**Abstract: 556 words [excluding References]**

**Stream: LGBT Research in Management and Institutions: Broadening the Lens.**

**Keyword: Rural; Nonmetropolitan; Gay; Identity**

**Title of paper and presentation: Life in the rural: a bleak house for gays?**

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A review of the available literature on gay and lesbian lives quickly reveals a relative lack of research on gay and lesbians in nonmetropolitan and rural areas. Whilst recent years have seen a growing number of empirical studies on the lives of gay and lesbians, most of this research has tended to focus on those who live in urban and suburban areas with very little attention paid to rural queer lives (Boulden, 2001; Halberstam, 2005; McCarthy, 2000; Preston and D’Augelli, 2013). This urban-centric approach has seen a conflation of gay and urban identities, with the voice of gay people usually the voice of an urban metropolis.

But just because their voice has not been heard to the same extent, does not mean there are no rural gay voices to be heard! There have always been gay people in rural areas, and same sex desire, intimacy and non-normative sexual practices have always existed in the nonmetropolitan space, as the early work of Howard (1999) on gay men living in 1950’s and 1960’s Mississippi aptly testifies.

Howards’ work has been followed by more recent scholarship on rural gays including the work of Boulden (2001), Gray (2009), Kennedy (2010), Kazyak (2011), Annes & Redlin (2012), and Preston & D’Augelli (2013) which are part of a growing number of studies into rural gays and lesbians. More recent literature (see Kazyak, 2011) has heralded the arrival of a new focus of study: namely a focus on rural gay identities; people identifying as gay or lesbian and performing that identity in the space of the rural.

Kazyak’s work in particular emphasises the construction, development and formation of rural gay identities and how rural gays and lesbians are modifying cultural narratives about what it means to be gay. Her work documents how characteristics of rural life can produce, and not always hinder, constructions of gay and lesbian identities, identities which are different from urban gay identities. Furthermore, we see a welcome turn from some earlier scholarship which tended to place emphasis only on the challenges of rural living, leaving us with the impression that rural gay men and lesbians are at a profound and overwhelming disadvantage, both socially and psychologically, when compared to their urban counterparts (Wienke et al, 2013) and that they inhabit an inherently hostile and bleak environment.

And so, is living in the nonmetropolitan a bleak and hostile experience for gay people? Or can gay men form gay identities in the rural? My interviews with forty gay men in nonmetropolitan Ireland and England have produced testimonies revealing many examples of resilience, fortitude, acceptance and a determination to live and ‘be themselves’ within the context of an environment which can and does pose distinct challenges for LGBT people. I examine the significance of space for these men as they inhabit the nonmetropolitan and rural environment. For the gay men in this study, there is no doubt; the nonmetropolitan space does have an impact on how they live their lives. The centrality of heterosexuality, and hegemonic masculinity to normative conceptions of rural sexuality, gender relations and rural masculinity is apparent throughout. Heteronormative dominance blights every social transaction. With this in mind, we address the questions: why do gay men live in these environments? What are the benefits and challenges of living in the rural? What coping strategies do gay men employ? And finally, what is the nature of gay identities that are emerging in these locations?

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**About the author**:

Aidan McKearney is a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management and Director of Postgraduate HRM courses at London South Bank University. To date, his research has focused on issues around managing diversity within the workplace; and in particular on issues around LGBT inclusion. His particular interest centres on issues concerning sexual citizenship in the context of a changing global context. He has also been involved in research exploring Global HRM and the transference of practices within multi- national organisations. He is currently involved in the early stages of a research project which will examine diversity, employee voice (and silence) in SME’s in the UK, Nigeria and Thailand.