female bodies and were asked to provide their impression of the people in the photographs (e.g., "How intelligent is this person?" "How good is this person at his/her job?" "How successful is this person with his/her relationships?"). On average, men stereotype men and women for being overweight by rating them significantly worse than the photographs of thin individuals. Rothblum and colleagues (1988) asked individuals to rate job applicants' potential for success in sales with thin and large bodies. Participants rated obese applicants as having low potential for leadership, being likely to have poor hygiene, and not having a professional appearance. Overweight individuals less often rate themselves as being attractive as do thin individuals (Phillips and Hill 1998). In this study, being overweight also decreased girls' chances of being rated as attractive by others. The effect of weight stigma is also evident in average differences in pay between overweight and normal weight people (Pagan and Davila 1997). On average, obese women are more likely to work in low-paying jobs than non-obese women.

In summary, being gay, overweight, or both can pose a wide range of negative experiences due to the stigma associated with these statuses. Those who occupy multiple

disadvantaged or stigmatized statuses suffer greater consequences in terms of mental health, self-perceptions, and general life chances (Dowd and Bengtson 1978). Considering that being gay and overweight bodies are stigmatized statuses, those who possess both attributes may face greater deficits in mental health and self-perceptions than heterosexual and normal weight individuals. Additionally, pressures within the gay community like feedback from peers and images dominant in gay-male targeted publications provide cues for many gay men as to how a normal, ideal male body should look (Drummond 2005; Duncan 2007; Locke 1997).

Referencing one's body to these images is likely to increase general anxieties about the body (Duggan and McCreary 2004). The following section reviews the negative consequences of weight perceptions, feeling stigmatized for being overweight, and evidence of gay cultural ideals for male bodies.

### **The Mental Health Consequences of Body Ideals**

The way individuals perceive their bodies is affected both by physical realities such as weight and social pressures like media and peer groups (Bordo 1993; Wolf 1991). Failing to fit these ideals can have negative consequences for self-perceptions and psychological health. For instance, Boyd and colleagues (2011) used the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to analyze the associations among weight, weight control practices (e.g., dieting, exercise, taking pills), and body image among Asian, black, Hispanic, and white girls. On average, about half of the girls in their study viewed themselves as overweight and three-quarters of the girls were engaged in some kind of weight management routine (e.g., dieting, exercise, using medication).

Ideals of body weight increase the risk of depression for those who are unable to live up to these ideals. For instance, body image becomes salient to adolescent boys and girls during puberty (Ge et al. 2001). On average, girls report more depressive symptoms when they perceived their bodies to be overweight. For boys, the association between perception of weight and depressive symptoms was a little more complicated. For example, a sense of being too heavy increased depression among Anglo boys, while for African American boys, a sense of being overweight is associated with lower depressive symptoms. Additionally, being dissatisfied with weight increases depression in young men and women, net of actual body weight (Frisco et al. 2010).

How weight perceptions and the effect of being unhappy with body size differs among men and women. First, weight dissatisfaction among men is more of a recent phenomenon than among women. Pope and colleagues (2000) reviewed national surveys from *Psychology Today* and found that men's negative body image has increased from fifteen percent of men being dissatisfied with their overall appearance to 43 percent being dissatisfied with their appearance in 1997. Weight dissatisfaction also increased from 35 percent to 52 percent in the same timeframe. In the same surveys, women expressing dissatisfaction increased from about half of women to one-third of women. Body dissatisfaction is much more common among women than men in terms of eating disorders and desire to be underweight as well (Lewinsohn, Seeley, Moerk, and Striegel-Moore 2002) and men tend to experience greater depression symptoms when they perceive themselves to be underweight (Pope et al. 2000). For example, being underweight and feeling that they are underweight increases young men's likelihood of being depressed while for young women, a sense of being overweight increases weight dissatisfaction (Boyd et al. 2011; Frisco et al. 2009; 2010). Men in general stigmatize other overweight men as being less successful in relationships and work (Hebl and Turchin 2005), compare their own muscularity with media images and other men (Jones 2001), and engage in excessive dieting and exercise when they are unhappy with their bodies (Markey and Markey 2005).

Body image carries negative consequences for gay men as well. Research to date has examined eating disorders among gay men and more generally, how gay men evaluate their own and others' bodies in relation to gay culture. Gay men, compared to heterosexual men, are more likely to weigh less, report greater desire to be thin, and be at a higher risk for eating disorders (Beren et al. 1996; Boisvert and Harrell 2009). When compared to women in general, gay men have greater body dissatisfaction and anxiety about showing their bodies than gay women but are similar to heterosexual women in perceiving themselves as overweight (Sevier 1994). Herzog and colleagues (1990) analyzed a clinical sample of gay men and found that these men often desired to be underweight. This work suggests that gay men may be at a similar risk for body image concerns as women and more at risk than heterosexual men, be more likely than heterosexual men to desire to be thinner, and it is likely to be related to body standards in gay culture (Herzog et al. 1990).

Differences in body ideals by sexuality are reflected, and may be perpetuated or reinforced by, media images and feedback from gay peers. The images dominant in gay male-

targeted media are often bodies that are youthful, muscled, skinny, fashionable, and white (Locke 1997; Saucier and Carion 2008). When older and overweight bodies are showcased in these publications, they are typically present in advertisements for weight loss and medical intervention (Locke 1997). Locke theorized that gay men who consume this media are likely to reference their own bodies to these images and experience lowered self-esteem when they feel that they are too overweight or old to fit in with mainstream gay culture. Testing this theory, Duggan and McCreary (2004) compared gay and heterosexual men's consumption of fitness magazines and pornography. Gay men were more likely to view or purchase fitness magazines and pornography than heterosexual men. Greater consumption of fitness magazines was associated with higher scores on scales that tapped the extent which individuals felt anxiety about showing their bodies in public for gay and heterosexual men, while only gay men were impacted by increased consumptions of pornography. Additionally, the frequency of viewing or purchasing pornography increases the likelihood of gay men reporting symptoms of anorexia (Taylor and Goodfriend 2008). Thus, gay men are likely to experience increased depression symptoms as their body size increases and when they report being dissatisfied with their weight.

Similarly, overweight gay men may encounter troubles in finding a sexual partner. Gay men in gay social spaces like bars are often stratified in terms of desirability, appearance, and other traits like age and race (Green 2011; 2008a). Green suggests that gay men internalize cues from gay culture about ideal bodies (e.g., the men who receive the most attention from others and bar decorations that feature men's bodies) and evaluate their own desirability from the perspective of other gay men. Men perceived as less desirable within the setting avoid interacting with those perceived as more desirable, cope with rejection, and manage their bodies (e.g., weight loss, weight-lifting) to achieve a greater level of desirability (Green 2008a; 2011). While the analysis in this chapter does not consider the impact of media and gay culture on gay men's weight perceptions, the effect is more apparent in Chapter Three and is discussed as potentially driving gay men's negative weight perceptions in Chapter Four.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Being a sexual minority and having a large or overweight body are stigmatized characteristics that have consequences for discrimination and mental health. It is likely that being gay and overweight is consequential for men's weight perceptions and mental health. The following analysis examines young gay men's body image concerns with three specific research

questions: First, are young gay men more likely to be dissatisfied with their weight than heterosexual men? The pressures of gay male body ideals, evident in gay-male targeted media, make it likely that young gay men will experience greater body dissatisfaction than heterosexual men. Second, are gay men, at any body size, more dissatisfied with their weight than heterosexual men? As body size increases, individuals are more likely to view themselves negatively in terms of weight (Ge et al. 2001; Pope et al. 2000) and gay men are more likely to hold negative self-perceptions of their weight than heterosexual men and have similar weight perceptions as heterosexual women (Sevier 1994). Finally, the analysis examines how body size and being dissatisfied with weight impacts gay men's risk of depression. Young sexual minorities experience greater deficits in mental health than heterosexual individuals because of strained relationships with family and friends and are unlikely to have a lot of gay friends (Meyer 2003; Ueno 2005). Additionally, weight dissatisfaction is linked to greater depression symptoms and other mental health issues (Herzog et al. 1990; Frisco et al. 2010). It is likely, then, that being gay, overweight, or both will increase depression symptoms.

## DATA AND METHODS

### **National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health**

Data for this chapter come from Wave II and Wave III of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Add Health is a nationally representative data set of students in grades 7-12 during the 1994-95 school year. The original sample includes 80 high schools, along with 52 feeder schools. At sixteen of these schools, all students were asked to participate while about 200 students were sampled from each of the remaining schools. Respondents answered questions about physical health, psychological well-being, friendships, families, neighborhoods, schools, and romantic relationships. School administrators also provided data on school characteristics. Since the initial sample, three in-home follow-up interviews have been collected with the most recent being in 2008.

The goal of analyzing Add Health data is to reveal systematic trends in how young gay men perceive and manage their bodies. Add Health, while initially focusing on adolescence, schooling, and home life, also focuses on respondents' health and self-perceptions. I analyze two waves of data to capture body image and sexual orientation dynamics during adolescence (Wave II) and early adulthood (Wave III). Respondents were 11-23 years old during Wave II and 18-28 years old in Wave III. Analyzing two waves of Add Health captures two points of

time in which most individuals' perceptions of their bodies are changing as they pass through puberty during adolescence and young adulthood (Ge et al. 2001). Additionally, past work has shown that age matters in terms of the relationship between sexual orientation and mental health (Ueno 2010). Sexuality was measured differently across the two waves of data with Wave II measuring romantic behavior and attraction and Wave III measuring respondents' self-identified sexual orientation. Men and women experience weight concerns differently. On average, young men report greater weight concerns when they perceive themselves as underweight while for young women, weight concerns are manifested in perceptions of being overweight (Frisco et. al 2009; 2010). Therefore, the following analysis focuses solely on comparisons between gay and heterosexual men. Analyses that compare gay and heterosexual men and women can be found in the appendix of tables at the end of this chapter. The following describes the key measures used in the analyses.

## **Measures**

**Sexual Orientation.** The key independent variable for this analysis is sexual orientation. Both waves asked a range of questions that tap respondents' sexual attractions. In Wave II, respondents were asked if they have ever been attracted to a male, and separately if they had ever been attracted to a female. Responses to these questions places each respondent in one of four categories: no attraction, attraction to only males, attraction to only females, and attraction to males and females, which is measured following the procedures developed by Ueno (2005). Second, Add Health asked adolescents to report any persons—including their sex—they might have had some kind of romantic relationship with in the past 18 months (e.g.-holding hands, expressing attraction). Responses to these questions place respondents in the same set of categories in the first measure. Respondents' sexual identity was captured by matching respondents' biological sex with responses to these questions and combining both sets of questions into two broad categories: those who report same-sex or both-sex attraction or dating and those who report only opposite sex attraction or dating. In Wave III, participants were asked to identify as either: "100% heterosexual," "mostly heterosexual, but somewhat attracted to people of your own sex," "bisexual—that is, attracted to men and women," "mostly homosexual, but somewhat attracted to people of the opposite sex," "100% homosexual," and "not sexually attracted to either males or females". This measure was collapsed to reflect those who report only or some same-sex identity and those who report an only heterosexual identity. Both ways

of measuring sexual identity have strengths. According to developmental psychologists, adolescent individuals with same-sex attractions are likely still figuring out as to how a gay identity relates to them (Cass 1979; Troiden 1988). The questions in Wave II, then, more accurately tap sexual orientation at this age, as respondents were not asked to label their sexuality.

For the analyses, two possible combinations of gender and sexuality are used: males who report no same-sex attraction, dating, or identity and males who report some or only same-sex attraction, dating, or identity. For ease of interpretation, I refer to these categories as heterosexual men and gay men. Gay men make up less than ten percent of both analytic samples. Among males, 4.97 percent (n=357) and 5.71 percent (n=405) identified as having some same-sex attraction in Wave II and Wave III, respectively. Heterosexual men made up 95 percent (n=6,825) of Wave II and 94.29 percent (n=6,684) of Wave III. Heterosexual men are the reference category in all analyses.

**Depression Symptoms.** The mental health consequences of stigma are assessed using a measure of depressive symptomatology. In addition, I include previous wave depression symptoms as an additional control. Participants were asked to report how frequently the following items were true during the past week: 1) “You were bothered by things that usually bother you,” 2) “You felt that you could not shake off the blues, even with help from your family and your friends,” 3) “You felt that you were just as good as other people,” 4) “You had trouble keeping your mind on what you were doing,” 5) “You felt depressed,” 6) “You felt that you were too tired to do things,” 7) “You enjoyed life,” 8) “You felt sad,” and 9) “You felt that people disliked you”. Possible responses to these items were: never or rarely (coded as 0), sometimes (coded as 1), a lot of the time (coded as 2), and most the time or a lot of the time (coded as 3). Items 4, 8, 11, and 15 were reverse coded. Responses to these were summed to create a scale that ranges 0-27, with higher scores indicating greater depressive symptoms.<sup>1</sup> All depressive symptom scales were adequately reliability (Wave I alpha=0.79; Wave II alpha=0.80; Wave III alpha=0.80).

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<sup>1</sup> Nine items were used to assess depression symptomatology in Wave III while the first two waves of Add Health included an additional ten items. For ease of comparison, I include only the nine items retained in Wave III to construct depression symptoms scales for Waves I and II.

**Actual body weight.** Respondents' weight and height were recorded and converted to the Body Mass Index (BMI) scale. BMI is calculated by using the standard formula: multiplying the quotient of weight in pounds divided by the square of height in inches by 703. To avoid collinearity issues among BMI, sexual orientation, and interaction terms, BMI was mean-centered for the multivariate analysis. The average BMI score is 23.44 in Wave II and 26.67 in Wave III.

**Controls.** Both sets of analyses will control for respondents' race, parents' education (Wave II), years of education (Wave III), and respondents' age.

### **Analytic Strategy**

The results are presented in three sections. The first reports the descriptive data on sexual orientation, weight perceptions, BMI, and depression symptoms from both waves of data (Table 2.1). Bivariate relationships between the sexual orientation categories and weight perceptions, depression, and BMI are investigated. The second portion (Table 2.2) examines sexual orientation/gender differences in weight satisfaction using cross-sectional binary logistic regression models for each wave of data. In these analyses, I estimated three models for both waves of data. Model 1 examines baseline differences between gay and heterosexual men in weight perceptions while Model 2 examines whether or not baseline differences are due to actual weight. The final model included interactions between BMI and sexual orientation to examine whether or not actual weight differences are more consequential for specific sexual orientation groups. These findings are also presented in a graphical format in Figures 2.1 and 2.2, which plot predicted probabilities of being satisfied with weight across the BMI scale for gay and straight men and women.

The third part of the analysis estimates the impact of sexuality, weight status, and body satisfaction on symptoms of depression. I estimated three ordinary least squares regression models for both waves of data that first test for differences in depression symptoms among gay and heterosexual males (Model 1), then add the influences of BMI and weight perceptions (Model 2), and finally test whether weight perception varies by sexual orientation. For all multivariate analyses, I control for differential sampling probabilities among individuals using the Add Health Wave II and Wave III grand sampling weights (Chantala and Tabor 1999). For brevity, I refer to respondents as men, although most Wave II respondents are not adults.

## RESULTS

### **Weight Perceptions and Depression Symptoms by Sexual Orientation**

Table 2.1 presents the percentages and means of the key measures for this analysis for both waves of data. Gay men make up less than ten percent of the sample in both waves of data. Weight perceptions do vary by sexual orientation. Heterosexual men are more likely to be satisfied than dissatisfied with their weight in both waves of data with 57.2 percent and 51.8 percent of heterosexual males being satisfied in Wave II and III, respectively. During adolescence, 56.3 percent of gay males report being satisfied with weight. During young adulthood, gay men are more likely to be dissatisfied with their body weight with 56.2 percent of gay men reporting being dissatisfied with their weight.

As expected, gay men report greater depression symptoms than their heterosexual men. However, both group averages decreased between Wave II and Wave III. Gay men’s depression symptoms decreased from 6.6 to 5.8. Heterosexual men reported a lower average risk of depression in both waves of data with the average score being 5.2 in Wave II and 4.1 in Wave III. The differences in depression symptoms among sexual orientation groups are significant. BMI appears to vary less by sexual orientation among men.

Table 2.1: Percentages and Means of Outcome Measures by Gender-Sexuality Groups

	Wave II		Wave III	
	<i>Gay Men (n=357)</i>	<i>Heterosexual Men (n=6,825)</i>	<i>Gay Men (n=405)</i>	<i>Heterosexual Men (6,684)</i>
Satisfied with Weight	56.3%	57.2%	43.8%	51.8%
Dissatisfied with Weight	43.7%	42.8%	56.2%	48.2%
Depression	6.6	5.2	5.8	4.1
BMI	24.4	24	26.1	26.7

### **Weight Satisfaction, Actual Weight, and Sexual Orientation**

Table 2.2 presents the odds ratios from binary logistic regression models of weight perceptions on sexual orientation and BMI for both waves of data. Model 1 estimated average differences in weight perceptions for all gay men versus heterosexual men while Model 2 added the effect of BMI. Model 3 adds interaction terms between sexual orientation and BMI. In Wave II, gay males are not significantly different from heterosexual men in their odds of seeing themselves as the right weight. In Wave III gay men have 33 percent lower odds of being satisfied with their weight than heterosexual men. As expected, BMI appears to have a general and negative effect on weight perceptions. For each unit increase in BMI, the odds of being satisfied with body weight in Waves II and III decline by seven and ten percent, respectively.

Taken together, the first two models suggest two findings regarding the associations between sexual orientation and weight perceptions. During adolescence, general weight perceptions are not conditioned by sexual orientation.<sup>2</sup> By young adulthood, differences in weight perceptions by sexual orientation emerge. Gay men have greater odds than heterosexual men of being dissatisfied with their weight. Model 2 also confirms that the sexual orientation difference in weight satisfaction is not simply due to physical or body size differences.

How does BMI differently condition the link between sexual orientation and weight perceptions? To answer this question, I included interaction effects between BMI and sexual orientation in Model 3 and estimated predicted probabilities of being satisfied with weight by sexual orientation across the BMI scale (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). The interaction effects for gay men are not significant in either wave, however for women, the effect is significant.

Table 2.2: Binary Logistic Regressions of Weight Satisfaction on Sexual Orientation and BMI among Men; Odds Ratios (standard errors in parentheses); National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Waves II and III

	(1)		(2)		(3)	
<i>Measure</i>	Wave II	Wave III	Wave II	Wave III	Wave II	Wave III
Gay Male (vs. Heterosexual Male)	1.06 (0.19)	0.67** (0.11)	1.05 (0.19)	0.62** (0.11)	1.06 (0.21)	0.62** (0.10)
BMI	---	---	0.93*** (0.01)	0.90*** (0.01)	0.93*** (0.01)	0.90*** (0.01)
Gay Male*BMI	---	---	---	---	0.97 (0.03)	0.99 (0.03)
Race (vs. White)						
Black	1.39** (0.14)	1.27* (0.13)	1.48*** (0.16)	1.30** (0.14)	1.48*** (0.16)	1.30 (0.14)
Hispanic	0.85 (0.14)	0.92 (0.11)	0.87 (0.10)	0.98 (0.12)	0.87 (0.10)	0.98 (0.12)
Asian	0.73 (0.15)	0.83 (0.14)	0.69 (0.14)	0.82 (0.15)	0.70 (0.14)	0.82 (0.15)
Other	0.78 (0.17)	0.62* (0.14)	0.87 (0.19)	0.70 (0.16)	0.87 (0.19)	0.70 (0.16)
Age	0.96 (0.02)	0.96 (0.02)	0.98 (0.23)	0.98 (0.02)	0.98 (0.23)	0.98 (0.02)
Education <sup>a</sup>	1.09 (0.10)	1.01 (0.02)	1.06 (0.94)	1.01 (0.02)	1.06 (0.09)	1.01 (0.02)
Wald chi-square	24.11**	22.54**	131.05***	197.04***	131.21***	202.61***
N	5,213	5,034	5,170	4,836	5,170	4,836

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

a – Education is mother’s education in Wave II and respondents’ years of education in Wave III

<sup>2</sup> Additional analyses in Appendix A that included gay and heterosexual women suggest a similar finding, but also show that differences in weight perceptions among gay and heterosexual individuals are more conditioned by gender.

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 depict the predicted probabilities of being satisfied with body weight as conditioned by BMI, in adolescence (Wave II) and young adulthood (Wave III), respectively. These are based on Model 3 for both waves of data. The red horizontal line indicates the tipping point of where the predicted probability of being satisfied with weight drops below 0.50. One result of this analysis is that gay men’s predicted probability of being satisfied with body weight decreases more dramatically as body size increases than heterosexual men. That is, gay men have a lower BMI threshold for being more likely to be dissatisfied than satisfied with their weight than heterosexual men. For example, in Wave III, gay men’s predicted probability of being satisfied with their weight drops below 0.50 when BMI is around 24. For straight men, the predicted probability drops below .50 when BMI is around 27.5. For a 20-year-old man of average height of 67 inches, this corresponds to a weight difference of almost 20 pounds. The Wave II analysis shows a similar, but not as stark, trend with the BMI threshold for gay men being slightly lower than the threshold for heterosexual men.

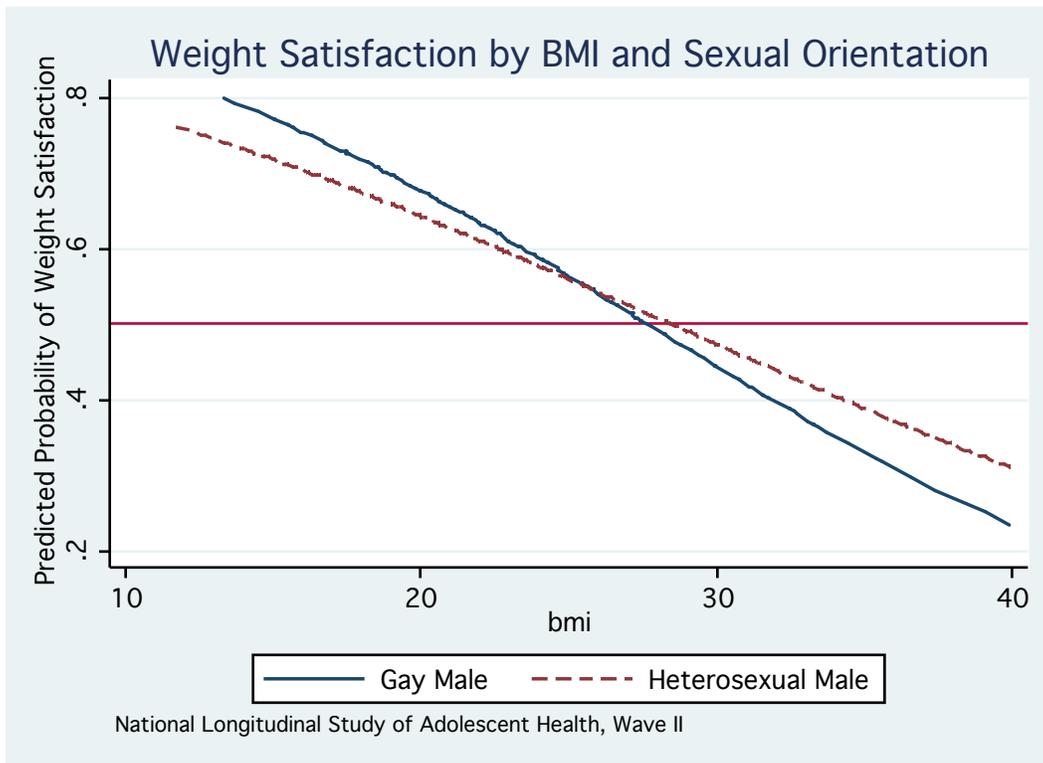


Figure 2.1. Weight Satisfaction by Sexual Orientation/Gender, Wave II

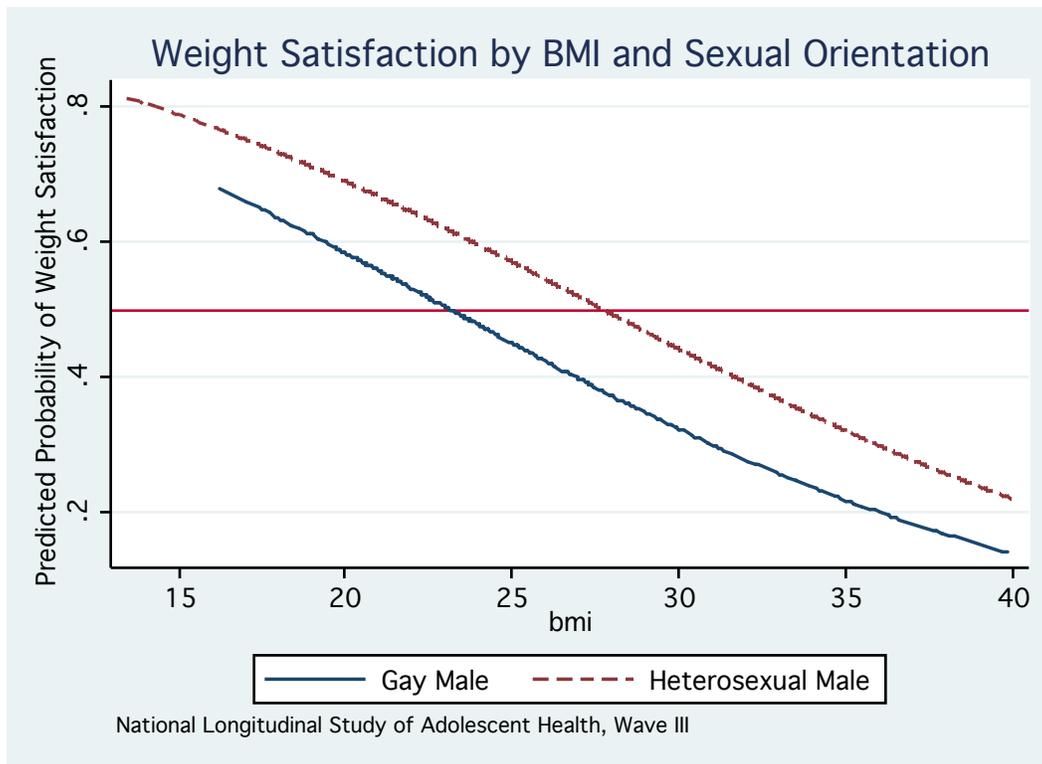


Figure 2.2. Weight Satisfaction by Sexual Orientation/Gender, Wave III

### The Combined Effect of Sexual Orientation, Actual Weight, and Weight Perceptions

In order to assess the combined effect of sexual orientation, weight perceptions, and actual weight, I estimated three ordinary least squares regression models for both waves of data. Model 1 estimated average differences between gay and heterosexual men while Model 2 included the effect of BMI and weight satisfaction. Both models included controls for previous wave depression symptoms. The results of Model 1 show that gay men report greater average depression symptoms than heterosexual men in both waves. Gay men report an average of 0.75 and 1.07 greater depression symptoms than heterosexual men in Wave II and Wave III, respectively. After controlling for BMI and weight satisfaction, gay men's predicted depression symptoms is still significantly greater than heterosexual men. BMI has a significant, but extremely weak and negative effect on depression symptoms in Wave III, largely because weight satisfaction is also in the model and has a strong influence on depression symptoms. Being satisfied with weight is associated with a 0.43 (Wave II) and 0.56 (Wave III) decrease in depression symptoms. The predictors in Model 2 explain 34 percent and 16 percent of the

variance in depression symptoms in Waves II and III, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Weight perceptions explain a small part of the bivariate association between sexual orientation and depression symptoms for gay men Wave III. This suggests that the differences in depression symptoms among sexual orientation groups reflect more factors other than body size and weight satisfaction.

Model 3 examines whether or not weight dissatisfaction leads to greater increases in depression symptoms for gay men. Compared to heterosexual men, weight perceptions do not uniquely impact the link between sexual orientation and depression symptoms for gay men. In sum, weight perceptions, BMI, and sexual orientation impact depression symptoms more generally. While this is not unique to young gay men, it does demonstrate how sexual orientation and weight perceptions affect gay men's depression symptoms negatively, putting overweight gay men at a higher risk of depression.

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<sup>3</sup> The differences in r-squared values between the waves is likely due to the lagged value of depression symptoms between Wave II and III. The Wave II analysis controlled for Wave I depression symptoms, which captured depression one year before Wave II data was collected. The Wave III analysis controlled for Wave II depression symptoms, which captured depression 5-6 years before Wave III data was collected.

Table 2.3: OLS Regression Unstandardized Coefficients (standard errors in parentheses) of Depression Symptoms on Sexual Orientation, Weight Perceptions, and BMI among Men; National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Wave II and III

<i>Measure</i>	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	Wave II	Wave III	Wave II	Wave III	Wave II	Wave III
Gay Male (vs. Heterosexual Male)	0.74* (0.32)	1.09*** (0.31)	0.75* (0.32)	1.07*** (0.32)	0.47 (0.53)	1.15** (0.41)
BMI	---	---	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)
Weight Satisfaction (vs. Dissatisfied with Weight)	---	---	-0.43*** (0.12)	-0.56*** (0.14)	-0.46*** (0.12)	-0.55*** (0.14)
Gay Male*Weight Satisfaction	---	---	---	---	0.46 (0.67)	-0.20 (0.66)
Race (vs. White)						
Black	0.38* (0.15)	0.52** (0.18)	0.42** (0.15)	0.56** (0.19)	0.42** (0.15)	0.56** (0.19)
Hispanic	0.84*** (0.18)	0.44 (0.23)	0.83*** (0.18)	0.52* (0.24)	0.84*** (0.15)	0.52* (0.24)
Asian	0.78** (0.29)	0.64* (0.28)	0.76** (0.29)	0.55 (0.29)	0.76** (0.29)	0.55 (0.29)
Other	0.43 (0.40)	0.25 (0.38)	0.41 (0.40)	0.37 (0.40)	0.41 (0.40)	0.37 (0.41)
Age	0.09* (0.04)	-0.08* (0.04)	0.09* (0.04)	-0.08 (0.04)	0.08* (0.03)	-0.08 (0.04)
Education <sup>a</sup>	-0.22 (0.13)	-0.12** (0.04)	-0.19 (0.13)	-0.12*** (0.04)	-0.19 (0.13)	-0.12*** (0.04)
Previous Wave Depression	0.56*** (0.02)	0.34*** (0.02)	0.56*** (0.02)	0.34*** (0.02)	0.56*** (0.02)	0.34*** (0.02)
Constant	0.51 (0.58)	5.43*** (0.90)	0.81 (0.59)	6.55*** (0.96)	0.83 (0.59)	5.60*** (0.93)
N	5,181	5,002	5,139	4,803	5,139	4,803
R <sup>2</sup>	0.33	0.15	0.34	0.16	0.34	0.16

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

a – Education is mother’s education in Wave II and respondents’ years of education in Wave III

## DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I examined young gay men’s body image concerns and psychological well-being as consequences of weight and sexual orientation stigma. Are young gay men unique from heterosexual men in their weight perceptions? The results of this study demonstrate that general weight perceptions vary by sexual orientation in young adulthood (Wave III). Additional analyses (see additional tables at the end of this chapter) including gay and heterosexual women further demonstrate how sexual orientation, in terms of weight perceptions, matters for men in early adulthood. In Wave II, gay and heterosexual men have similar weight concerns.

One explanation of the difference between Wave II and III results is the difference in age of respondents and the normative changes to the body during adolescence. Most individuals were in their early and middle teenage years: a time at which adolescents are in the midst of or exiting puberty. Weight gains and awareness of body changes increase overweight perceptions

among girls while for boys, there is no clear link between pubertal changes and overweight perceptions (Ge et al. 2001). Researchers suggest that this is the case because boys' increased weight was likely due to building muscle. Additionally, males are more likely to experience negative body image when they perceive themselves as underweight (Frisco et al. 2010). Thus, at this time of life, physical changes associated with puberty may outweigh the effects of being gay on weight perceptions.

By Wave III, respondents were well past puberty and likely to be more developed in terms of sexual identity and awareness of gay culture. Evidence of this, albeit tenuous, is the greater proportion of men admitting to same-sex attraction in Wave III. Psychological theories regarding gay identity development posit that as individuals age, they become more secure in their identities as gay men and women (Cass 1979; Coleman 1982; Troiden 1988). For example, Cass (1979) described several stages of homosexual identity development in which individuals progress from feeling confused as to how a gay identity is relevant to them to later feeling more secure in their gay identity. At the later stages, individuals are likely to be older, have had at least one same-sex romantic relationship, are more integrated with other sexual minorities, out of the closet, and aware of general gay culture (Coleman 1982; Troiden 1988). In turn, greater awareness of gay culture means greater knowledge of ideal bodies in gay media. Therefore, possibly driving the emergence of differences in weight perceptions between gay and heterosexual men is the added pressure from gay culture (Drummond 2005; Duggan and McCreary 2004; Locke 1997). For example, older gay men reference gay cultural standards of appearing youthful and muscled when describing how they manage their appearance (Slevin and Linneman 2010).

Alternately, research examining body image and Cass's (1979) stages of gay identity development suggests that being in a later stage of development predicts positive body image for white gay men while for black gay men, no relationship was observed (Udall-Weiner 2009). While stage of gay identity development was not considered in this study, the general difference between heterosexual and gay men in weight satisfaction suggests that as gay men age, their body image concerns become more associated with sexual orientation. Future research could examine this link more thoroughly by considering contextual factors that mediate the relationships among age, sexual identity development, and experiences with weight stigma.

Gay men in general experience greater psychological distress. According to past research, this is due to being isolated from other sexual minorities, strained familial relationships, threats of violence, and other obstacles (Meyer 2003; Ueno 2005; 2010). Therefore it was not surprising to find that gay men report higher average depression symptoms than heterosexual men. This study considered the possibility of whether or not gay men are more susceptible to weight-related depression. While no significant interaction between sexual orientation and weight perceptions emerged for gay men in the analysis, there was a general and negative effect for weight perceptions and BMI for all individuals. Being dissatisfied with body weight as well as increases in BMI are associated with increases in depression symptoms. The effects of sexual orientation, weight perceptions, and BMI on depression symptoms lend empirical support for the risk of double stigma and puts larger gay men at higher risk for depression.

The evidence of double stigma in this analysis should be interpreted with three cautions in mind. First, weight satisfaction is only one component of how weight stigma could be felt. A range of work examining body image more broadly and shown to have detrimental impacts on well-being include body image scales, perceived weight discrimination, and efforts to lose or gain weight (Boyd et al. 2011; Schafer and Ferraro 2011; Sevier 1994). Future work could improve our understanding of sexual orientation and body image by more thoroughly investigating other components of how weight stigma may be felt among sexual minorities. Second, one of the driving features of how gay men experience body image is through consumption of gay-targeted media and integration with gay culture (Locke 1997). While this may be the case, it was beyond the scope of this data to examine this as a factor affecting weight perceptions. Research employing small samples provides preliminary evidence that integration with gay culture is related to a desire to be thin, despite actual weight, and high rates of eating disorders among gay men (Beren et al. 1996; Herzog et al. 1990). Finally, I coded weight perceptions to reflect those who were satisfied with their weight versus those who were dissatisfied. This was due to low cell sizes when estimating the regression models. A more accurate picture of gay men's body image would include a measure that reflected overweight and underweight perceptions, as research using smaller samples has shown that gay men are more likely than heterosexual men to desire to be small (Beren et al. 1996).

Having a larger body and being gay are two attributes that are stigmatized in Western culture. This study has sought to provide initial evidence of the combined experience of weight

and sexual orientation stigma. The results suggest that being gay and overweight doubly affect mental health and self-perceptions of weight. However, these results leave two important questions unanswered: First, if overweight gay men, compared to average or underweight gay men, face a heightened risk of depression, then how do cues from gay culture impact self-perceptions and increase weight stigma's effect? It is likely that gay men evaluate their own desirability in comparison to both images of ideal bodies in gay media and those who receive the most attention in gay culture (Green 2011). Second, if overweight gay men are subordinated by weight and sexual orientation stigmas, what options do they have for coping with and resisting stigma? Indeed, subordinated groups are not passive in their experience of inequality via stereotypes (Thoits 2011). In some cases, individuals may resist or adapt to stigma by creating alternative subcultures with their own forms of power and prestige (Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir 2000; Thoits 2011). To answer both of these questions, I next present a case of study of the bear subculture.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### “GROW THE BEARD, WEAR THE COSTUME AND YOU’LL FIT IN”: RESISTING WEIGHT AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION STIGMAS IN THE BEAR SUBCULTURE

#### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I examine the processes through which some gay men experience and resist stigmatization due to weight and gay stereotypes. Stigmatized individuals are affected by cultural assumptions of abnormality through labeling, stereotyping, and discrimination (Goffman 1963; Link and Phelan 2001). Gay men experience the effects of stigma via, threat of violence, pressure to stay in the closet, and stereotypes associated with gay sexuality. Similarly, being visibly overweight lowers status through stereotypes of overweight people in the media and everyday life. As a result, overweight gay men are likely to hold negative self-perceptions by evaluating their own value from the perspective of other gay men and broader culture (Green 2011; Mead 1934). Much research on the experience of stigma has focused on the detrimental effects of stigma and coping with stigma (Feagin 1991; Lapinski, Braz, and Maloney 2010; Yeung, Stombler, and Wharton 2006) while other studies have examined the active resistance of stigma (Pyle and Klein 2011) and how resistance increases self-esteem and feelings of empowerment (Saguy and Ward 2011; Shih 2004; Snow and Anderson 1987). This study uses the bear subculture to consider both the experience of and the resistance to weight and sexual orientation stigmas. Through participating in an alternative subculture with its own ideals of body size and what it means to be a masculine gay man, the bears are able to define larger bodies as attractive and resist stereotypes of gay sexuality (Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir 2000).

The bears are a community of gay men with roots in San Francisco, California in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As an evolution of the hypermasculine “Castro clone” look with emphasis on physique, the bears formed around more relaxed, “authentically masculine” attitudes and bodies (Wright 1997b). At the same time, the HIV/AIDS pandemic was beginning to overwhelm the gay community. Individuals living with the disease at the time lost a lot of weight and fleshy bodies in the gay community were viewed as not infected (Wright 1997b).

The average bear since then is a gay man with extra weight, a hirsute body, facial hair, and a costume of jeans, flannel, baseball caps, and t-shirts. Since the initial years, the group has become a global community of men who idealize larger bodies through bear pride events, bear social groups, bear-themed media, and bear dating websites. The subculture is a unique segment of the gay community because of their appreciation of larger bodies, resistance to effeminacy (Hennen 2005), and emphasis on appearing masculine.

The bear community provides a space for overweight gay men to resist stereotypes of being overweight and gay. According to Thoits (2011), stigma resistance is accomplished through deflecting and challenging stereotypes placed on individuals. Specific strategies include confronting inaccurate stereotypes, downplaying stigmatized attributes, defining stigmatized attributes as less discrediting, and joining social and activist groups. Alternative subcultures like the bears arise when subordinated groups create their own forms of power and prestige (Schwalbe et al. 2000) and act as a source of validation and social support for group members (Thoits 2011). The bears have done so by affirming bigger bodies as ideal, attractive, and most desirable (Schwalbe and Schrock 1996), as well as emphasizing a “regular guy” masculinity that contradicts the stigma of effeminate gay sexuality (Wright 1997b).

How do bears’ resist negative stereotypes of gay sexuality and weight? In this chapter, I interpret bear narratives in bear-themed media and interviews with members of the subculture as telling a story of experiencing and resisting stigma. I first review how stigma’s effects are felt in everyday life, and how subordinated individuals do resistance. This is followed by an introduction to the bear subculture by reviewing the history of the community and how the bears have actively fought weight and gay stigmas. The analysis focuses on the changing nature of weight and sexuality perceptions as men recounted their stories of coming out as gay, coming out as a bear, and life as a bear. For ease of interpretation, I separated the analysis into two sections that analyze weight and sexual orientation stigmas separately. In reality, these experiences were often intertwined with each other in the data. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of bears resisting stigma in relation to increasing self-esteem, social change, and broader processes of resisting multiple stigmas.

### **Stigma in Everyday Life**

Stigma is a pervasive force in society. Individuals who possess stigmatized attributes face some kind of status loss through stereotyping, grouping, and negative self-perceptions

(Goffman 1963; Link and Phelan 2001; Mead 1934). Stigmatized individuals are often affected through strained interactions with others, being aware they are stigmatized and the risk of fulfilling stereotypes, and discrimination. For example, Feagin (1991) interviewed middle-class black individuals about experiences with race-based discrimination. Interviewees recounted instances of being denied service at restaurants, white individuals crossing the street to avoid them, and unfair treatment from white authority figures. They also described the pressure to not confront discriminators in order to avoid further mistreatment. Feagin (1991:107) attributed these stories as being tied to the “omnipresence of the stigma of being black”.

Western culture places a high value on smaller, more toned bodies and failing to fit these ideals impacts individuals’ self-esteem and health. Because body size is something that is not easily hidden, overweight individuals must contend with stereotypes about their character. These stereotypes include having low self-control, being lazy, and having low intelligence (Bordo 1993; Hebl and Turchin 2005). Advertising often draws on these widespread stereotypes of overweight individuals to sell weight loss products (Blaine and McElroy 2002). Researchers observed that weight loss infomercials often constructed overweight individuals as unattractive and personally responsible for their weight.

For gay men, weight stigma may be even more pervasive in gay culture with a high impact men’s self-perceptions. Gough and Flanders (2009) interviewed gay men who identify as bears and were considered obese by Body Mass Index (BMI) standards. Men in this study expressed opposition toward the legitimacy of BMI standards and being labeled as sick because of their weight. Feedback from gay peers also contributes to feeling weight stigma and efforts to maintain a muscled body (Duncan 2007) and engage efforts to appear youthful (Slevin and Linneman 2010). For example, Duncan (2007) interviewed gay men about how they managed their bodies within gay and heterosexual culture. Men’s narratives in this study revealed that some gay men feel pressure from other gay men to maintain a muscled and lean physique in order to attract other gay men’s attention. Within in gay social spaces like gay bars, attractiveness and having a desirable body plays a role in men’s chances of obtaining a sexual partner (Green 2011). Green (2011; 2008b) notes that often there is a social order organized by attractiveness and affect and those without the ideal bodies either undertake great lengths to make themselves more attractive to other gay men or cope with rejection from other gay men.

Being gay, while not being a visible like body weight, is stigmatized through stereotyping and discrimination. Sexual minorities are more likely than heterosexual individuals to experience social isolation from family and friends, discrimination, and threat of violence (Meyer 2003; Pascoe 2007; Ueno 2005). For example, Pascoe's (2007) ethnography of masculinity in high school describes how young gay men feel pressure to alter their actions (e.g., walking with a lowered gaze and policing feminine actions) in order to avoid bullying and violence from other men. Research on men on the down low—men who engage in same-sex sexual relationships but outwardly live a heterosexual lifestyle—reveals that one driving force behind this phenomenon is the risk of social stigma (Lapinski et al. 2010). Lapinski and colleagues interviewed men about their motivations to cover their same-sex sexual activity. Men described the risk of being stereotyped as effeminate, having gay hobbies, and being overly emotional contributed to their choice to remain on the down low. Similarly, social stigma also pressures gay men to downplay their sexual orientation to avoid discrimination. Men interviewed by Lapinski and colleagues (2010) described a fear of being cut off from church friends and families if they came out. Additionally, Connell's (1992) analysis of life history interviews of gay men reveals that some men remain in the closet to avoid challenges to their masculinity or protect their high status jobs. Work examining gay fraternities also describes the contextual pressures of social stigma that gay men feel (Yeung et al. 2006). Members discussed the difference in how they policed their actions within the safe space of their fraternity and at campus-wide events. Within their fraternities, they felt more comfortable engaging in stereotypical gay behaviors while at campus-wide events, they discussed having to “tone it down” in order to for their fraternity to be viewed as legitimate on campus. The stigmas of being gay, overweight, or both impacts individuals' self-perceptions and chances of being treated equally. Additionally, stigmatized individuals may be more likely to monitor behavior to make their bodies more acceptable and avoid fulfilling stereotypes of being gay.

### **Resisting Stigma**

While social stigma carries consequences of decreased life chances and everyday discrimination, social scientists have noted that subordinated individuals are not completely passive in their experience of stigma. Some stereotyped populations manage to reduce the negative effects of stigma through resistance. Indeed, resistance is not only a way to cope with stigma, but also a means for subordinated individuals to feel more empowered (Shih 2004).

Thoits (2011) defined stigma resistance as opposition toward the imposition of stereotypes. Individuals resisting stigma likely have felt devalued for possessing a stigmatized attribute, namely lowered self-esteem and discrimination (Corrigan and Watson 2002). Thoits (2011) further defined stigma resistance by elucidating two strategies: deflecting and challenging. Deflecting strategies are best described as stigmatized individuals deciding that stereotypes are “inapplicable to themselves—as ‘not me,’” or that the stigmatized attribute is only a small part of their identities (Thoits 2011:13). In interviews with homeless individuals, some participants sought to distance themselves from others who embodied stereotypes of homelessness (Snow and Anderson 1987). For example, homeless individuals who had been that way for a short amount of time often described their homelessness as temporary and unlike other individuals who had been homeless a lot longer.

Challenging strategies include stigmatized individuals attempting to change how others think about the stigmatized attribute. While challengers are similar to deflectors in the belief that stereotypes do not represent them, they further claim that the stereotype does not apply because it is wrong (Thoits 2011). These individuals view the stereotype as not accurately describing them because the stereotype is flawed from the start. Challenging takes the form of aligning one’s actions with mainstream norms in order to not fulfill stereotypes, educating others about the stigmatized attribute and confronting others on erroneous stereotypes, and joining activist groups that provide both social support and legitimization of their anger toward the stereotype (Thoits 2011). For example, fat rights activist groups like the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) provide online forums, conferences, and social support for individuals to “come out as fat” (Saguy and Ward 2011). NAAFA members challenge weight stigma by questioning stereotypes of large bodies, providing various educational resources on the Internet about health at every body size, and legitimate outrage about weight discrimination.

Resisting stigma has varying outcomes for stereotyped individuals. Resistance through coping is a means for stigmatized individuals to prevent discrimination (Shih 2004). Coping can be depleting on individuals’ resources, as it often involves confronting stereotypes, educating others, and monitoring actions to avoid fulfilling stereotypes. Alternatively, coping can also bring gains in self-esteem and empowerment by taking control of the stereotypes and perceiving stigma as rooted in other people’s prejudices (Thoits 2011). Resisting stigma may be consequential for reinforcing negative stereotypes and meanings. When subordinated groups of

individuals deflect stereotypes, they may engage in defensive othering by pointing out the differences between themselves and other stigmatized individuals (Schwalbe et al. 2000). For example, the recently homeless individuals in Snow and Anderson's (1987) study did so by claiming they were more motivated to end their homelessness than people who had been homeless for a longer period of time. Finally, resisting stigma is a resource that may prepare individuals to resist later stigma (Thoits 2011). Resistance strategies are likely adaptable and a person who has resisted a previous stigma—such as being gay—can transfer the skills they learned to fighting a future stigma—such as weight in the gay community.

Social groups are useful for changing others' and self-perceptions about stigmatized attributes. Qualitative work has been especially useful for describing the social processes by which stigmatized individuals collectively challenge stigma. Schwalbe and colleagues (2000) reviewed qualitative work on inequality and identified several generic social processes by which social stratification is maintained and challenged. In particular, subordinate adaptation through forming alternative subcultures is a means of resisting stigma. This strategy entails subordinated individuals reacting to conditions imposed on them by dominant groups by creating their own forms of prestige, power, and hierarchy (Schwalbe et al. 2000). For example, Willis's (1977) ethnography of working class boys revealed how that some males perceived their chances of getting ahead through the educational system as nonexistent. But, instead of "unquestioningly taking on the worst jobs," the "lads" that Willis interviewed recast school and white collar work as undesirable. They saw as their likely futures—working in factories like their uncles and fathers—as ideal and more masculine.

The bear subculture and members of the fat pride movement provide compelling examples of how forming an alternative subculture challenges cultural ideals of sexual orientation and weight. There are networks of chubby gay men and their admirers (Suresha 2002) and fat pride movements and publications have attempted to recast marginalized fat bodies from deviant and stigmatized to normal and more ideal (Gimlin 2002; Saguy and Ward 2011; Snider 2009). Groups such as the bears also maintain their distinction from other groups by affirming larger bodies and defining bears as not stereotypically gay (Hennen 2005; Schwalbe and Schrock 1996). The subculture offers a resource for resisting weight and sexuality stigmas. The subculture values larger, hirsute bodies that are more relaxed and perceived as less effeminate than the average gay man. The bears have thereby challenged stereotypes of

overweight bodies as lazy, unattractive and gay men as overly effeminate (Hennen 2008; Gough and Flanders 2009; Pyle and Klein 2011). In the following section, I provide a brief history of the bear subculture and review how resistance has always been a part of the subculture's history.

### **A Bear's History**

The late 1970s and early 1980s—after the Stonewall riots of 1969 and start of the gay rights movement—brought about the formation of the bear community. Before this time period, the term “bear” for gay men was more obscure, without any media outlets or clubs for self-identified bears. Bear historian, Les K. Wright, describes the early bears as a minority group in the gay community who appreciated more traditional masculine traits and hobbies (e.g., watching football and playing cards). He cites an article in the *Advocate*, July 26, 1979 titled “Who’s Who in the Zoo: A Glossary of Gay Animals” that described bears as being furry, enjoying beer and cuddling, having large chests reminiscent of ex-football players, and requiring little exercise to keep their distinct body type (Wright 1997b). At this time, the “Castro clone” look of masculine attire (e.g., uniforms and clothing that showed off physique) dominated the gay mainstream. The “clone” look also emphasized competition and cliques amongst gay men (Levine 1998). As a result, the early bears formed their community around more relaxed bodies, appreciating a “regular-guy” masculinity, and segmented themselves from general gay culture by substituting the color-coded hankies that signified interests in specific sexual practices used in gay clubs with miniature teddy bears in shirt pockets (Wright 1990; 1997b). The early (and current) bear look consisted of jeans, baseball caps, beards, flannel, t-shirts, larger bodies, and facial and body hair.

Other social trends in the 1980s assisted the growth of the bear community. First, the HIV/AIDS pandemic devastated the gay community. The HIV/AIDS virus affected the body by rapid weight loss and skinnier gay men became associated with HIV/AIDS. The increased concern of catching the illness and the association of thin bodies with HIV/AIDS contributed to the increase of men's attraction to the bear community. Larger and fleshier bodies became associated with strength and good health (Hennen 2005). In addition, Girth and Mirth chapters—groups of men who celebrated larger bodies—provided an already established network of larger gay men and their admirers from which the bears could draw membership (Suresha 2002).

By the late 1980s, the bear community (bears and their admirers) in San Francisco was more firmly established, as evidenced in specialized media such as *BEAR* magazine and bear-themed sexual play parties, also known as “Bear Hug” parties (Wright 1997a). The heightened visibility of bears via these outlets contributed to men identifying as bears across the country throughout the late 1980s and 1990s (Wright 1997b), and resulted in the formation of a variety of bear social groups, bear pride events, more bear magazines and electronic media, and the occasional bear model in mainstream gay publications.

Despite the rise in the number of men identifying as bears and the subculture’s spread throughout the nation during the 1980s and 1990s, the subculture maintained a low profile in gay themed media. A content analysis of gay-targeted magazines published in the mid-1990s, including *The Advocate*, *Out*, *Genre*, and a range of erotic magazines shows the relative invisibility of bears and bear bodies during that time (Locke 1997). In his study Locke concluded that these magazines are biased toward clean-shaven, smooth and thin bodies. The few instances in which men with facial and body hair and larger bodies appeared in the magazines were typically presented in a negative way. For example, advertisements featuring men with beards were depicted as dealing with health issues. Other examples include an image of a husky, hairy body, as an advertisement for liposuction while a picture featuring a man with gray hair accompanied a hair-coloring advertisement. These images suggest that larger, older, hairier body is a sign of low self-control and something to be corrected (Bordo 1993).

However, groups in the gay community who do not fit the images in mainstream gay media are not completely passive in their experience of weight stigma. Individuals have the power to create their own forms of media and spaces that resist old ideals and praise alternative standards when the mainstream market does not represent their interests or needs (Locke 1997; Wolf 1991). The bear subculture has been successful in formulating standards of beauty for themselves by creating alternative media that celebrate bear bodies and challenge stereotypes of ideal male bodies (Pyle and Klein 2011). Locke also analyzed three bear-oriented magazines: *BEAR*, *Daddybear*, and *American Bear*. These publications celebrate the larger, hairier, and older bodies more, relative to the mainstream gay media. The average bear body is presented as large and having facial hair. In addition, the bear body is presented as wearing jeans, flannel, t-shirts, and almost always a baseball cap, which reinforced the “authentic” bear look. The only occurrences of skinny, less hairy men in these publications are in the personal advertisements.

Resistance toward weight stigma is evident in other comparisons of gay publications and bear media. McCann (2001) compared erotica from mainstream gay publications and bear publications. Results from this analysis reveal that mainstream gay erotica are less likely to explicitly describe parts of the bear body (e.g., large bellies) and facial hair than the bear publications. When analyzing a variety of bear pornographic magazines, researchers also find a sharp contrast between the muscled, “unobtainable” bodies in mainstream gay pornography and the “fuzzy, countrified” images in bear pornography (Kelly and Kane 2001, 330). Other scholars have examined mainstream media and the production of fat-positive media (Whitesel 2007). Fat-positive, gay-targeted advertising is another way subordinate groups produce their own media by reworking popular media. In addition, analyses of “fat friendly” websites revealed that men of this group also construct the bigger body as more relaxed and masculine (Monaghan 2005).

The bear subculture often describes itself as being more masculine than the rest of the gay community. Gay men, by their sexual orientation, experience status loss via stereotypes of gay sexuality. Schippers (2007) theorized that when men experience some challenge to or loss of masculinity, they will seek out labels or groups that compensate for that loss. This seems to apply quite well to the bears. Men who identify as bears link their distaste for general gay culture and the stereotypes associated with being gay to their interest in the bear community (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 2007). The “bear” label gives men a chance to feel more masculine as gay men and avoid gay stereotypes. This resistance was confirmed by Hennen’s (2005) ethnography of a bear group and comparative study with other alternative gay subcultures (2008). Through reframing other gay men as too effeminate and overly concerned with skinny bodies, the men in Hennen’s study were able to define themselves as masculine gay men.

Overweight gay men encounter not only stereotypes of being gay, but also the effects of weight stigma. The bear community offers a place for men to feel some acceptance of their bigger bodies and to feel more comfortable as masculine gay men. For example, many bear events celebrate larger bodies by including bear body pageants in which participants compete for titles such as “Mr. International Bear,” or “Bear Bust Cub,” as well as providing places for men to show off their bigger and hairier bodies. More broadly, the bears are an alternative subculture aimed at resisting weight and sexual orientation stereotypes through creating alternative body ideals (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

The following analysis examines how weight and gay stigma are resisted in the bear community. A growing literature on the bears, body image, and masculinity has examined how the subculture is a resource for some gay men to feel more comfortable as larger, masculine men. However, one issue that has remained unaddressed is how previous experience in general gay culture contributes to men identifying as bears. Additionally, I examine how weight and sexual orientation stigmas take on new meanings after discovering the bear community. Becoming a bear is way to resist stigma, but it does not mean that individuals completely bypass feeling the effects of stigma afterward. The growth of the community as more inclusive has brought about new issues of weight and gay stigma such as not feeling big or muscular enough and managing the body to appear more masculine. Second, this study examines the bear subculture using Thoits' (2011) conception of stigma resistance and provides empirical evidence of how multiple stigmas are simultaneously resisted using a range of deflecting and challenging strategies.

## DATA AND METHODS

### **Content Analysis**

Data for this study comes from two sources: a content analysis of bear-themed media and life history interviews with self-identified bears. For the content analysis portion I chose *A Bear's Life* magazine. Published quarterly since fall 2005, *A Bear's Life* magazine has gone from 33 pages in its initial issue and available only through mail order to 58 pages and both available online and bookstores by the summer 2010 issue. The analysis covers all twenty issues published between fall 2005 and summer 2010. Article topics include home decorating, exercise and fitness, the media, interviews with celebrities, a range of recipes, and event planning. The magazine features regular columnists, guest authors, and community spotlight interviews with prominent bears and gay rights advocates. Most relevant to this analysis are a range of articles written by members of the bear community about the bear body and personal views of what it means to be a bear. In these articles, men often write about their bodies, feelings before and after they found the bears, and feeling comfortable as gay men. Because the topics are written from the standpoint of men in the community, as well as how they discuss how they discovered the bears, the magazine is ideal for studying how bears make sense of their bodies and sexuality.

Content analysis is a useful method for studying weight and sexual orientation stigma in the bear community for two reasons. First, as past studies of bear media have noted, bear media provide an added resource for men of this subculture to affirm their own bodies. Second, most

research that examines bear media has been limited to pornographic publications. Analyzing a lifestyle magazine where the body is not the complete focus allows for observation of how the bear body is more subtly implicated in sexual identity, creating a bear identity, and adds to empirical studies of bear media.

The analysis began with an open coding scheme of every article in each issue of the magazine through summer 2010. For each article, I wrote a memo about how and if the author talked about the bear body and what it means to be a bear. Roughly 10-20 articles per issue addressed the topic of being a bear or referenced bear bodies and ranged from one paragraph to three pages in length. Following Charmaz (2006), I continuously wrote memos as I analyzed each article. I also wrote extended memos about the themes I observed in the text and pictures after every year of issues. From these memos, I identified codes as to how bear bodies and identities are constructed. These codes include idealizing the bigger body, body boundaries between bears and non-bears, what it means to be a masculine bear, life before and after discovering the bear community, and the various labels for bear bodies (e.g., cub, otter, wolf).

### **Life History Interviews**

In order to further understand stigma resistance in the bear subculture, I collected 21 semi-structured life history interviews with members of the bear community. I began by drawing a snowball sample of eleven men from the U.S. South and Midwest through contacts I had in the subculture. Following an initial analysis of those interviews, I drew a second snowball sample of ten men who were residing in the San Francisco Bay Area, California. Combining both samples provides geographic diversity and allows me to capture a more complete cross-section of the bear subculture. Men living in the South were also more likely to somewhat be in the closet to protect their familial relationships and against violence while men residing in the San Francisco Bay Area were more likely to be completely out and have little or no fear of being ostracized for being gay. Finally, because the bear subculture has roots in the Bay Area, these men's perspectives also provided a greater understanding about the initial years of the subculture and how the community has changed over the past three decades.

The men in my sample have ages that range from 23 to 55 with most men being in their forties. In regards to race, four men identified as black, two men identified as Latino, and fifteen men identified as white. Men's involvement with the bear subculture was varied. At the time of their interview, some men had only known about the subculture for less than a year, others had

known about it for five or more years, and one had known about it his entire life. Additionally, some men’s involvement with the community was mostly for dating and social networks while other men were deeply involved in forming bear social groups, planning bear-themed events, and offering specialized services to the bear community. Seventeen men of the sample participated in their interviews alone. Two interviews were conducted as couple interviews with the original respondent and his partner. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Most interviews ranged from 1 hour to 3 hours in length with one interview lasting a half hour. A complete description of the sample can be found in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1: Interviewed Subjects, by Demographic Characteristics**

Pseudonym	Location	Age	Race	Interview Type
Tracy	South	45	White	Individual
Frank	South	48	White	Individual
Dennis	South	23	White	Individual
Silas	South	55	White	Individual
Brian	South	33	White	Individual
Mac	South	46	White	Individual
Shane	South	27	Black	Individual
Charlie	South	29	Black	Individual
Kevin	South	45	Black	Individual
Kenneth	South	41	Black	Individual
Andy	Midwest	27	White	Individual
Chris	Bay Area	42	White	Individual
Ron	Bay Area	40	White	Individual
Jordan	Bay Area	47	White	Individual
Perry	Bay Area	46	White	Individual
Spencer	Bay Area	44	White	Individual
Tom	Bay Area	40	Latino	Individual
Elliot	Bay Area	45	White	Couple #1
Shawn	Bay Area	40	White	Couple #1
Aaron	Bay Area	50	Latino	Couple #2
Derrick	Bay Area	35	White	Couple #2

My interview guide included themes of coming out, discovering the bear subculture, life before and after becoming a bear, masculinity, and body image before and after becoming a bear (see Appendix C). I focused on themes from the content analysis and by previous qualitative and ethnographic studies of bears and bear bodies by (Gough and Flanders 2009), Hennen (2005; 2008), and Monaghan (2005). I asked men to discuss their own coming out stories and how they discovered the bear community. Other topics included: their involvement with bear social groups and bear events, descriptions of bear bodies and what it means to be a bear, knowledge and explanation of the labels associated with the bear body, their experiences with the bear body, how they feel about their own bodies, their peer groups, and feeling stigmatized and discriminated against for being gay. In general, men were asked to tell their stories about coming out before knowing about the bears, how they discovered the bears, and their lives as

bears. I treat the magazine articles and interviews as equivalent forms of data. As opposed to presenting each separately, I present a combined analysis of both in this study.

### **Analytic Strategy: Narrative Analysis**

Individuals often achieve a coherent sense of self through narrating a reconstructed past. That is, individuals create narratives that allow them to group diverse life experiences into a meaningful whole as well as make sense of their present, past, and future selves (McAdams 1996). While narratives most often appear to be personal, individuals often draw upon others' or cultural narratives to help make sense of their selves (Loseke 2007). For instance, a study of preoperative male-to-female transsexuals shows that individuals collectively constructed a transsexual narrative in a support group (Mason-Schrock 1996). Individuals in the group drew on past experiences of trying on women's clothing as proof that they had always been transsexuals. Ponticelli's (1999) study of ex-lesbians' reconstruction of sexual identity in an ex-gay ministry also points to how narratives can be collectively constructed, as well as the importance of discourse. In this study, ex-lesbians were encouraged to reinterpret their sexual pasts in the frame of Christian psychoanalytic theory by replacing terms like "lesbianism" with "lesbian tendencies" and inferring causal explanations for their deviant sexual pasts (e.g., absent parents). Many bears coming out stories share several themes of the body and masculinity with the themes present in the magazines I analyzed. Therefore, I approached both the content analysis as telling a bear cultural narrative and interviews as telling a personal bear narrative.

Narrative analysis is especially useful for this study for several reasons. First, analyzing how men talk or write about their own and others' bodies, as well as sexuality, allow for an analysis of how men of this subculture experience weight and sexual orientation stigma before and after encountering the bear community. That is, the analysis will consider men's experience embedded within a larger context of racial, class, gender, and sexuality inequality (Calasanti 1996). Slevin and Linneman (2010) conducted a similar narrative analysis of older gay men. In their study, men talked about their experiences of being stigmatized for being old within the gay community as well as how they came to accept their own aging bodies in an ageist and body-obsessed gay culture. Along the same lines, overweight gay men who later identify as bears form their coming out stories around negative body image via gay culture, stereotypes of gay sexuality, and what they have done to cope with these anxieties.

Second, narrative analysis is useful to investigate how men interpret their bodies and coming out stories simultaneously. In *A Bear's Life* magazine stories and interviews, men often use their bodies to frame an additional phase of coming out as a bear. For example, men often talk about feeling rejected or alienated from mainstream gay culture because of their bigger bodies and from heterosexuals because of their sexuality. Discovery of the “bear” label is often used as a turning point for reinterpreting their own status within the gay community and among heterosexuals. Third, narratives collected by purposive sampling are especially useful for studying hidden populations that may be reluctant to reveal personal characteristics. For example, past research of older gay men and women revealed that a narrative format is especially useful for recruiting participants, as it is a place where people can share their stories in a judgment-free context (Slevin 2010). Finally, narrative analysis is useful for examining the correspondence between the personal narratives in the interviews and the bear cultural narratives in the magazine (Loseke 2007).

In Chapter Two, it was noted that many gay men experience negative consequences of weight and sexual orientation stigma. These include lowered self-perceptions and heightened risk of depression. But subordinated individuals are not completely passive in their experience of stigma and have the power to resist stigma and create their own forms of prestige (Schwalbe et al. 2000; Thoits 2011). Keeping that in mind, I approached the data by asking three questions about how individuals are constructing their own narratives around being a bear: 1) How are body image issues and gay stereotypes evident in the articles and interviews? 2) Do individuals feel stigmatized for being overweight and gay? and 3) How is becoming a bear useful for coping with body image and resisting stereotypes of gay sexuality?

#### ANALYSIS

The following analysis examines how becoming a bear is a means to resist both weight and sexual orientation stigmas and is organized into two sections accordingly. As gay men who perceive themselves as overweight, men’s life stories and writers’ narratives describe feeling inferior in relation to gay culture, for their weight, and in relation to the broader culture, for their sexual orientation, before discovering the bear community. In the first section, I explore how becoming a bear is a resource for many men to transform feelings of body shame to feelings of acceptance. In short, becoming a bear is way to resist weight stigma. For many men, coming out as gay and coming out as a bear are separate events. Wright (1997a, 6) described the process

of coming out for bears as men claiming an identity that is consistent with how they feel—or as he puts it: “For many bears, coming out as a bear represents a major step, from mimesis (‘acting myself’) to authenticity (‘being myself’).” The data analyzed in this study suggests a similar process of men using the bear identity as representative of how they feel about their own and others’ bodies. Articles in the magazine and interviewees described having gone through a time when they did not know about the bears, versus their lives after they found the subculture. In the former, men discussed feeling unattractive and hiding their sexual attraction to bigger bodies. Following some time of alienation, men discover the bear community and feel more validated in their bodies and not judged for being attracted to larger men.

Additionally, becoming a bear is how some gay men to reclaim their masculinity (Hennen 2005; Schippers 2007). In the second half of the analysis I explore how becoming a bear is also a way to resist stereotypes of gay sexuality. This analysis shows how men’s bodies are tied to coming out and forming a gay identity. Many men discussed feeling resistant toward being gay because they did not want to be perceived as overly effeminate or fit stereotypes often placed on gay men. But as they moved into the bear community, they often felt surprised and relieved that there was a subculture of gay men who appreciated “more masculine” traits and activities and more relaxed and average bodies than the mainstream gay culture.

### **Resisting Weight Stigma: “The outcasts in a group of outcasts”**

When coming out as gay, men who do not embody gay cultural standards of the body often feel rejected and shamed (Slevin and Linneman 2010). For men who become bears, this part of their life narratives is marked by feeling alienated from their own bodies and from expressing their attractions to bigger bodies, as well as receiving negative feedback from their gay peers: “They don’t like body hair. They wax and stuff,” “The truth of the matter is that I don’t see those guys looking my way,” and “A stereotypical gay bar is all about posing and looking the part.” For the men I interviewed and the writers in the magazine, perceptions of their own and other men’s bodies were dynamic as they moved toward the bear subculture. There are three themes to this process. First, feeling stigmatized for having a larger body and their attractions toward larger men before becoming a bear. Second, finding the bears and having their self-perceptions challenged. Finally, embracing the bear body in terms of self-perceptions and their attractions toward larger men. I complete the analysis by discussing instances in which bears still grapple with body image in the midst of an evolving bear community.

**Feeling Weight Stigma: “Fat kids are never popular”.** Men often discussed feeling separated from gay culture because of their own bigger bodies. In short, they felt some sense of inferiority in the gay community due to their body size. For example, Charlie claims, “Before I knew about the bear community, I thought people didn’t like me because I’m big and fat,” and Tracy noted, “Let’s say that the gay culture is the stereotypical buff man who is a GQ model.” An article from the magazine highlights the shame from being attracted to larger men: “I had some conceptions of about how being gay worked, and they didn’t seem to be how I worked. It’s almost fun, like I considered pudgy and hairy guys not simply another type of man but a whole other species.” In the magazine, the writers characterized the time in their lives before knowing about the bear subculture as “being in hibernation” and “an outcast in a group of outcasts.” The men I interviewed described this time of their lives as feeling unattractive, and confused about sexuality.

In general, these men recall feeling shameful for having a bigger body before finding the bear subculture, partly due to how they perceived gay culture body ideals. The theme here is similar to Green’s (2011) finding of less popular men in gay bars. Often, these men felt unattractive and unable to fully play the sexual field because they did not have the physical qualities that other gay men were seeking. Jordan, when discussing how he managed his weight right after coming out, directly described the standard: “I was always a chubby kid. When I was coming out, it was like you were skinny and tan. And it’s probably still like that in some ways. But there was this paradigm of being thin and wearing the right clothes.” One writer discussed his own body when coming out: “Bears seemed to be the ‘ewwww’ category back then.” Another writer talked about how he referenced his own body with other men’s bodies:

I always felt that I was fat and ugly and when I look at some photos, I wasn’t, but that’s what my mother always told me—that I was fat and ugly. When I came out and met people and developed friendships, I felt everyone else was sexually attractive, interesting and handsome, but not me.

In relation, some men described their weight as causing them more shame than being gay. This is evident in Ron’s story when he described his initial experience with coming out: “They were more mean to me about my weight than anything else. But for being gay, no. People could care less...I was always the fat kid. Fat kids are never popular.” Implicated in these quotes is how gay men who reference their bodies to general gay culture experience negative emotions and pressure to conform (Locke 1997). These quotes also describe the heightened sensitivity to

negative body image when coming out. While being overweight is a stigmatizing attribute in general in Western culture, being overweight is especially devalued in gay culture, as evidenced by other gay men's critiques on larger or unattractive bodies (Duncan 2007; Green 2011). These men described their experiences of weight stigma in gay culture as feeling disconnected and unappreciated by other gay men.

In gay bars and other gay social settings, men often evaluate their own desirability from the perspective of other gay men. That is, gay men internalize cues from gay culture (e.g., feedback from other gay men and images of ideal gay bodies) and understand their own position in the social order (Green 2008a; 2011). Social order in gay spaces is maintained by stratifying desirable bodies, men evaluating their own characteristics within this system, and patterning interactions with other gay men, accordingly. Stories of going to gay bars and feeling out of place early in their adult lives was a common theme that describes how stratification by desirability was a way that weight stigma was felt. Perry discussed his experience with going to a gay bar in his hometown during his twenties:

I was feeling a little disenfranchised. I was not older, but I was starting to be a little older than some of the people I hung out with. I had started to sprout a little more chest hair. I was bulked up a little bit, so I wasn't skinny. I was never skinny. I've always carried baby fat. I wasn't feeling really—If I went to Connections [a gay bar], I would feel that not anyone would be attracted to me. I was at a low point.

Ron echoed a similar sentiment when comparing gay bars to bear bars: “When I go to other bars, it's insecurity up front. I kinda feel like the fat old guy in the corner.” As these quotes describe, men who perceived themselves as overweight felt that they did not fit with gay culture. Evident in both of these stories is how gay men interpreted their bodies against their average youthful body in gay bars. In both accounts, these men expressed knowledge of the social order in which their body type and age would confer lower chances of attracting a sexual partner in mainstream gay bars (Green 2011). In the case of these men, weight stigma manifested in perceptions of being uninteresting, unattractive, and overlooked in gay culture.

Another way these men felt weight stigma appears in their stories about feeling pressured to manage their bodies to fit the expectations of broad gay culture. Ron, a forty-year-old South Bay native characterized his feelings about his body before discovering the bears:

When I was hanging out in that parking lot at TD's [a gay bar], I was always the fat one... We were always on a diet. One friend lost 110 pounds. I lost 75. I think the other lost 60. We banded together to look like everybody else. There was no bear community.

I never even think I heard someone say, “I like big guys.” I think at that age, I never heard those words.

In this quote, Ron is describing his involvement with gay culture right after graduating from high school. While discussing how disenfranchised he felt with gay culture because of his weight, Perry described: “I think at the time right before I left Louisville and I was kind of like, felt a little off the rails. I did not know that I could go to bear things be accepted and be very welcomed...At that point in my life, I was going to the gym seven or eight times a week and working out.” In both of these cases, a motivator for diet and exercise, he described wanting to fit in, feel welcomed among gay men, or “look like everyone else”. Not surprisingly, this process is not unique to just overweight gay men. Green’s (2011; 2008b) studies of urban gay men and black men references a similar process of gay men engaging in “front work” (Goffman 1963) to make their bodies and demeanor more attractive to other gay men. Other work has noted that a lot of gay men feel a pressure to conform their bodies to ideal standards present in gay media and feedback from gay peers (Duncan 2007; Duggan and McCreary 2004).

Having a large or overweight body is a disadvantaged status and this especially true for gay men. However, this is only half of the story. Weight stigma is also felt in terms of being attracted to men with larger bodies and is often stereotyped as deviant and a fetish (Pyle and Klein 2011). A writer in the magazine described the stigma of being attracted to large bodies:

Coming out about the type of homo I was seemed to spark controversy. It was great to be a gay youth, and no one judged you or thought you were strange...unless you told them the type of guys you liked [i.e., larger men]. There’s no one who is more out of place than the outcast in a group full of outcasts.

Two other writers added, “Part of being gay in the gay liberation movement was to allow us to express ourselves sexually with people we desire. The gay community was often closed or fascist about size and appearance,” and “Part of why it took me so long to come out was because the type of gay I was didn’t make any sense to me. My first sexual experiences weren’t fellows I found attractive. They were just there.” In these narratives, men implicate gay cultural standards of ideal bodies as affecting how comfortable they were with expressing their attraction to larger gay men. Feeling “different enough” for being gay affected whether or not these men openly expressed their attraction to larger bodies.

Some men directly implicated feedback from gay peers that affected how they expressed their attraction towards larger men. When talking about his first years in the Bay Area, Aaron described how one of his close friends criticized his taste in men:

I had a friend and every time I would look at a guy with a beard or a mustache he just said, “God, that’s so gross.” He just didn’t understand that if someone wasn’t groomed the right way...And he would be like, “Oh, look how gross they are. They need to go to the gym and work out.” I was a lot lighter than I am now. But I just—I always felt I had to hide that from him, you know.

Dennis also described the pressure he felt to express attraction an ideal type of body because it was the trend in the gay community:

At first I felt like I had to like the skinnier six-pack guys because in the gay community that’s what everyone seemed to like. All my gay friends in high school, all two of them, were into skinnier, more effeminate men. And you know, in all honesty, I felt like I had to be into that because I didn’t know that there were more masculine men who were gay... I mean I’ve always thought that bigger guys were handsome, but at the same time, you know, all of the gay guys were “Ohh, bigger guys, ewww.” So I kind of was like, you know, was turned off by that. Who needs to be even more different, you know. I was already different enough, being a homosexual. Who needed to be a homosexual who was into fat guys?

These examples describe men’s attractions before discovering the bear subculture as not making sense and not aligned with what their gay peers thought was attractive. Men actively hid their attraction to bigger men to avoid negative feedback from their peers. These quotes also suggest that the effects of social isolation from other gay peers experienced by young gay men (Meyer 2003) is intensified via attraction to large bodies and a pressure to conform.

Men who become bears described the time between coming out as a gay man and coming out as a bear as feeling shameful about having a larger body, feeling like an outsider in gay culture, and receiving negative feedback from their peers in regards to weight. Ironically, men felt closeted in the gay community for being attracted to larger bodies. The interviewees and writers in the magazine saw very few images of bodies that they found attractive or looked like theirs in gay publications and among friends. A lot of these men’s stories confirm Locke’s (1997) concern that when gay men who are just coming out perceive large differences between themselves and the bodies in gay media they will experience body shame and feel disconnected from gay culture.

**Finding Bears: “I realized who and what I was”.** One possible interpretation of the stories presented above is that a lot of these men were primed to seek out a group of gay men with similar body interests. And this could be the case for some men. As quoted earlier, Perry described his life after coming out in his twenties as “feeling disenfranchised” with gay culture. Also, Girth and Mirth chapters in cities across the country existed well before the bear subculture became popular (Suresha 2002). However in the stories and interviews I analyzed, discovery was usually unintentional, with men often describing it as “stumbling into the bears” or being randomly called a bear or cub in gay bars or on online dating sites. Most of the writers in the magazine and the bears I interviewed never discussed or could not recall intentionally seeking out an alternate group of gay men like the bears.

What men do recall about discovering the bear community is the challenge to their self-perceptions of weight and attractiveness and a resolution to feeling conflicted as overweight gay men. One author from the magazine writes about going his first bear bar: “In an instant, in a second, my life had changed forever. I realized who and what I was—I was a bear!” Dennis discussed his discovery of the bear subculture by interacting with another man:

I learned about this community when I turned 18 years old. And I went to my first gay bar and there was this skinny...what would be considered a “twink,” which if you want me to elaborate is a skinnier guy who has remotely no hair or is less masculine and more feminine. That’s what I think. And they looked me and I was just starting to get chest hair and I remember him putting his hand in my shirt. It was really like my first flirtatious experience at a gay bar and he goes “Oh! You’re a bear!” or he said “Oh you’re a cub!” Not a bear, a cub. And I was like “I’m a what?” And he, you know, explained “Well bears are heavier set guys who are furrer and who are homosexuals.”

One article in the magazine describes the feelings that come with discovering the bear community: “Discovering *BEAR Magazine* was as enormous for me as coming out. Pigeonholing in the gay community can be rampant, but having a name for what I liked was revelatory for me. Armed with this new knowledge, I leapt into the bear scene goatee first.” In my sample, once men came across the bear subculture, they claimed their sexual identities and bodies as “bear.” Or as Brian put it: “I kind of say when I found [a group of] bears and I actually started participating in the group that definitely started another phase in my life. It was finally a community someplace.”

Other men talked about media and Internet research as helping them discover the bear subculture. Shane claimed, “I just found out about it through porn...So I just Googled it and

went from there.” Andy had a similar experience, although at an earlier age, when he was looking up gay erotica in his school computer lab:

I knew I liked body hair. Specifically—I had body hair at that point. Around the third grade I started getting hairy from the waste down...I was made fun of for it actually. But I had body hair. I kind of actually liked it, even though I was made fun of it for it. That’s one of the first sections [of gay erotica] that I liked...I knew that I liked hairy guys. So I went there and that’s where I became aware of the term bear.

Dennis continued his discussion of discovering the bears after being called a cub at gay bar: “I remember going home and, you know, looking it up online and I discovered this community of people who looked like me who were embracing their masculine side, as opposed to their feminine side. And it intrigued me. In a sense, it turned me on more than anything.” In these quotes, as well as Dennis’ quote in the previous paragraph, men discovered the bear community by searching for their tastes in men on the Internet. In most cases, this involved stumbling onto a particular type of bear body. Dennis’ quote also sums up the emotional experience of feeling intrigued and relieved when discovering the group—a sharp contrast to their earlier feelings when first coming out.

Discovering the bear community also meant that men finally found a group of friends that looked like them. Shane explained his adoption of the bear label as being based on a checklist of behaviors and body shape that qualified him as a bear:

Mainly that it was just that a culture that I identify with because mainly people identify with the bears because of weight and being hairy. Guys that don’t groom themselves nearly to the degree that non-bears or people outside of the bear culture. So it was just kind of like: “Yep, that’s me. Yep I do that. Yep, I totally do that. Yes, I like to eat. Yeah, I’m a bear.” So it was kind of like a checklist.

Tracy added: “I have the physical make up for it. 230 pounds, hairy (laughs). Big, larger waist. I have a 40 inch waist. The stereotypical buff gay man does not have.” In these quotes, finding bodies that look like their own provided a rationale as to why they became a bear. However, the general social aspects of the group also attracted men to the bears, as evidenced by Kenneth’s statement: “I think the support: the initial support. I think people genuinely want to help you out in whatever way you needed help. Well, not whatever way, but initial help. So if you’re relocating, they’ll give you advice.” Here, Kenneth’s experience with the bears is favorable because he found initial social support within the group. Later on, he added that he has been able to have an extended social network because of the bears.

This, for most of the men in my sample and featured in *A Bear's Life* magazine, discovering the bear label was unintentional and occurred years after coming out of the closet for these men. Twenty of the interviewees described the moment they discovered the subculture as something that came at a time in their lives when they were feeling shameful about their bodies and sexual identity. Andy's story represents the sole exception. For Andy, he stumbled upon the group at a very young age and years before he came out.

Andy's story also suggests that the time between coming out as gay and coming out as a bear is diminishing for younger generations. For example, all four of the men I interviewed who were in their twenties had already discovered the community and adopted the bear label. For the men in their forties and fifties, a bear subculture was either non-existent or less popular when they were coming out in their late teen years and twenties. Perry best described this in his discussion of the next generation of bears: "My impression is that if a kid is a few pounds overweight now, he can go online and he can figure out, find other kids his age that find him attractive." The decrease in the years between coming out and discovering the bear subculture has implications for feeling weight stigma. Younger generations may only partially feel, or completely bypass, feeling stigmatized for their bigger bodies—at least within gay culture—because of the increased availability of bear websites, books, and publications.

Regardless of whether men spent only a few years or a decade of their adult life as unaware of the bear subculture, self-perceptions about their bodies and attractions were transformed by the bear subculture. The radical change in weight perceptions among men who become bears is an example of how deflecting strategies are used for resisting stigma by defining the stigmatized attribute as less discrediting (Thoits 2011). The general perceptions of their bodies transformed from shame (discrediting) to being accepted as a gay man with a larger body. The following section further describes weight stigma resistance after discovering the bear label.

**Resisting Stigma, Embracing the Bear Body: "Being comfortable in your own skin".** As represented in the interviews and magazine articles, the most common process for men coming out in the bear community has two parts. First, men come out as gay without awareness of the bear subculture. During this time, men feel unattractive and unable to express their sexual desires for bigger, hairier men. This ends when men stumble upon the subculture, claim the label, and reinterpret their bodies and attractions from being unattractive and marginalized, to being normal and the center of their bear identity. In short, they are able to resist weight stigma

by becoming a bear. For instance, men talked about the general feelings around discovering the bears: “So accepting, you know,” “I felt great. I felt elated. I was in an atmosphere I had wanted to be in for a long time,” “But I think in general, that a bear bar is more accepting and loving as a community,” and “It means a lot to me. It gives me a title, I guess. It labels me”. A lot of the feelings associated with discovering the bear community were relief and a sense of belonging.

Resistance to body ideals was evident in how they redefined what bodies were attractive and feeling free to express their attraction to other large men. First, men found that they were able to transform feelings of shame about their bodies to feeling attractive and validated. Chris, who had only discovered the bear subculture in the past year, described the comfort that followed after he discovered the bear subculture: “Figuring out that there is a bear culture. That it’s about being comfortable in your own skin, you know. In theory, less judgment than other parts of the community.” The bear subculture also was a place of relief from lifelong feelings of being overweight and unattractive. Ron references his discovery of the bears as a way to put to rest some of his weight issues he carried through childhood:

It was refreshing. For the longest time—ever since I could remember—I joke about always being on a diet since 1971, which is when I was born. My mother always had me on a diet. I was always the fat kid. And at 17, I sprouted hair all over the place. And back then in the 80s, hair wasn’t in, so I always hid it. I’ve never shaved my chest, ever. Just the thought of it growing back is too much. It was always more about being fat than anything else. So when I found a group of people that didn’t dislike the fat part or didn’t put up with it—or actually embraced it—it was refreshing. It’s like someone liking you all of the sudden that you didn’t know had a crush on you.

Here, Ron described how he had always felt some stigma because of his weight and other aspects of his body. His story, along with other interviewees’ experiences, involved redefining the larger body as unattractive to something that is interesting and sought after in the bear community. For example, Brian discussed the validation of bigger bodies in the bear subculture: “You’re not labeled as the fatty or you don’t get the ‘ew, you’re too hairy’ reaction. Usually it’s the ‘hmmm you are hairy’ in a positive term.” Chris described in more direct terms when describing his experience at a bear event:

Yeah, I had this friend who goes to certain events and loved taking off his shirt. He had a great body. He’s like “Everybody take off your shirt!” I’m not taking off my damn shirt. He poked me in the belly and was like “You realize this is currency, right?” What are you talking about, currency? He’s like “People like this. You have something they want. Stop stressing about it.”

Charlie discussed a similar process when going to a bear bar:

I love going to a bar and having confidence and knowing that you know what, you may not like me but I still have people out there who do like me. It's reassuring. That's me. I find out if somebody likes me somewhere and they may not be physically here but it's been expressed that they're appealing to me and because of who I am. Before I knew about the Bear community, I thought people didn't like me because I'm big and fat or it was the black thing. But now I'm okay with being big...The community validates me.

In short, the bear community gave men a new vocabulary to describe their bodies as attractive, ideal, and interesting. These men's stories raise questions about resistance is done through joining and maintaining a subculture. Chris's story of his friend pointing to his belly and calling it "currency" and "having something they want" is an example of how alternative subcultures create their own systems of prestige (Schwalbe et al. 2000). In this case, the bigger body is not only accepted, it is a form of capital in the bear community and thus helps members resist narrow body ideal in the general gay community.

Alternately, these stories could be interpreted as less about resistance and more about becoming selective in friend groups. That is, are the bears in my sample resisting weight stigma or are they being adaptive and selecting friend groups that validate them? For example, Perry discussed this when he was first navigating the bear community in his late twenties at local gay bars:

If you went to Connections [gay bar] you would be out of place. So people found their pockets. But gay community or bear community or whatever, I don't think it's any different. Churches serve a lot of functions and one of them is that most churches at the beginning, there was probably a little island of misfit toys. It's people who don't socially fit in anywhere else. And the church is not gonna ask you to leave. It's the same thing. Triangles [gay bar] was not a real popular bar, but they were not gonna ask the bears to leave. So they identified and made it a safe place to be.

In Perry's story about the bars and Chris's story about realizing his belly is capital in the bear community, there is a theme of bears seeking out friends and settings that validate their bodies.

For either interpretation, the narratives in my sample suggest that a change in the feedback from gay peers is needed to reframe the bigger body as attractive. When individuals seek to exit a stigmatized status, the feedback from others has to change (Granberg 2011). In Granberg's study of individuals who had lost weight, individuals did not feel they had exited their stigmatized status until their friends and family stopped reacting to their weight loss. This is similar to the bears in my sample. By becoming a bear, a lot of these men experienced a

change in feedback that allowed them to feel more accepted and less concerned about the size of their bodies. However, this change in feedback came from a new network of friends in the bear community, as opposed to a change in feedback from old friends and family.

Feeling validated about having a bigger body is a major theme in *A Bear's Life*. For example, men often write about the feelings they when they discovered the bear subculture:

Remember that feeling you had when you realized there was a bear community? That being gay didn't mean you had to be sewn into a Baby Gap T-shirt and as hairless as Britney Spears? For me, finding the bear community marked the first time I really found acceptance and felt attractive.

Another writer echoes: "After spending much of my youth despising my bulky physique, I discovered the subsection of the queer community that not only embraced my size, but revered it; coveted it. I found power in a sexual framework wherein I was hot...sexy...and maybe lovable." In these two quotes, men relate their discovery of the bears to being the moment when they no longer felt unattractive. That is, they were able to disregard mainstream gay cultural norms of skinny bodies and accept their own bigger bodies.

Other writers mention this in relation to going to bear bars: "It is very nice to go into an environment where people are not automatically eliminating me from talking to because of my size." "I felt like Alice stepping through the looking glass. I had been ignored at the gay bars I'd been to. Many gay men were not attracted to guys with beards. However, I found myself to be in very much demand." In these two quotes, the writers discuss their feelings of being a bear as opposed to how they felt before finding the bears. Similar to the personal narratives of the bears I interviewed, writers in the magazine referenced discovering the bear subculture as a time to transform feelings of shame about the body to feeling accepted and resist weight stigma.

One other area where men received positive feedback occurred at bear events. Perhaps a more active form of resistance to weight stigma (Pyle and Klein 2011), men described their first experiences at bear events as eye-opening and feeling comfortable with showing the bear body.

Brian shared his interpretation of the first bear event he attended:

I think you'll find a higher number of Speedos in the Bear group than you would in any other standard American beach or pool. They like to kind of show themselves off, you know. They're not models. Not what you would typically consider models. But there's definitely a group there that appreciates a more average masculine form and they like to show themselves off. They like to get that validation that they're not ugly because you know, I don't know. The GAP doesn't have their kind of body on the commercials or

whatever the case may be... just to be able to expose parts of your body and not feel self-conscious about it.

Brian's quote supports Locke's (1997) claim that subordinated individuals will create their own media and spaces to feel validated when the mainstream does not offer this. Chris further described the level of comfort with having a bigger body that some men feel at bear events: "We wanted to go to the underwear party because none of us had ever done that... For me, it was weird because I had never done it. Wasn't sure if it would be okay or if I would be comfortable. But once everyone else is doing it, it's no big deal. It's like everybody's hanging out in their underwear." Ron shared a similar story that more directly describes the emotional feeling about showing off bear bodies at bear events:

We moved to LA and I did not want to go because I thought they were gonna throw me out because I was too fat. What I realized was that LA has a giant bear and chub community. I probably had the time of my life hanging out at the Girth and Mirth parties, pool parties, and the bear parties. They had this bar night called Club Chub. I called it fat camp. They did it at this dive bar in Santa Monica and it was like 5 dollars to get in, a dollar for a bottle of beer... These boys—I mean no one was self-conscious. I mean they were dancing and fat's just hanging out everywhere. Stretch marks. I'll never forget there was this young kid up on the box like a go-go dancer in half top. He looked like a zebra he had so many stretch marks. And the bitch didn't care! That was the best part of it. Everyone was sweaty and gross, but everyone was having such a good time. And I had a great time.

In reaction to the absence of larger bodies in mainstream media and previous feelings of being unattractive, bear events can function as a place for bears to receive validation from other gay men and feel comfortable with showing their bodies.

Becoming a bear also meant embarrassment at being attracted to large men and feeling less pressure to be attracted to a certain body type. Tom discussed this by comparing how he felt when he first came out to how he felt once he discovered the bears: "It was nice to see there was a subculture where they were accepting all people. Because before, you had to be the little thin, skinny twink or muscle person. And there you saw guys that looked more normal and average." One writer in the magazine expresses this: "The guys who started it, it opened my eyes to the fact that I could openly like bearish types of guys and be OK with that." When discussing how he discovered the bear subculture, Dennis claimed: "Once I learned about the bear community, once I learned that bigger hairy guys—I learned that being gay, I liked men. And men to me was bears: was masculine men with chest hair, deep voices and who embrace their masculinity and

celebrated their femininity at the same time.” In these examples, men discussed becoming a bear as not being ashamed of liking bigger and hairier bodies. The subculture’s alternative body standards allowed these men to feel comfortable and not risk being ostracized when expressing their sexual attractions.

The men in my sample experienced and resisted weight stigma in coming out as gay and coming out as a bear. The process of coming out, experiencing shame about having a larger body characterized these men’s lives before discovering the bear community. In coming out as a bear, men redefined their bigger bodies as attractive and reconciled their attractions toward larger men in the gay community. Resistance strategies can be used in combination with each other (Shih 2004; Thoits 2011). The presence of the bear community allowed a lot of these men to deflect weight stigma by defining their body size or attraction to bigger bodies as not discrediting in the gay community (Thoits 2011). By joining the bear community, men gain social support through network of gay men who appreciate bigger bodies, justify their new weight perceptions, and challenge being stigmatized as unattractive, overweight gay men. Indeed, collective resistance—especially in activist groups—is useful for not only changing others’ views of a stigmatized attribute, but also for legitimizing groups’ anger at being stigmatized (Thoits 2011). Whether or not the bears can be viewed as attempting to change how others view bigger bodies is debatable and not clearly evident in my sample of bears. Thus, this analysis suggests that collective resistance need not be focused on changing how others view a stigmatized attribute as being totally necessary for resisting a stigma. For these men, the change in feedback and having a network of bear friends to validate their bodies and attractions helped them reconcile their bodies and attractions in the gay community.

These narratives also describe the pay-off of challenging stigma in terms of feeling more empowered by attributing stigmatization to other people’s prejudice (Shih 2004; Thoits 2011). The men and writers in my sample reinterpret their devaluation because of body size before becoming a bear as having more to do with weight prejudice in the gay community and less about their own size. However, simply becoming a bear does not mean that all body image issues diminish or that men never feel self-conscious about their weight. In the following section, I analyze men’s stories about feeling self-conscious about their own weight even after they became a bear.

**Muscle Bears: “They’re interrupting my ability to be fat and I don’t like it”.** As the bear subculture grew, the definition of the bear body broadened and potentially undermines the extent to which the community deflects and challenges weight stigma. One aspect of this growth especially notable in the narratives of men from the Bay Area was the creation of the muscle bear category. Across the interviews, the muscle bear is best described as a bear that is bulky and hairy, with clear muscular definition. Aaron described the average muscle bear: “It’s super muscular. Very confident. When they walk into the bars, people stare at them.” Perry noted the muscle bear phenomenon as having an impact on how bears define themselves:

I have the opinion now, what was a bear is now a chub. What was a twink [a thin and hairless gay man] now just stopped. Now all they’ve done is gotten older, gotten hairier and continue to workout. Now they’re the muscle bears...They weren’t bears ten years ago. They were probably forced into the community due to aging. When you’re 25, you can manage this little bit of hair at the top of your chest. When you’re 45 and it’s migrated to your back, it’s probably become a losing battle to manage it down...I think they shifted—It used to be bears and cubs and that’s it. I wasn’t enough in the community to pay attention to the labels. I think I very much was a cub. The muscle bears have taken over the position, very hyper masculine muscle bears. That’s the image now. And then you got the big bears and chubby bears and the chasers and the cubs and everybody else like that. I mean there are just—the whole community. It’s become so much bigger and the definition has gotten looser.

The general shift in how bears define themselves via the muscle bear impacted some men’s body image in terms of how they managed their bodies toward achieving a muscle bear body and disrupting positive self-perceptions of weight. Ironically, interviewees described bear-themed media as representing the muscle bear more than the average bear body. Spencer described the shift: “The porn industry holds some of the blame because they have propagated this is what a bear is. Before, a bear was very vague definition. And now, ‘Do you look like Jack Radcliffe?’<sup>4</sup> No you don’t. Guess you’re not a bear then.’ It’s become more of a beauty pageant. It used to be, ‘I’m a guy and I dig blue collar looking guys.’”

The muscle bear body impacted men’s weight perceptions and posed a challenge to their comfort about their own bigger bodies. In the previous section, many men felt some comfort about their own bodies when they came out as bears. But the muscle bear phenomenon revives old body image issues for some bears. Referencing one’s body against the muscle bear group

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Radcliffe is a popular bear model that was featured in a lot of early bear-themed adult films. A lot of interviewee used him as an example of a muscle bear.

brings up feelings of being self-conscious about body size. Aaron described this when talking about going to bear events and being more reserved with taking off his shirt: “I don’t walk around with my shirt off...I’m a big guy. So I’m just not—Especially if I’m around the muscle bears, I tend to be more reserved. I’ll show at the pool.” When asked about whether he saw the muscle bears as good or bad for the subculture, Ron described his feelings in terms of reviving old weight issues:

It really kind of destroys the bear culture in my mind...Because it’s exactly like it was back when I was 20 years old in that parking lot, trying to lose weight and be like everybody else. Except the difference now is that you have to lose weight and you have weightlift. The only difference is that you don’t have to shave. The muscle bears are the same exact guys back then who used to wax the hair off. Now they’re just leaving it on. They’re interrupting my ability to be fat and I don’t like it.

Ron’s quote directly states the dilemma of being a bear and having positive self-perceptions around weight. Additionally, his description of the muscle bears being “the guys back then who used to wax the hair off” suggests that the bear community being distinct from the rest of gay culture as compromised by the emergence of the muscle bear.

Men talking about muscle bears are an example of how complex body image and weight stigma is in gay culture. The bear subculture is a resource for men who have a large body, are attracted to large bodies, and both to feel connected to a gay subculture and resist the effects of weight stigma. But as the subculture has grown, the definition of what a bear is has become more encompassing with a whole zoo of labels for body types for admirers, average bears, muscle bears, and younger cubs. While participating in a subculture that challenges stigmas provides validation and social support (Thoits 2011), resistance can be undermined as subcultures evolve. That is, a hierarchy of bear bodies within the community has emerged. The muscle bear, for some men in my sample, has replaced average, chubby and hirsute as the ideal bear body, challenge the positive self-perceptions about weight obtained from the bear community, and revives old feelings of weight stigma.

How individuals react to or define muscle bears provides insight into how stigma resistance strategies can be adapted as contexts change (Corrigan and Watson 2002). For example, Aaron adopted an avoidance strategy by keeping away from settings where feels forced to reference his body against muscle bear bodies. Other men in my sample talked about managing their bodies to fit a muscle bear look. Elliot described this when he discussed his

attraction to muscle bears and his efforts to manage his body: “I was always attracted to big guys... Those are the people who kept your eye and what you aspired to be. The other thing I did was worked out a ton [and] got pretty beefy myself.” This aspect of the muscle bear provides additional evidence to Green’s (2011) observation of social order in gay spaces. Green suggests that men in these setting recognize physical and social cues in gay bars, internalize these cues, and evaluate their own attractiveness from the standpoint of other gay men. As a result, some gay men may seek to alter their own bodies toward embodying the ideal in these settings. In this case, men seeking to inhabit the muscle bear category were, in part, attempting to increase their own attraction in the bear community. In short, the muscle bear shift posed challenges to men’s feelings of acceptance in the bear community. In my sample, some men adapted their resistance strategies to avoid or look like a muscle bear while others coped with revived feelings of weight shame.

### **Resisting Gay Sexuality Stigma: “I’m a man’s man”**

In this portion of the analysis, I present two themes of resistance against stereotypes of gay sexuality that were present in men’s stories about coming out and discovering the bears. First, a lot of men spent time talking about feeling disconnected between their interests and what they perceived as typical gay interests. These narratives include men describing the bear subculture as “more masculine” and noting differences between bears and other gay men, describing themselves as not enacting gay stereotypes, distancing themselves from the label “gay”, and joking about masculinity in the bear community. I also discuss whether or not these strategies are more about resisting gay stereotypes or about being able to pass as heterosexual. Second, idealizing the bear body meant that men could further set themselves off from mainstream gay culture and construct the bear body as more masculine than other gay men. Indeed, many men referenced that having and liking bear bodies meant that they were less caught up in the weight-obsessed gay culture that could be construed as effeminate. However, some bears still engaged in some body management after discovering the subculture by adopting a bear “look” or “costume,” growing facial hair, and “bulking up”—all with the intention of fitting in with the masculine bear imagery.

Coming out as gay means that men suffer some loss of status via stereotypes of gay sexuality that include effeminacy, being overly emotional, and having “gay” hobbies (e.g., decorating, dancing, fashion). Spencer described this concern in direct terms when talking about

the threat of violence that gay men face: “What’s more damning than ‘gay’ that doesn’t require medication or incarceration in today’s society?” A lot of the men I interviewed shared stories about negotiating their status as men, being gay, and appearing masculine. Kevin explained it bluntly when talking about these stereotypes: “[I] still want to be thought of as a guy.” With being gay, manhood is even more complicated. Sociologists often note that monitoring their own masculinity is a continual concern for gay men because of the stigma of being gay and the possible consequences of stigma (Connell 1992; Hennen 2005; Schippers 2007; Slevin and Linneman 2010). For some bears, their status as men, or at least the presentation of a masculine self, is another feature that sets them apart from the rest of gay culture. Or as Perry described it: “I would say that the percentage of people in the bear community that are masculine is probably higher than the rest of the gay population.” In short, being a bear is not only a way to resist weight stigma, but also a means to resist some stereotypes of being gay.

**Resisting Stereotypes: “We’re gay men, but we’re men”.** When talking about coming to terms with their sexuality and describing the appeal of the bear community, men discussed feeling out of place in an effeminate and body-obsessed gay culture. These individuals perceived a mismatch between themselves and other gay men primarily in terms of masculinity. Aaron described feeling disconnected from gay culture when he first moved to San Francisco: “I just thought it was always these guys walking around with chaps...Really queeny guys. I was scared that I was gonna be one of those guys that started dressing in drag and all that. I didn’t understand it. So I thought, once I’m gay and accept it, I’m gonna start acting like that and dressing like that. I was like, ‘What am I supposed to do?’” Evident in Aaron’s story is feeling confused and that becoming effeminate was inevitable. There is also a tone of reluctance to coming out, as he perceived that he would have to adopt traits that he did not understand or want to embody. On the other hand, Silas described the disconnect in more resistant terms as he described the difference between bears and other gay men:

They do all the thing girls do. I mean—I may sound like I am anti-woman and I am really...But still—we’re men. We’re gay men, but we’re men...You got these twink and most of them got to have their hair perfect. They got to have their clothes perfect. They’ve got to go to the gym. They have their nails done. They’ve to get a pedicure...You go to the pool, they’re stretched out like models, the twinks are. They got to put the lotion on and all this. You got a big ol’ bear and he’s in the water having a ball and good time. He’s got his beer and they got them some wine cooler.

In this quote, being masculine and more relaxed is used to distinguish bears from mainstream gay culture. This is accomplished by equating other gay men as more effeminate and not “real men” (Schippers 2007). In addition, both quotes describe a theme of how bears define themselves as a group by describing what bears are not. Hennen (2005:35) described this process as bears using mainstream gay culture, women, and effeminacy as “oppositional anchors” to describe themselves.

Another way this was accomplished was downplaying gay stereotypes and playing up the differences they observed between themselves and other gay men. For example, Mac talked about feeling different from other gay men using hobbies: “See I’m not like that...I don’t watch sports you know but I don’t do fashion decorating.” Shawn described his bear friend group in a similar way: “We have a lot of friends with beards and goatees. We have lots of friends with who like to eat, have fun, and are relaxed. Just like to have a good time. Don’t sit around and do drugs and stuff.” Aaron and his partner also described gay stereotypes that bears are less likely fulfill when describing what a bear is:

Aaron: What I think a bear is? I think it’s someone who is hairy, beefy, or just relaxed. I don’t know. For me, the bears are so much more relaxed than other gays I would say. Yeah. That’s it for me basically.

Derrick: Hairy is sometimes a big part of it. They don’t have to be. Beefy. Yeah. I guess I like relaxed. I think it’s more of a mellow type of attitude rather than the other type of gays that are friends of ours. They’re the people who like the dress up, do their hair, go out, do drugs. Super fabulous or whatever. That’s fine. But it’s not us. We’re more dwellers on our couch. We have friends over. It’s hard to define exactly what it is. It’s such a—It’s definitely a subculture in the gay culture.

This couple and the individuals above described gay stereotypes as a distinguishing characteristic between bears and other gay men. This included hobbies like fashion decorating, drug use, less relaxed, and being style- and body-conscious. They characterized the bear subculture as more masculine, relaxed, and less body conscious.

The men in my sample discussed how they distanced themselves from the term “gay” as a way to resist stereotypes. This was described in various terms: “I guess I’m a man’s man. I’m the straight gay guy,” “I describe myself as a straight man who fucks other straight men,” and “I don’t think gay is defining to be honest with you.” What is interesting about these quotes is how some individuals opted to use the term “straight” with caveats as a means to describe themselves. When asked about this, individuals described the negative stereotypes associated with the term

“gay”. For instance, when asked about why he does not call himself “gay”, Kevin said: “It’s just a play on the words and how people make you feel. That you’re lower class.” Kenneth echoed:

Well for me...like when society hears the word gay, they see the guys with the short—the guys who are like very effeminate. Like effeminate women or effeminate guys. They perceive that as the only idea of gay. I don’t get up, I don’t do drag. I don’t do any of the other stuff they do...Internally I’m gay, externally I’m not their definition.

Kenneth described stereotypes that are associated with the gay community as not making sense relative to how he perceives himself as a gay man. In doing so, men felt uncomfortable with calling themselves gay and even not coming out to all people. For instance, Kenneth later talked about how he keeps his friends on “a need to know basis” about his sexuality.

One conclusion that could be made from narratives regarding gay stereotypes and the term “gay” is that these men place some value on passing as straight. However this conclusion neglects the complexity of how these individuals view their manhood in the context of their sexuality. Instead, these quotes appear to describe more about self-perceptions, what they view as attractive, and becoming comfortable with being gay, as opposed to passing as straight. For example, Chris discussed the perception of bears as “straight-acting”:

I hear people talk about “He’s so masculine or he’s so manly.” It’s just how people describe it... I wonder if people would say straight-acting. Even that tends to be a negative. Like straight-acting sounds like they’re trying not to be gay sort of thing, right. And if it’s about accepting each other and being yourself, that sounds counterproductive. But yeah, maybe more tough...I don’t know. I think people just appreciate good looking guys. And a lot of bears are good looking.

Chris described the bears as being more concerned about appearing as masculine gay men and challenging narrow stereotypes of gay sexuality as opposed to passing as straight. In fact, most individuals felt more comfortable with being gay and out of the closet after discovering the bear subculture. Shawn, a former police officer, described how he came to terms with being gay only after discovering the bear subculture when he found *BEAR* magazine when responding to a drunk and disorderly complaint in a bookstore:

He [the offender] saw me and kind of freaked out and dropped the magazine. He put it back on the shelf and he put it next to BEAR magazine and I noticed that. I remember the tag-line: “Masculinity without the trappings”. Or something like that. I was like, “oh okay”. Got done that day. Went back the next day and bought the magazine off-duty. That kind of opened my eyes to there’s this whole gay community out there that’s not I was used to growing up and seeing at Decadence [yearly gay pride event in New Orleans, LA] at that time...I was confused about the whole thing because where I grew up, it was

always the gay person was the guy who was ice skating and the guy who was, you know, very flamboyant.

Shawn prefaced this story by describing how he never felt comfortable with being attracted to other men. By discovering the *BEAR* magazine, he was able to start making sense of his own attractions. He later described going to his first bear bar in San Francisco: “The first time I went to the Lone Star, it was like this is a freaking Iowa bar, people with Carhartts and whatever.”

The themes of distancing from gay stereotypes and from the term “gay” demonstrate the joint nature of resistance through an alternative subculture. By claiming, “not all gay men act like that,” or “I don’t have gay hobbies,” in their discussion of general gay culture, the bears challenge preconceptions of what it means to be gay and deflect stereotypes of being gay (Thoits 2011). This is also evident in the men’s descriptions of feeling more comfortable with being gay after they discovered the bear subculture. Men decide what it means to behave as a bear (e.g., relaxed, not posing, and not obsessed with looks) and stereotypes of gay sexuality to maintain a distinction between themselves and other gay men and define themselves as the more masculine side of the gay community (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Resistance toward stereotypes was also evident in the stories they told about joking about effeminacy. Groups often form their own culture of joking to maintain cohesiveness and boundaries between members and outsiders (Fine and Soucey 2005). This was the case among some bears. Often, joking about effeminacy came in the form of using feminine pronouns to address other gay men. Brian described this when talking about his bear group going out to bars: “Doing the ‘hey girl’ and sistas and uh, you’re definitely going to hear that in the bear group as well but it usually has a little more of a sarcastic vibe attached to it.” Ron used this strategy when he explained how he and his friends created a bear-themed bar night: “I came up with the title, Butch. And then filled the logo with glitter. Which was on purpose. It’s big bubbly letters so it looks like hello kitty. Everyone is like, ‘Glitter is not really butch.’ I said, ‘That’s the point. Have you met the bears in San Jose at all? A bunch of big hairy girls.’” He continued his story with an example when joking was met with opposition:

I think the bear community focuses on masculinity. Even if they’re big girls, it doesn’t matter. You can find the guy in the boots in the flannel shirt that’s saying things like “girl” and “sister” or “What’s her problem?” I love that about it. That’s the best part as far as I’m concerned. Awhile back, I had this friend and his boyfriend disliked me...I called him [the friend] girl all the time I saw him. It’s just the way it was. His boyfriend disliked me and I couldn’t figure out why...My friend pulled me aside and said, “He

doesn't like you because you called me girl." And I'm all, "You gotta be kidding me." And he goes, "Well he has this whole masculinity thing." I mean he only hung out with guys that liked sports and all that sort of crap. I'm like, "Bitch, please. No. Don't care." I would queen it up every time he was around. "Hi-sies!" He really, really disliked me. But I think that's actually the most fun parts of being gay that I would never give up. You get to be as masculine as you want and as girlie as you want all the same time.

The description of bears as "hairy girls" and the playful use of feminine pronouns comprise an interesting form of resistance and demonstrate the complex nature of bears, gay stigma, and resistance. On one hand, some of the bears in this study that described distancing themselves from gay hobbies and stereotypes expressed distaste for jokingly using feminine pronouns or joking about effeminacy. Silas explained this: "The actual flinging the hands and you know, calling you girl, bitch, and stuff like that I just don't get. I don't get that. We're men and that's the way we're supposed to act." By dismissing jokes about effeminacy, men like Silas play up the "that's not how gay men should act" side of resistance to challenge gay stigma (Thoits 2011). On the other hand, Ron and Brian's stories describe the playful nature of joking and get at the "it is only one part of me" side of deflecting stigma. For example, Ron described how some bears could still be masculine in their appearance but still joke with effeminate pronouns.

The strategies that men described in order to resist the stigma of being gay could be interpreted in three ways. First, through distancing from gay stereotypes, having reservations about calling one's self gay, and joking, the bears in this study describe how they deflect stigma. This is done by either claiming that the stereotypes did not represent them or that the stereotypes were only a small part of who they were (Thoits 2011). This also aided men with feeling more comfortable with their sexuality, as opposed to passing as heterosexual. Alternatively, rejecting the use of feminine pronouns and jokes about effeminacy could be viewed as a less effective form of resistance and perhaps feeding into the stigma of being gay. Defensive othering is done, in reaction to feeling oppressed, by subordinated or stigmatized individuals seeking membership in a dominant group by criticizing others for enacting the stereotypes attributed to them (Schwalbe et. al 2000). In short, the bears in my sample that criticize other bears' joking about effeminacy are doing so in part to claim status as a man (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). In doing so, they reinforce common negative perceptions that stigmatize gay men. Finally, whether criticizing or joking about effeminacy, these stories provide general evidence as to how

stereotypes associated with a stigma impact self-perceptions and behavior. In both strategies, men express knowledge of mainstream stereotypes, evaluate their own behavior and identities as masculine gay men from the mainstream perspective (Mead 1934).

**Emulating the Bear Body: “They all look like lumberjacks”.** The body was also important in men’s stories of resisting sexual orientation stigma. Appreciating or having a bear body was perceived to be more masculine. This was because many of these men viewed other gay men who were body- and fashion-obsessed as more effeminate and fulfilling stereotypes of gay sexuality. In these men’s descriptions of the bear community and how they fit, perceiving their bigger, hirsute bodies as being more “natural” aided in separating the bear community into the more masculine segment of the gay community. This was evidenced in some of the men’s descriptions of the bear body as “tough,” “not stereotypical,” and appearing “tough enough to kick anyone’s ass”. But as a caveat to this, the masculine bear look was accomplished through some body obsession via managing weight, facial hair, and adopting a bear “costume”.

In the first half of the analysis, discovering the bear community meant that interviewees and writers could perceive their own bodies as attractive. The bear body in these men’s stories was also a means to perceive themselves and other bears as masculine gay men. That is, the body was often intertwined with men’s narratives of resisting sexual orientation stigma. Mac described this by tying aspects of the bear body to masculinity: “Just being a masculine guy you know. Beard, facial hair, you know. Sometimes a small goatee sometimes none you don’t necessarily have to have a beard. Usually you’re hairy.” A lot of men recounted instances in which their bodies and dress made their sexual orientation a surprise to others. Shawn discussed a story about when he started a new job:

You’re always coming out. And still today you’re still coming out because especially I think, bearish guys are still coming out all the time. Not coming out, meaning just coming out, “I’m gay,” but when they start a new job or when you run across people in the grocery store and the last thing they think about is “oh, you’re gay”. But when I start talking them and mention that I have a husband they get this glazed look on their face and then it dawns on them: “Oh, this person’s gay”. I think just in general from the way bears look, it’s just, it’s not your typical gay person. So everyone has the sort of stigma of gay is clean-shaven, blonde hair, 18 year old, six-packs, running around doing meth.

Kevin also tied the bear body more generally to being masculine and not obviously gay: “The toughest dude you knew in the world might be a bear. And it would shock you to find out that person is who they are. All this time, you thought otherwise...I would never know. If you were

to ask, you might find out because some people will come out and tell you.” These narratives also demonstrate resistance to sexual orientation stigma via deflecting (Thoits 2011). That is, they described a mismatch between the bear body and what broader culture might perceive as the stereotypical gay man’s body. The bear body is constructed as tough, not overtly gay, and masculine in these quotes.

One driving force behind the formation of the bear community is the resistance to a body-obsessed gay culture. Ironically, there is pressure to manage body weight, other body features, and clothing toward fulfilling a “bear look”. Wright (1997b) described early bears as caring less about having muscled or thin bodies and more about being relaxed, regardless of body shape. This aspect of bear history made one theme of these men’s stories especially interesting. When describing how they felt accepted for their bigger bodies when they discovered the bears, men also described the front work (Goffman 1959) they did to make their bodies to look more “bearish”. Men briefly described the “bear look” as: “Boots, blue jeans, cowboy hats, baseball caps, uniforms. It’s not, you know, knee-high white socks with gold lamé shorts,” “The look is essentially—granted there is variation on this theme—But generally it’s belly, body, and beard. The 3 Bs,” “They all look like lumberjacks...they’re all clones,” and “You see them in the cop glasses and the hat and the leather jacket and the swagger and damn cigar.” So while the bear community prides itself on being less body-obsessed toward skinnier bodies, some men described the pressure to adopt a masculine bear look in terms of weight, hair, and costume.

The general acceptance around having a bigger body is complicated by the anxieties some men feel about having a masculine bear body. When asked about the rise in popularity of the bear community, Ron described the bigger body as now being secondary to a masculine look: “I think it’s become popular because the masculine thing has become popular. I don’t think being fat will ever be popular.” Chris described this anxiety when he was first coming in the bear subculture: “I never felt I fit any one box in particular. I think the same is true with the bear culture. Like when you look up definitions, it’s like be yourself and do your thing, and I still worry about being too heavy or not hairy enough.” Andy also talked about the “bear look” as an equation of body hair, facial hair, and weight:

Basically it boils down to how you look, and your attitude... I think there’s definitely a weight limit. When people get too big, they’re like you’re not a bear, you’re a chub. I’ve heard that. I can’t define what that weight limit is. That’s—Generally most people who identify as bear, I find that they don’t have all three of those [beards, bellies, and body

hair]. They have two. Like they'll have a beard and a belly. Or are hairy but do not have the belly. It's usually a combination of those.

Andy later linked body and facial hair and weight as promoting an "über-masculinity with a nurturing side" that he views as the ideal embodiment of the bear look.

This was also evident in the men's stories about growing facial hair. Ron described it in an earlier quote of "hairy and masculine is popular". A lot of individuals I interviewed discussed the pressure of growing more hair in relation to adopting the masculine bear look. Jordan discussed this when he began dating his current boyfriend, whom he described as a "classic" bear: "When I met my boyfriend, I decided to go for it and let it fill in. I come from a pretty much hairless Irish family. So I'm probably the first man in my family in a hundred years that's able to grow a beard. There was some pressure." The focus on hair is evident in some men's stories of feeling rejected by the bears at first. Andy described this when he was first coming into the bear subculture during his teen years:

I was actively rejected. Probably was a good thing because I was underage. A lot of it was also, "You don't look like one" because I couldn't grow facial hair at the time. That was a big thing among bears in Louisville at the time. I would say that I started identifying with it when I was around 17. But I wasn't accepted as part of it until about 20, 21...How I looked basically is what I think it boiled down to.

Chris also talked about altering his facial hair to fit in with other bears: "With my own facial hair. Deciding if it's gonna be a full beard like yours. Is it gonna be long? Is it gonna be short? Is it gonna be a goatee or just a mustache? And people just comment constantly: 'Why did you change it? I like it the way it was' or 'I wish it was more like that guy's beard.' Before I wore facial hair, nobody gave a crap." What is interesting about men's stories of weight and hair in the bear subculture is how the general concern about being "too fat" or "not hairy enough" is in contrast from the early roots of the "relaxed" bear community (Wright 1997b). In some ways, becoming a bear brought up a new set of body ideals aimed at fulfilling the masculine bear look.

One last component of the masculine bear look is the clothing. This was especially salient among the men I interviewed in the Bay Area. Jordan described this part as men enacting the "butch drag". In this case, how one dressed their body among the bears conferred membership in the community: "Wear the costume, you fit in." Often, this included boots, jeans, flat-top haircut, some kind of facial hair, flannel, and t-shirts. This look has been one of the longstanding components of the bear subculture (Wright 1997b). Discussion of this look came

up in subtle ways during interviews. For example, in one group interview Elliot and Shawn broke out into laughter when realizing that one was wearing a flannel shirt. This look was also a way for men to feel more like a regular guy and not pigeonholed by gay stereotypes. For example, Frank described how he conceived of his own bear identity: “How I would dress to be perceived. I’m not gonna go out and buy super tight skinny jeans or some fashionable Louis Vuitton t-shirt because that’s not me. That’s not how I want to be perceived. I want to be perceived as me as a regular guy. Jeans and t-shirt, riding my motorcycle kind of guy.”

Additionally, the “bear costume” was a way for men in my sample to fit in with the bear subculture. Ron described this in a story about going to his first bear bar in San Francisco: “After my trip to the Lone Star, that first time around, I think within the next three months and I got my bear costume. My Timberland boots, my jeans, my flannel shirt, and my flat top. And oh my god did I get laid well. I’ll tell you, wearing the costume helps. It really did.” He further described the costume as being important for young individuals just coming into the bear community:

I meet a lot of big guys that are younger or are trying to fit in and that’s one of my pieces of advice: go buy the costume. Right now it’s a hipster look but it’s the same sort of things it was back then. It worked wearing the costume. You get what you want. Grow the beards, get the buzz-cut. The black-rimmed glasses are really big as well. Wear the costume, you’ll fit in.

Treating the body as a project was a means for some men to embody and ideal bear body. As noted in the previous section, this is not a unique aspect to the bear community. Green’s (2011) observation of gay men trimming body hair, selecting clothing that shows off muscularity, and adopting workout routines in order to attract more attention in mainstream gay bars is similar to how bears engage similar forms of front work to attract the attention of other bears (Goffman 1959).

But not all men bought completely into the bear costume. Chris described the criticism he received for changing his appearance after he had Lasik surgery to improve his vision: “With glasses and now I have Lasik. You know people gave me crap when I got rid of my glasses. They were like, ‘It’s part of the bear uniform.’ Bear uniform? I just want to be myself.” He later described this criticism in an interaction with a close friend: “He was like, ‘Just look, a lot of bears have glasses. A lot of them wear facial hair. Lumberjack clothes and boots.’” While Chris did not totally buy into the “bear uniform,” his story still illustrates the emphasis some

members of the subculture place on the masculine bear look by policing bears who do not dress like other bears (Schwalbe and Schrock 1996).

Adopting a bear look in these stories was a means to further integrate themselves in the bear community, as well further distinguish themselves from the broader gay community. Other work has more generally shown that individuals entering a new group or subculture will engage in practices to feel more authentic in their new identity. For example, male-to-female transsexuals' narratives about transitioning often include stories about dressing and comporting the body to feel more authentic as a woman (Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005). In some cases like Frank's, dressing the part was a way to feel more like a "regular guy". Conversely, decorating the body to fit the bear look also aided some of these men in feeling more connected to the bear community.

Ironically, these men resorted to body-conscious and stigma-related efforts in their efforts to resist stereotypes of gay sexuality. While the bear subculture was founded on resistance against narrow views of what a gay male body should look like (Wright 1997b), the men in my study discussed engaging in several acts to emulate a masculine bear body. Additionally, by distancing from gay stereotypes and perceiving gay men who enacted gay stereotypes as less than them, some men in my sample reinforced the stigma associated with being gay in their narratives (Schwalbe et al. 2000). The irony was not lost on some of these men. For example, Ron described how he "queened it up" around individuals who thought negatively of effeminate gay men. Chris questioned the reasoning behind a "bear uniform" and described how it hinders the bear subculture's emphasis on not being overly body-obsessed.

## DISCUSSION

The bear subculture was founded in resistance. Since its inception, the community has experienced changes in the definition of what it means to be a bear, an increase in bear media and consumer outlets, and growth of a global culture that is easily accessible through the Internet. Despite changes, the community still describes itself as a place for like-minded men who have and appreciate larger bodies, as well as value some level of masculinity. This chapter examined how men in the bear community resist weight and gay stereotypes in narratives of coming out as gay, coming out as a bear, and being a bear. How do men in this community challenge stereotypes of weight and being gay? Interviewees and writers' interpretations of attractive gay

male bodies and stereotypes of gay sexuality were dynamic as they told stories of coming out as gay, coming out as a bear, and their experiences in the bear community.

The bears' resistance to weight and gay stereotypes is more complicated than in simple terms of either deflecting or challenging stigma. Both seem to be in play. Additionally, the alternative ideals of the community impacted how these men resisted stigma (Schwalbe et al. 2000). As the men told their stories of coming out as gay, they described this time of their lives as feeling unattractive, being criticized by their gay peers, and feeling confused about their lives as gay men. These perceptions were challenged as they stumbled into the bear subculture, as they were able to redefine their larger bodies from unattractive and stigmatized to ideal and less discrediting (Thoits 2011). Bears also challenged stereotypes of being overweight through joining a social group. In their stories of coming into the community, both interviewees and writers described how they gained social support through network of gay men who were like-minded in their body ideals. Additionally, joining a group that focuses on resisting stigma provided legitimization of their bodies and attraction to bigger men (Schwalbe et al. 2000)

Ironically, these men's stories regarding gay stereotypes invoked seemingly contradictory strategies with the same goals in mind. On one hand, some men challenged stigma by distancing themselves from gay stereotypes and criticizing other gay men who act more flamboyant. To many, it may appear that men in this group are trying to pass or hide their gay identity. This does not seem to be the case. Instead, these men described resisting gay stereotypes as either attempting to change how broader society viewed gay men or they did not perceive gay stereotypes as accurately describing themselves (Thoits 2011). On the other hand, some men deflected gay stereotypes through describing how effeminacy is only one part of them and sharing stories of jokingly using female pronouns to address other men. Either way, the knowledge of stereotypes, the self-evaluation from the mainstream perspective of what it means to be gay, and monitoring of own and others' behavior demonstrates how stigma can be internalized. Additionally, the resistance through distancing from gay stereotypes and criticizing effeminate gay men risks subordinating other gay men, as it reinforces negative perceptions of gay sexuality (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

The varying strategies of resisting gay stigma bring up questions around coping with and resisting stigma. Are bears' resistance strategies a form of coping, empowerment, or both? Stigma coping is primarily aimed at preventing negative outcomes with the possibility of being

depleting on individuals' psychological resources (Shih 2004). However, increasing self-esteem is another outcome of overcoming stigma. The analysis here suggests that stigma resistance is both taxing and empowering. Most of the men in this study described still feeling weight stigma within the bear community (e.g., the muscle bears and bear costume) and avoiding mainstream gay clubs. Stories about gay stereotypes also suggest that resistance to stigma requires constant monitoring of actions to gain legitimacy as a masculine gay man (Yeung et al. 2006). Some men in this study described themselves as resistant to call themselves gay and avoiding effeminate behavior. Some of these stories speak to the empowerment side of resisting stigma. In narratives of attending bear events, these men described feeling more validated as being free to flaunt their bigger bodies as well as the confidence they when they walk into a bear bar. Joking about effeminacy also was a way to feel empowered when resisting gay stigma for some men.

Despite the bear community's more relaxed attitude around bigger bodies, simply becoming a bear did not erase all feelings of weight and sexual orientation stigma. In fact, it brought up new issues for some of these men. One common theme was how to interpret the bear body in a changing bear community. For example, the emergence of the muscle bear category revived old feelings of negative body image. Concern over presenting a masculine look as a bear meant paying close attention to and—managing—weight, body hair, facial hair, and clothing to embody the “bear costume”. In both cases, some men felt compelled to engage in front work aimed at embodying an ideal bear body (Goffman 1959). This result demonstrates three points. First, it is evidence of the pervasiveness of weight and sexual orientation stigmas in America. Second, it illustrates the dynamic nature of alternative subcultures. As the bear community has evolved and grown, the original notion of praising large hirsute, masculine bodies has started to shift to where the muscle bear trumps the average bear of the 1980s. Finally, resisting stigma through joining an alternative subculture can be undermined if the subculture's values and how it defines itself changes.

Finally, this analysis has implications for social scientific knowledge on the transferability of resistance strategies. Individuals who have already experienced being stigmatized may be better prepared to resist newer stigmas (Thoits 2011). That is, some of the same resistance strategies they used before can be adapted to cope with the new stigma. In this case, overweight gay men who are out already have, to some degree, coped with the stigma of being gay. Therefore, when they encounter criticism from peers about weight and view their

bodies as not fitting the ideals of gay culture, overweight gay men may already have the skills to cope with weight stigma.

Both weight and sexuality are two attributes that are culturally loaded with stereotypes and judgments about character. These notions, flawed or not, have the power to disadvantage individuals in everyday interactions, discrimination, and self-perceptions. This chapter used the bear subculture as an example of how multiple stigmas are resisted using combinations of deflecting and challenging strategies (Thoits 2011), as well as how an alternative subculture maintains alternative forms of prestige (Schwalbe et al. 2000). As this chapter has shown, doubly stigmatized individuals are not completely passive in their experience of subordination. The existence of alternative groups who resist stigmas, as well as experience with overcoming stigma, provides a script for resistance strategies to where individuals can feel accepted and improve self-regard. However, resistance is also limited. Some strategies, such as distancing from others who enact stereotypes, risk further segmenting subcultures and reproducing the negative meanings associated with a stigmatized status. Additionally, resistance among the bears can be hindered as the community changes how it defines what it means to be a bear and shifts body ideals.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

#### CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

In this dissertation, I examined gay men's weight perceptions, experience of weight stigma, the stereotypes of being gay, and how some gay men resist the stigma of being overweight and gay. The goal of these studies is to provide a more comprehensive view of the significance of experiencing and resisting stigmas related to weight status and sexuality. Being overweight and gay are two statuses that are stereotyped negatively via cultural beliefs of what is normal (Goffman 1963) and inhabiting multiple stigmatized statuses increases the felt effect of stigma (Dowd and Bengston 1978). I employed a mixed methods design to quantitatively investigate broad trends in body image, depression symptoms, and sexual orientation. I complemented the quantitative analysis with a qualitative study of the bear subculture. The qualitative portion described how some gay men actively resist weight and gay stigma and analyzed the benefits and risks of men's resistance strategies.

This dissertation contributes to the social science literature on body image, sexuality, and stigma resistance in several ways. First, I extended past work that has examined the uniqueness of gay men's body image in terms of discrimination, anxiety around showing the body, weight management, general self esteem, and sexual identity formation (Duncan 2007; Duggan and McCreary 2004; Sevier 1994; Udall-Weiner 2009) by exploring gay men's experience of and resistance to weight and gay stigma. The quantitative results build on this work by analyzing body image and sexuality at two points of time using nationally representative data. I find that gay men in early adulthood are more disadvantaged in their weight perceptions than heterosexual men, and these more negative weight perceptions pose an additional risk of increasing gay men's heightened risk of depression. Additionally, gay men, compared to heterosexual men, have a lower BMI threshold for being more likely to be dissatisfied with their weight.

This dissertation also contributes to our understanding around the experience of multiple stigmas. Past work has clearly demonstrated the social costs associated with being gay, including isolation from gay peers, increased depression, being stereotyped as effeminate, and strained relationships with family and friends (Blashill and Powlishta 2009; Lapinski, Braz, and

Maloney 2010; Meyer 2003; Smith 1998; Ueno 2005; 2010). Overweight individuals are also stereotyped and discriminated against (Bordo 1993; Hebl and Turchin 2005; Puhl and Brownell 2006; Phillips and Hill 1998; Rothblum, Miller, and Garbutt 1988). The results of Chapter Two provide evidence of how being overweight, gay, and both contribute to deficits in mental health with overweight sexual minorities experiencing the greatest disadvantage.

The analysis in Chapter Three provides a case of how individuals are not passive in their experience of stigma. Both Thoits (2011) and Shih (2004) suggest that stigma resistance not only challenges narrow stereotypes, but also is a means for subordinated individuals feel empowered, as opposed to just coping. The question becomes: How do stigmatized groups transform negative feelings of stigma into validation? I suggested that one solution is joining and maintaining a subculture with alternative forms of power that affirm stigmatized attributes as the answer (Schwalbe et al. 2000; Schwalbe and Schrock 1996). The bears do so by providing a safe space to flaunt larger bodies, be openly attracted to larger bodies, and challenge effeminate stereotypes of being gay in various ways. However, resisting the weight and gay stereotypes among the bears presents a risk of subordinating other gay men who act more effeminate or refuse to adopt a “bear costume” (Hennen 2005; Schwalbe et al. 2000).

The analyses in Chapter Three also contribute to our understanding of how stigma resistance strategies are transferrable. That is, when one has developed strategies to resist one type of stigma in the past, they can apply these strategies to resisting newer stigmas (Thoits 2011). Thoits also hypothesized that past experience with stigma will increase the likelihood of resisting stereotypes. I used the bears as an example of this process. The men in my study discussed their coming out stories and how they coped with the negative reactions from others. As they encountered a newer stigma for being overweight in gay culture, they were able to transfer their previous experience to navigate weight stereotypes in gay culture. However, this was aided by discovering the bear community, thus highlighting the importance of alternative ideals in subcultures for successful resistance to stigma.

This study also demonstrates the pervasive nature of weight and gay sexuality stigma. In Chapter Two, gay men are at a greater risk of depression, despite controlling for past depression and other factors. The Chapter Three analyses revealed themes of still feeling stigmatized for weight and sexuality, despite joining an alternative subculture and engaging in deflecting and challenging strategies, and doing front work (Goffman 1959) to gain popularity among the bears.

This suggests that although resistance strategies are useful in fighting stigma, challenging stereotypes, and gaining social support from other stigmatized individuals, resistance strategies are limited in protecting individuals from the complete experience of stigma (Thoits 2011). Additionally, the Chapter Three analyses show how resistance strategies can be undermined as social groups evolve. As the definition of what it means to be a bear expanded, feelings of validation for having a bigger body were challenged. Additionally, the emphasis on adopting a “bear look” brought additional body image concerns within the bear community.

The analyses in Chapter Three contribute to the existing scholarship on the bear subculture. Past scholarship on the bears has examined masculinity and resistance to effeminacy (Hennen 2005; 2008), resistance to medical notions of healthy weight (Gough and Flanders 2009), the creation of spaces to flaunt bigger bodies (Locke 1997; Monaghan 2005; Pyle and Klein 2011), and the theoretical benefits of adopting a bear label (Wright 1997b). My analysis of the bear community provides a complex view of subculture dynamics and managing stigma. The community provides a place for men to feel validated in their bigger bodies and sexuality, but also presents new challenges to body image. More specifically, the analysis suggests that previously eased body image pressures among the bears have begun to reappear with the arrival of the muscle bear. This is also evident in the anxieties around adopting a bear look through managing body weight, hair, and “buying the costume”. It may be the case that these new dilemmas are due to an evolving bear community that has become more inclusive and more broadly defined, and thus less effective at sheltering members from broader pressures related to appearance.

#### MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

In Chapter Two, I examined gay men’s weight satisfaction and depression, relative to heterosexual men by using two waves of nationally representative data. Are gay men more dissatisfied with their bodies? Overall, gay men are more likely to be dissatisfied with their weight than heterosexual men in young adulthood but during adolescence, sexual orientation does not appear to explicitly impact weight perceptions. Differences in weight satisfaction by sexual orientation were net of actual weight differences. Gay men are also more affected by increases in BMI in terms of being dissatisfied with weight than heterosexual men. Does being a sexual minority status and weight dissatisfaction increase depression symptoms in adolescence and young adulthood? As expected, gay men reported more depression symptoms than

heterosexual men. Net of body weight and weight perceptions, previous wave depression symptoms, and other factors, gay males report greater depression symptoms than heterosexual males in adolescence and young adulthood. Taken together, these results suggest that overweight gay men are at a greater risk for depression than heterosexual men and normal weight gay men.

In the second study, I examined a subculture of gay men who actively resist weight and sexual orientation stigma. This complements the quantitative results in three ways. First, by examining gay men's narratives of coming out and experience with weight and sexual orientation stigmas, the qualitative analysis portrays the individual experience of being stereotyped. Second, the bears' resistance to stereotypes about bigger bodies and sexuality reveals how some gay men actively resist negative body image and feel more comfortable as gay men. Downplaying and joking about effeminacy, defining weight as not stigmatizing, distancing from and confronting gay stereotypes, and gaining social support from bear friends were common resistance strategies. Finally, the qualitative analysis demonstrates the complex nature of body image in gay America. Simply becoming a bear did not automatically ease everyone's concerns around weight. In fact, it introduced new anxieties of embodying an ideal bear body.

This study also investigated to how creating and joining an alternative subculture is beneficial for reframing negative feelings from stigma. Oppressed individuals often resist by creating their own forms of power, hierarchy, and prestige (Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir 2000). The bears affirm larger bodies as ideal and adopt a "bear look" that signifies membership (Schwalbe and Schrock 1996). But as the community has evolved, so has the alternative body ideals. The emergence of the muscle bear category poses challenges to some bears' feelings of validation in the community.

By studying the bear subculture, this dissertation also tested Thoits' (2011) conceptualization of stigma resistance strategies and how resistance can be undermined. The bears in my study enacted both deflecting and challenging strategies to resist weight and sexual orientation stigma. This study brings up questions about how resistance strategies are undermined. Ironically, feelings of validation in the bear community were challenged with the rise of the muscle bears and pressure to adopt a "bear look". Bears in my study referenced shifting their resistance strategies to becoming more body-conscious in adopting a "bear look," avoiding situations where they would have to reference their bodies with muscle bears, or

managing their bodies toward becoming a muscle bear. Additionally, resisting gay stereotypes brought up the consequences of reproducing negative perceptions associated with gay stigma through defensively othering effeminate gay men and criticizing gay men who jokingly use feminine pronouns (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

### STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

A range of work has examined sexual orientation differences in body image and depression symptoms. But a lot of this work has been limited by small sample sizes, and little age, race, and geographic variation. The quantitative portion of this study has sought to improve on this work by employing two waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). This provides a more complete picture of body image, gender, sexuality, and age. As individuals age, sexual orientation appears to affect body image more while gender drives differences in weight perceptions during adolescence. However, one limitation of the quantitative analysis is the low frequency of sexual minorities. Sexual minorities made up less than ten percent of the sample in both waves of data. This presented issues with examining interaction effects between weight perceptions and sexual orientation due to low cell sizes. This was remedied by coding weight perceptions as satisfied versus dissatisfied. A better strategy would be examining the interaction of direction of weight perceptions (overweight or underweight versus satisfied) and sexual orientation because of the gender differences in how body image is experienced. Women experience greater depression symptoms when they view themselves as overweight while for men, greater depression symptoms are attributed to perceptions of being underweight (Frisco et al. 2009).

I employed a mixed methods design to capture more of the experience of weight and sexual orientation stigmas by providing two perspectives. The analysis in Chapter Two gave a broad systematic view of differences in depression symptoms and weight perceptions among sexual orientation groups. I conceptualized weight perceptions as indicative of feeling the effects of weight stigma and depression symptoms as being responsive to experience with both weight and sexual orientation stigma. The study of the bear community unpacked the effects of negative weight perceptions and sexual orientation stigma. In doing so, the qualitative analysis presents a more complete interpretation of the experience of weight and sexual orientation stigmas, as well as how some gay men resist these stigmas. The mixed methods design of this study also gives a more dynamic view of weight and sexual orientation stigma and addresses

some of the limitations in each study. One limitation of the Chapter Two study was failing to capture how gay men are active in their experience of stigma. Chapter Three addressed this by examining various resistance strategies and gave examples of how stigma is experienced. Chapter Three was limited by examining only one segment of the gay community. Chapter Two addressed this limitation by analyzing the experience of gay men more broadly and demonstrated the increased risk of depression for overweight gay men, net of past depression and other factors.

The study design, however, is not without limitations. For example, the age of respondents in the Add Health data ranged from early teen years to late twenties while the average age of the bear sample was forty years old, which makes the complementary nature of the two studies more tenuous. Additionally, the experiences of the bears in my sample call for more research on weight stigma terms of perceived weight discrimination and weight management among gay men.

Combining the interview and content analysis data provided a more complete analysis of bear narratives. Especially in terms of resisting weight stigma, there was considerable overlap in themes and supports theoretical statements about how individuals draw on cultural narratives to construct their personal narratives as a bear (Loseke 2007; Mason-Schrock 1996). Additionally, there are other sources from which bears can draw from to construct their personal narratives such as bear social groups and bear pride events as well as experience and resist weight and sexual orientations stigma. As overweight gay men who have experienced stereotypes most of their lives, bears might take instances of discrimination and resistance normal and less likely to recall them in interviews (Martin 2003). So while the analysis of bear-themed media and life history interviews yielded rich data, this study could be strengthened through ethnographic studies of bears, bear social groups, and bear-pride events. Expanding the study to include ethnography would also raise more conclusions about how resistance strategies are utilized and challenged in everyday life. Additionally, this would strengthen conclusions about how changes in the bear subculture (e.g., muscle bear) impact the success of resisting weight stigma.

In keeping with the stigma, I interpreted men's stories about the body as examples of resistance. However, some themes noted in the Chapter Three analysis could have alternate interpretations that include minority statuses and inequality, emotions and embodiment, and relationships. I discuss this more in the following section.

## DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results and limitations of this study provide several routes for future research. In this section, I suggest directions for future research in regards to weight, stigma, and sexuality. I conclude by reviewing more general themes among the bear data that fall outside the scope of stigma and resistance.

### **Weight and Sexual Orientation Stigma**

The significant association between being gay and weight perceptions calls for more research into the effects of subcultures on weight and other stigmas. In this analysis, the bear community had clear effects on body image and experience of sexual orientation stigma. However, there are other subcultures centered on fighting stereotypes of the body. Hennen's (2008) comparative ethnography of bears, radical faeries, and leathermen is an excellent example of how subcultures with seemingly different populations enact similar strategies for resisting gay stereotypes. This work could be expanded by comparatively studying other sexual subcultures in the gay and straight world. For example, the PrimeTimers are a national group of gay men with chapters across America that rejects stereotypical notions of aging bodies in gay culture and stereotypes of being older in the broader culture. Other subcultures that affirm sexual attraction to overweight individuals like Big Beautiful Women and chubby chaser groups would also make for interesting comparisons for stigma resistance strategies across gender and sexual orientations and provide a broader understanding of stigma resistance. This could also be studied using a mixed methods design through interviews with members of these groups and targeted surveys that measure the impact of cultural body standards, the internalization of stigma, and resistance to stigma.

Another route of future research should consider gay women's experience of weight and sexual orientation stigma. In Chapter Two, I estimated additional models including women (see Appendix A). On average, gay women experienced the greatest amount of depression symptoms and were more likely than heterosexual men to be dissatisfied with weight. This is in contradiction to past work that suggests that gay women are similar to heterosexual men in their body image concerns (Sevier 1994). One possible interpretation of this finding is that gender, and not sexual orientation, is driving body image for gay women (Bordo 1993). However, future research should further examine gay women's experiences of body image and gay stigma and whether or not gay women experience gay cultural effects on body image.

Finally, general body image was found to be salient to adolescents and young adults, but sexual orientation appeared to have a greater effect in young adulthood than adolescence. Alternately, my older sample of bears suggests a more mixed story of body image past early adulthood. The subculture helped a lot of men put body image concerns to rest, but some referenced stories of still feeling negative body image. Additionally, other qualitative work on gay men, age, and the body suggests that body image remains salient in old age (Slevin and Linneman 2010). Future research could expand on this literature by systematically examining gay men's body image in data sets that include middle-aged and older adults, such as the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS) and the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP).

### **Research Directions for the Bears**

I interpreted bear narratives as examples redefining body ideals, resisting gay stereotyping, and resisting weight stigma and as an example of a subculture in the broader scheme of sexual stratification (Green 2011). However, four other themes in the data warrant future research: minority statuses, emotions and embodiment, relationship status, and visibility of the bears. Various minority statuses, such as race and HIV status, emerged as prominent themes that created barriers to full participation in the bear community. Race, in terms of stereotyping and visibility were evident in these men's stories. For most white men, the bear culture encapsulated only body and masculinity and was a site to desire (and be desired for having) larger bodies. When probed further on the "whiteness" of the bear community or the creation of race-based labels for non-white bear bodies, most white interviewees expressed color-blind views of the community, playing up the inclusiveness of "all types". The use of special labels for bear bodies of a different skin color (e.g., bear of color, black bear) were viewed as not different from the other general labels (e.g., cub, bear). However, the Latino and black men of my study told a different story. These men shared accounts of feeling rejected from the bear culture or fetishized among the bears for their skin color. In the magazine I analyzed, an overwhelming majority of photographs feature white bodies. Such accounts of rejection and cues from bear-themed media provide evidence of racialized sexual stratification among the bears and general gay culture (Green 2008b) that challenge the inclusive nature of the community. Similarly, HIV status impacted men's participation in the bear community. While there were no accounts of being fetishized for the illness, nor bear-specific terms for bodies with HIV, some men in my

sample shared accounts of invisibility due to their HIV-positive status among the bears that were similar to black and Latino men's race-based accounts of rejection.

Taken together, minorities statuses can reduce desirability and at the very least, place minority gay men in situations where they must decide to react to stereotypes and rejections. For example, many black gay men exist in a predominantly white gay culture and often “do race” by engaging stereotypes about the black male body and dominance, as a means to compete in the gay sexual field (Green 2008b). More broadly, men who might be perceived as “less desirable” in gay culture might alter their appearance or “play in” to stereotypes in gay settings to increase their chances of finding a sexual partner (Green 2011). One future route of research will be to advance Green's “sexual fields framework (2008a; 2008b; 2011) by examining how even resistance groups like the bears maintain broader inequalities in race and desire and how marginalized groups like black and Latino gay men alter their presentation of self among the bears to achieve greater desirability.

The body, emotional experience and culture, and sexual identity are inextricably linked for the bears in my study. A lot of the language used to describe body image and weight stigma in these men's stories invoked a common emotional script. In short, these men tied their embodiment as a bear toward achieving acceptance, validation, and putting shame and fear about their bodies to rest. This was also evident in bear-themed media, suggesting there is an emotion culture (Hochschild 1979) around the bear body. Using the bears as an example, future work could unpack this to reveal more general processes in the body-emotions link. This can include examining the link between personal narratives of bears and cultural narratives in bear-themed media and observing the emotion culture at bear-themed events.

Relationship status seemed to impact how some men viewed their connection to the bear community. For men in long-term relationships, participation at bear-themed events and importance of the bear community in their lives decreased. For single men or those in open-relationships, the bear community appeared to be more important. Those seeking sexual partners view the bear community as a means to reduce the likelihood of rejection or as one bear in my study described it: “It's like marketing a product. You gotta know your market and consumer. If I'm gonna have people physically interested in me, I need to go to a market where this is what they're looking for.” This is similar to Green's (2011) observation of gay men carefully

selecting gay bars where their erotic capital is more valued and therefore more likely to feel accepted.

Finally, the other theme evident in some men's stories relates to the visibility of the bear culture itself. That is, as a segment of the gay culture, some men interpreted the bears as still an underground group. Two themes in the data relate to this. First, for mostly men in the South who were either juggling a gay identity and heterosexual relationship or living in a community that appeared unwelcoming towards gay men, the bear community offered a link to the gay community without being explicitly out. Having a bear paw tattoo or a bear-pride bumper sticker was a more subtle means announce their membership in the community than a rainbow flag or other prominent markers of gay pride. Second, the creation of subcultural terms such as labels for the body or the common ways for bears to express their attraction toward other men through a "woof" or growl, suggests another way that some gay men signify their gay identity without being completely out. Or as one member in my study suggested:

"If you see another attractive bear, cub, or all of the above, you give them a woof... I mean, it's kind of like a secret code, you know. Being a gay man, you can't be out in public and go up and hit on any man that you find attractive because you're going to get punched in the face, you know. If you don't know that if a person is gay, giving out a little woof as you're walking by, if they are in that community, it is, they...it's like a secret code. It lets them know that you are interested with out being too much. Without being offensive.

A subtle component to this theme is gender. In particular, men in my study invoking bear terms to not completely out themselves, as well as men existing in settings that do not embrace their gay identity, could provide some insight into how subordinated men might reclaim some status as a man. Alternately, another interpretation could be less about gender and more about protection from violence. In the case of gay men in communities that seem unwelcoming and in the quote above, the "secret codes" of the bears are a way to find other gay men without putting one's self at risk of violence.

Body size and sexual orientation are two characteristics that have increased in national attention. Programs targeting weight loss and healthy living, fat activist groups like the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), and political debates and public opinion on equal rights for gay and lesbian individuals show how much attention the U.S. places on these statuses. The increased visibility raises questions about whether or not overweight and gay individuals are treated equally, how being stigmatized increases the risk of mental health

problems, and how individuals resist and cope with stigma. The conclusions of this dissertation suggest that individuals are stigmatized for body size and sexual orientation and feel the effects of stigma through weight dissatisfaction and risk of depression. In order to avoid the consequences of stigma, some gay and overweight individuals adopt resistance strategies that on one hand are empowering, but on the other, risk subordinating others and depleting one's psychological resources.

APPENDIX A

ADDITIONAL STATISTICAL TABLES AND FIGURES

Table A.1: Binary Logistic Regressions of Weight Satisfaction on Sexual Orientation and BMI; Odds Ratios (standard errors in parentheses); National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Waves II and III

<i>Measure</i>	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	Wave II	Wave III	Wave II	Wave III	Wave II	Wave III
Sexuality (vs. Straight Male)						
Gay Male	1.07 (0.19)	0.64** (0.11)	1.06 (0.21)	0.55** (0.10)	1.06 (0.21)	0.61** (0.10)
Gay Female	0.58** (0.09)	0.69*** (0.07)	0.51*** (0.04)	0.65*** (0.07)	0.51*** (0.09)	0.47*** (0.07)
Heterosexual Female	0.76*** (0.04)	0.68*** (0.04)	0.67*** (0.04)	0.63*** (0.04)	0.61*** (0.03)	0.50*** (0.03)
BMI	---	---	0.89*** (0.00)	0.84*** (0.01)	0.93*** (0.01)	0.90*** (0.01)
Sexuality*BMI						
Gay Male*BMI	---	---	---	---	0.97 (0.03)	1.00 (0.03)
Gay Female*BMI	---	---	---	---	0.94 (0.03)	0.83*** (0.03)
Heterosexual Female*BMI	---	---	---	---	0.89*** (0.01)	0.85*** (0.01)
Race (vs. White)						
Black	1.12 (0.08)	1.02 (0.07)	1.29*** (0.09)	1.22** (0.10)	1.35*** (0.10)	1.30*** (0.11)
Hispanic	0.75*** (0.06)	0.77*** (0.06)	0.78** (0.07)	0.85 (0.08)	0.78** (0.07)	0.85 (0.08)
Asian	0.84 (0.12)	0.93 (0.11)	0.70* (0.10)	0.78 (0.11)	0.66** (0.10)	0.75* (0.10)
Other	0.72* (0.11)	0.78 (0.12)	0.77 (0.13)	0.95 (0.16)	0.74 (0.12)	0.97 (0.17)
Age	0.94*** (0.02)	0.94*** (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)	0.97 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)	0.97 (0.02)
Education <sup>a</sup>	1.09 (0.07)	1.07*** (0.01)	1.05 (0.07)	1.04** (0.02)	1.05 (0.07)	1.03* (0.02)
McFadden's R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.01	0.07	0.14	0.08	0.16
N	10,566	10,661	10,414	10,187	10,414	10,187

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

a – Education is mother's education in Wave II and respondents' years of education in Wave III

Table A.2: OLS Regression Unstandardized Coefficients (standard errors in parentheses) of Depression Symptoms on Sexual Orientation, Weight Perceptions, and BMI for all Gender-Sexual Orientation Groups; National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Wave II and III

<i>Measure</i>	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	Wave II	Wave III	Wave II	Wave III	Wave II	Wave III
Sexuality (vs. Straight Male)						
Gay Male	0.77* (0.32)	1.13*** (0.31)	0.78* (0.32)	1.09*** (0.32)	0.52 (0.52)	1.19** (0.41)
Gay Female	1.36*** (0.32)	1.86*** (0.23)	1.30*** (0.33)	1.77*** (0.23)	1.31** (0.48)	1.98*** (0.33)
Heterosexual Female	0.65*** (0.09)	0.33*** (0.10)	0.59*** (0.09)	0.27** (0.10)	0.66*** (0.14)	0.61*** (0.16)
BMI	---	---	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)
Weight Satisfaction (vs. Dissatisfied with Weight)	---	---	-0.56*** (0.09)	-0.82*** (0.11)	-0.50*** (0.12)	-0.51*** (0.14)
Sexuality*Weight Satisfaction						
Gay Male*Satisfied	---	---	---	---	0.43 (0.66)	-0.17 (0.65)
Gay Female*Satisfied	---	---	---	---	-0.02 (0.63)	-0.41 (0.45)
Heterosexual Female*Satisfied	---	---	---	---	-0.15 (0.18)	-0.70*** (0.20)
Race (vs. White)						
Black	0.30* (0.12)	0.53*** (0.13)	0.36** (0.12)	0.55*** (0.13)	0.36** (0.12)	0.54*** (0.13)
Hispanic	0.80*** (0.15)	0.55*** (0.16)	0.78*** (0.15)	0.49** (0.16)	0.78*** (0.15)	0.48** (0.16)
Asian	0.77*** (0.21)	0.57*** (0.20)	0.74*** (0.21)	0.49* (0.21)	0.74*** (0.21)	0.49* (0.21)
Other	0.70* (0.30)	0.66* (0.28)	0.69* (0.30)	0.71* (0.29)	0.68* (0.30)	0.73* (0.29)
Age	0.05 (0.03)	-0.09** (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	-0.09* (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	-0.09** (0.03)
Education <sup>a</sup>	-0.35*** (0.10)	-0.17*** (0.03)	-0.33*** (0.10)	-0.17*** (0.03)	-0.33*** (0.10)	-0.16*** (0.03)
Previous Wave Depression	0.56*** (0.01)	0.32*** (0.01)	0.55*** (0.01)	0.31*** (0.01)	0.55*** (0.01)	0.31*** (0.01)
Constant	1.22*** (0.44)	7.17*** (0.70)	2.03*** (0.46)	7.10*** (0.70)	2.02*** (0.47)	6.54*** (0.67)
N	10,504	10,605	10,351	10,126	10,351	10,126
R <sup>2</sup>	0.35	0.16	0.35	0.17	0.35	0.17

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

a – Education is mother’s education in Wave II and respondents’ years of education in Wave III

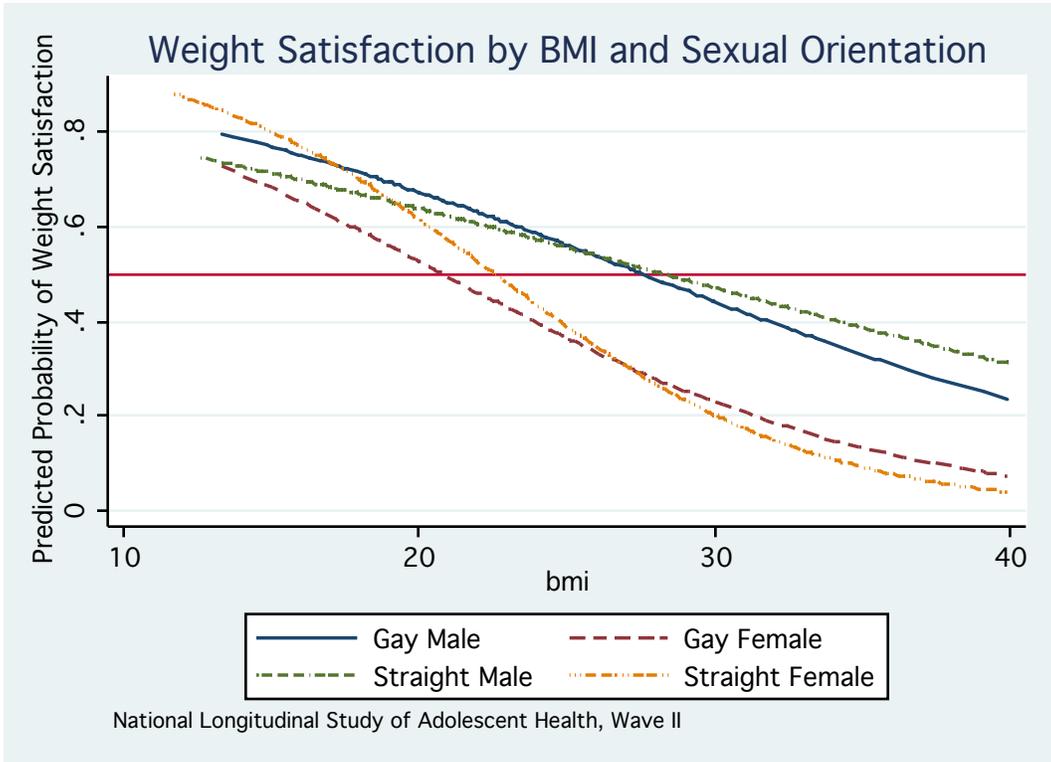


Figure A.1: Weight Satisfaction by Sexual Orientation/Gender for (Total Sample), Wave II

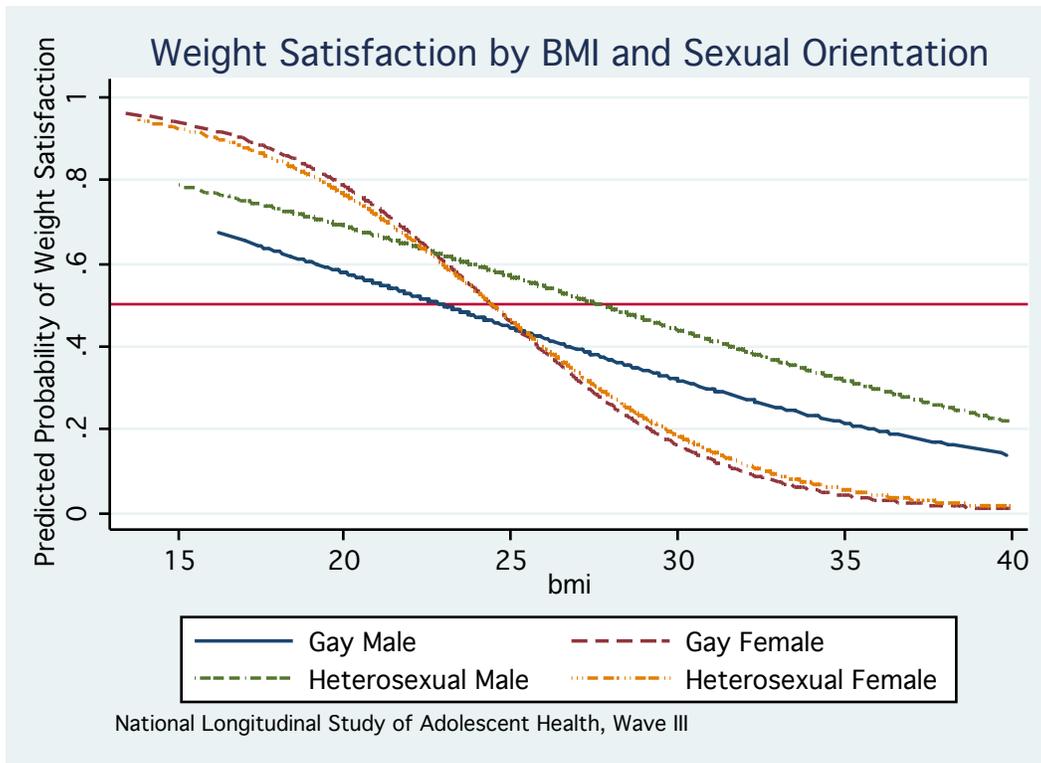


Figure A.2: Weight Satisfaction by Sexual Orientation/Gender for (Total Sample), Wave III

## APPENDIX B

### GLOSSARY OF BEAR SUBCULTURAL TERMS

**Bear:** A member of the bear subculture. The bear is the average hirsute body with facial hair and a large stomach. One interviewee defined a bear as having a beard, belly, and body hair.

**Chaser:** A gay men who admires bigger gay men or bears, though he is not visibly overweight.

**Chub:** A gay man who is visibly overweight. Sometimes used as the upper weight limit cut-off for the bear community. Additionally, the bear community drew from Girth and Mirth Chapters, which were chubby men and the men who admired them.

**Cub:** A younger bear or someone who has just come into the bear scene. Often described as someone who will eventually become a bear when he is older.

**Grizzly:** An older bear with “untamed” facial hair.

**Leathemen or Leather bear:** A segment of the gay community that has some overlap with the bear community. For men in my study, those who were part of the leather scene viewed it as a costume heightened masculinity.

**Muscle bear:** Commonly noted as a gay man with a hairy and more muscular body than the average bear. In *A Bear's Life*, the muscle bear is described as “feels like a bear but works out as a twink”.

**Otter:** Described as a younger, skinnier, but hairy, gay man.

**Polar Bear:** An older bear who is described as having a youthful personality.

**Twink:** The opposite of a bear. Men in this study described the twink as more effeminate, skinnier, more toned, and hairless.

**Wolf:** An older version of an otter.

**Woof/growl:** A common pick-up line or conversation opener among bears. Woofing or growling at someone is similar to saying “hello” or “you’re handsome”. Described by some men in this study as a “secret language” and a way for them to compliment other men with less risk of outing themselves.

## APPENDIX C

### QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### **Interview Guide for the Bears**

##### *Coming Out*

Do you have a story of when you first told people about your sexuality?

What was it like when you told your family?

Did anyone react negatively?

What was going through your head when you first started telling people?

Some people say that when they came out that they did not know about the bears. Was this the same for you? How so? *Ask for an example of when they first found the bear community*

What prompted your interest in the bear community?

What parts of the bear community appeal to you the most?

Which parts are you not so satisfied with?

Do you identify with any other gay communities? If so, which ones?

Does your involvement with the bears overlap?

Do you see these as complimentary? *Ask for examples if so..*

##### *Labels*

In the bear community, there are several terms and labels for the types of men. Are you familiar with these? If so, what do these mean (ask for examples)? Do you identify with any of these labels?

How about other terms in the community? What do these mean? Do you use these (ask for examples of contexts in which they are appropriate)?

##### *Boundary work/masculinity*

What does being a bear mean to you?

What are the ways that you signify your status as a bear in daily life?

How well known is the bear community among mainstream culture?

How would you rate the status of bears among other gay subcultures?

What are some characteristics that make the bear community lower/higher in status?

Would you say that there are body or attitude requirements to be a bear? Describe.

What sort of men do you seek out for...

romantically? (What sort of man do you seek out?) Can you give an example of this? friendships?

dating/sexually?

Give examples, why?

Some men have expressed norms about dating outside the bear community. Are you aware of these? If so, what are they? Can you tell me about an instance of this?

Are you a member of any bear-specific social groups? If so, how would you characterize the racial/gender/class/body type diversity in this group?

Where do you meet other bears?

The bears seem to have a lot of events around the country. Have you attended any of these? If so...

How would you describe the racial/body diversity at these events?

How welcoming would you describe the men at this event?

What do people do at these events? *Ask for examples*

### **Theme-guided Interview Guide (checklist)**

1. Sexual identity and coming out stories (walk me through what it was like when you came out)
2. Discovering the bears (When did you first hear about the bears? What is it all about?)
3. +/- of the Bear community (What aspects appeal to you? What is it like?)
4. Describe what a bear is (looks/actions/events/conversation/friends)
5. Relationships
6. Bear media
7. Overlap with other communities
8. Language, labels, and terms (are there any specific Bear terms? Give me an example of how they are used)

*Things to consider (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001)*

Treat efforts to get control of the interview as data on how men construct masculinity.

Let respondents ask the first question “Do you have any questions before we get started?”

Ask participants to be an expert “In light of your experience...”

Circle back and probe sensitive topics once rapport has been established.

Let the respondent select the setting.

Cite other interviewees’ responses if answers get too minimized.

Might be useful to put down notes or not put the recorder in a prominent place: ensures more comfort. If so, it is important to take notes immediately after the interview.

Use your own status as somewhat new to the community to ask probing questions. This could also play into reciprocity—share your own experiences after they have shared theirs.

Instead of “how did that make you feel...” questions, ask “what was going through your mind when...” or “what are your thoughts about...”

Ask for examples to avoid the “you know what I mean responses”.

Ask about the risk when they first came out as well as the context (family, age, etc)

If vague, ask questions like: “did you mean... or did you mean...” or “some men have experienced as this. You seem to have a different experience...”

## APPENDIX D

### QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT FORM

#### Informed Consent Form

I freely and without any coercion consent to be interviewed by Patrick McGrady as a part of a research project on the Bear subculture. The purpose of this study is to further understand how gay men construct their identities and masculinity through membership or association with the Bear subculture.

I understand my participation is completely voluntary and that I can decide to withdraw from participation at any point in time, with no penalty, and have the right to ask any questions regarding the project. I understand that I will be asked a series of questions about my association with the Bear subculture and will be free to provide as little or much detail in my responses. I understand that this interview will take approximately one and a half to two hours to complete.

I understand that my real name will not be used in transcripts or papers based on this research. To ensure anonymity, a pseudonym will be used in all files and manuscripts. All responses will be confidential, to the extent allowed by law.

I understand there are no significant benefits or risks from participating in this project.

I understand that I may contact Patrick McGrady, Florida State University, Sociology Department, (850) 644-6416, if I have any questions about my participation.

I have read and understand this consent form:

---

Subject

Date

#### Contact information:

Researcher: Patrick McGrady, Florida State University Graduate Student  
(850) 644-6416

Major Professor: Dr. John Reynolds, Florida State University, Professor  
(850) 644-8825

Florida State University Institutional Review Board; (850) 644-8633

Mailing address: Florida State University, Human Subjects Committee, 2010 Levy Avenue, Suite 276-C, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2742

## APPENDIX D

### IRB APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Office of the Vice President For Research  
Human Subjects Committee  
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742  
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392

#### RE-APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 12/20/2011  
To: Patrick McGrady  
Dept.: SOCIOLOGY

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Re-approval of Use of Human subjects in Research  
Identity and Manhood Construction of Bear Men

Your request to continue the research project listed above involving human subjects has been approved by the Human Subjects Committee. If your project has not been completed by 12/12/2012, you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the committee.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your renewal request, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this re-approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting of research subjects. You are reminded that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report in writing, any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chair of your department and/or your major professor are reminded of their responsibility for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in their department. They are advised to review the protocols as often as necessary to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

Cc: John Reynolds, Advisor  
HSC No. 2011.7339

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Yeung, King-To, Mindy Stompler, and Renee Wharton. 2006. "Making Men in Gay Fraternities: Resisting and Reproducing Multiple Dimensions of Hegemonic Masculinity." *Gender & Society* 20:5-31.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OCTOBER 2012

### EDUCATION

Ph.D. in Sociology, Florida State University, 2012

Dissertation: "Sexuality and Larger Bodies: Gay Men's Experience of and Resistance Against Weight and Sexual Orientation Stigma"

Committee: John Reynolds (chair), Douglas Schrock, Koji Ueno, Jasminka Illich-Ernst  
Preliminary Comprehensive Exam in Social Stratification and Inequality Reproduction,  
Passed with Honors, 2009

M.S. in Sociology, Florida State University, 2009

MS thesis: "Cultural Mismatch in the Classroom: Beyond Black-White Differences"

Committee: John Reynolds (chair), Verna Keith, Janice McCabe

B.A. in Sociology, Berea College, 2007

### ACADEMIC POSITIONS

Lecturer, University of New Haven, 2012-present

Temporary Full-time Instructor, Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS),  
2010-present

Adjunct Instructor, Lindsey Wilson College, 2012

Graduate Student Teaching Assistant and Instructor, Florida State University, 2007-2012

### GRANTS, HONORS, AND AWARDS

#### At Florida State University

Florida State University, Dissertation Improvement Grant: "Sexuality and Larger Bodies: Gay Men's Experience of and Resistance Against Weight and Sexual Orientation Stigma." \$739.00, 2011

Peer Mentorship Award, Department of Sociology, 2011

Nominated for Graduate Student Leadership Award, Graduate School, 2011

Graduate Student Teacher Award, Department of Sociology, 2010

#### At Berea College

Graduate Studies Grant, Department of Sociology, \$1,000.00, 2007

Outstanding Research Paper Award, Department of Sociology, 2007

Fuliang Chang Award for Excellence in Sociology, 2007

Seabury Leadership Award, 2007

Francis Finnell Vandivier Scholarship, Berea College, 2007

Stamm Appalachian Service Award, Berea College, 2007

Emily G. Graham Volunteer Service Award, 2005

Bonner Scholar Program, 2003-2007

## **TEACHING EXPERIENCE AND WORKSHOP PRESENTATIONS**

### Undergraduate Courses Taught

Deviance  
Introduction to Sociology  
Social Interaction  
Social Class & Inequality  
Methods of Social Research  
Sociological Theory  
Research Methods and Statistics for Human Services

### Teaching Workshops Presented

“Effective Teaching and Surviving Graduate School,” FSU, 2010, 2011  
“Time Management and Teaching,” FSU, 2010  
“Basics of Teaching Series: What I Wish I Knew before I Started Teaching,” FSU, 2010, 2011  
“Getting Ready to Teach: A Four-Square Method of Planning Courses,” FSU, 2011

FSU Program for Instructional Excellence (PIE) Associate, August 2010-August 2011:  
*Duties include completing needs assessment and making recommendations for teacher training in the sociology department, creating a teaching assistant mentoring program in the sociology department, organizing teaching workshops for graduate students, reviewing recommendations for university-wide teaching awards, and training new teaching assistants at the PIE conference.*

Program for Instructional Excellence Certificate, Florida State University, Fall 2007:  
*Certificate acknowledging completion in training in best teaching practices, teaching policies at FSU, and continued attendance at teaching workshops throughout my graduate career.*

## **PUBLICATIONS**

McGrady, Patrick B. and John R. Reynolds. 2012. “Racial Mismatch in the Classroom: Beyond Black-White Differences.” Forthcoming at *Sociology of Education*.

Pederson, JoEllen, Patrick B. McGrady, and Hanna Jokinen-Gordon. 2012. “Educational Steps: Teaching Students about Inequality in the US Educational System.” In American Sociological Association’s TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovation Library for Sociology (URL: <http://trails.asanet.org/Pages/Resource.aspx?ResourceID=12641>)

## **PAPERS IN PROGRESS**

“Institutional Politics and State Attacks on Teacher Tenure” with John Reynolds and Andrew Mannheimer.

## **PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS**

McGrady, Patrick B. 2011. "Young Gay Men's Management of Body Image." Anthropologists and Sociologists of Kentucky annual meeting, Highland Heights, KY.

Reynolds, John R., Andrew Mannheimer, and Patrick B. McGrady. 2011. "Institutional Politics and State Attacks on Teacher Tenure." Southern Sociological Society annual meeting, Jacksonville, FL

McGrady, Patrick B. 2011. "Out of Hibernation: Coming Out Narratives of Bear Men and Heteronormativity" Southern Sociological Society annual meeting, Jacksonville, FL

McGrady, Patrick B. 2010. "The Construction of Bear Identity and Bear Masculinity in Bear Media" Southern Sociological Society annual meeting, Atlanta, GA.

McGrady, Patrick B. 2009. "Cultural Mismatch in the Classroom: Beyond Black-White Differences" Southern Sociological Society annual meeting, New Orleans, LA.

McGrady, Patrick B., JoEllen Pederson, and Jose Gonzales. 2006 "Let All the Children Have Fun: Using Non-competitive Games in Children's Programs" COOL Idealist Service Learning Conference, Nashville, TN.

## **OTHER RESEARCH EXPERIENCE**

### Advanced Methods Training

Field Methods

Structural Equation Modeling

Hierarchical Linear Modeling

Software: HLM, MPlus, NVivo, Stata, and SPSS

## **PROFESSIONAL SERVICE**

### Department committees

President of Sociology Graduate Student Union (SGSU), 2010-11

SGSU Representative on Departmental Policy Committee, 2010-11

SGSU Representative on Departmental Awards Committee, 2010-11

Vice President of SGSU, 2009-10

SGSU Representative on Information Resources Committee, 2008-9

## **PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

American Sociological Association

Anthropologists and Sociologists of Kentucky

Southern Sociological Society

Sociologists for Women in Society

Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction