



# BLURRING SEXUAL BINARIES: MEN, MASCULINITIES, AND THE ISRAELI MILITARY

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## INTRODUCTION

In Israel there is compulsory military service for all Israeli Jewish male and female citizens, established since the inception of the state of Israel in 1948. The Israeli military, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), does not officially restrict homosexuals to perform duty: there is no formal limitation on recruitment or official risk of discharge being homosexual (Gal 1994). Hence, gays are permitted to serve in ranks and conscripts are not specifically asked about sexual orientation (Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000). This is, however, a recent development; only in 1993 was this new policy formulated (Gal 1994; Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000). Many studies have analyzed the Israeli military; however, they have mostly focused on a macro level of analysis, such as on issues related to policy, or institutional arrangements. Studies on the internal dimension of the military, focusing on what actually happens within the army in terms of social and cultural aspects, is still a field that needs attention (Ben-Ari 1998; Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000; Sasson-Levy 2003, 2007). In this paper, I will utilize secondary data, and provide empirical justification for the main assertion of this paper: to show the 'blurring' of sexual binary oppositions in the Israeli military, among both heterosexual and homosexual male soldiers.

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The term binary opposition “serves to explain the generation of meaning in one term of sign by reference to another mutually exclusive term” (Edgar & Sedgwick 2008: 27). The two terms may reflect two basic states existing in a certain system, such as male and female (ibid.). One term in the binary opposition can only be meaningful in relation to the other and also entails a meaning of the “non-opposite”, for instance, male may be understood as non-female; heterosexual may be understood and non-homosexual. Importantly, a binary opposition may contain an implicit evaluation for example ascribing good to male and bad to non-male. Such features provide inside in the workings of ideology: in the series of male/female, but also heterosexual/homosexual, public/private and culture/nature, these binaries are taken for granted and reflect the world, rather than structure it. In addition, Levi Strauss’s structural study of myth (1963) demonstrates that human perception is fundamentally rooted in binary oppositions. Binaries, however, are a “culturally specific interpretation” (1963:

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This paper primarily aims to expose the complexity of everyday reality in the Israeli military in terms of sexual ‘identity’ and behavior as opposed to formal claims. It is argued that, although the Israeli military portrays itself as an ostensibly ‘all-inclusive’ gender egalitarian institute for all its Jewish citizens, bringing ‘the diverse strata of Israeli society together’ (Belkin & Levitt 2001: 555), gay men’s identity is in fact informally restricted. Not only gay men, however, have to constantly maneuver in a context that upholds a hegemonic masculine and heterosexual norm; heterosexual men and women as well have to negotiate such norms.

First, I will briefly introduce the visibility and importance of the Israeli military in Israeli society. Secondly, I will discuss the history of the struggle of

the gay and lesbian movement in Israel, emphasizing the gay ban that was lifted in 1993.

Third, I will focus on heterosexual as opposed to homosexual identity by discussing heteronormativity and coming out. In the fourth section, I will explicate homosocial as opposed to homoerotic practices in terms of male-to-male relatedness. Last, I will provide an outline of hegemonic masculinity as opposed to non-hegemonic masculinities in a military context upholding specific ideas of manhood. As I will conclude, it remains a theoretical as well as a practical challenge to escape and reformulate the very binaries themselves, which are deeply rooted in the way we think and which are, in fact, highly ambivalent.

#### A SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY IN ISRAELI SOCIETY

The centrality of armed forces in Israel is neither a ceremonial nor a formal matter (Ben-Ari and Lomsky-Feder 1999: 4). In the Israeli case, the dominance of the military is related to the eruptions of war and to the ‘constant skirmishes’ that have become part of both institutional arrangements and the experiences of individuals. In practice, this is expressed through various aspects, such as reserve duty, security checks, judicial decisions, or appropriations of land. Baruch Kimmerling (1985, cited in Ben-Ari & Lomsky-Feder 1999) developed a model of an *interrupted system*, by which he meant that ‘during times of war the system puts routine activities “on hold” and mobilizes all its resources to handle the existential threat’, yet, can also return to normalcy when the fighting has ended. Israel is then seen as a flexible society capable of adjusting to different times of war and non-belligerence. In Kimmerling’s later work (1993, cited in Ben-Ari & Lomsky-Feder 1999: 6; Klein 2002), he elaborated on the idea of the Israeli society being characterized by a *cognitive militarism*: ‘by modes of thought and action in which security considerations are preeminent’. In fact, Israel could be seen as a militarized society (Grassiani 2009: 15) and a war society (Sered 2000) whereby soldiers and army commanders are ‘omnipresent and strongly influential in the public sphere.’ Since

conscription into the Israeli military has long been perceived as a 'normal' and 'natural' experience one has to go through, it has generally received broad societal support. However, as Grassiani (2009) calls it, there are 'cracks' to be noted in citizen's loyalty towards the state, which are becoming increasingly visible, meaning that more young people opt out of service. Yet, these still-modest cracks do not seem to pose a threat to the major importance of the military for Israeli society.

The military, its material, such as military vehicles, army bases and symbols and human representatives in the political and economic realm, can be found everywhere in Israeli society and remains to have a powerful impact. As a result, in Israeli society 'all things military' are normalized and become an accepted part of life and people's worldviews (Grassiani 2009). In fact, not only does the IDF play a dominant visible role in society, but military experience is often the basis for recruitment for elite managerial and political positions in the civilian labor force (Goldscheider 2002; Grassiani 2009; Herzog 2004; Klein 2002; Sasson-Levy 2003). Military service and rank during one's conscription, especially as professional military personnel, has a great influence on occupational possibilities in civilian life, and thus work possibilities are strongly tied to one's military career. Belkin and Levitt (2001) argue that the boundaries between military and civilian life prove to be porous and sometimes even virtually nonexistent.

*Sexual citizenship and gay rights: homosexuality and the Israeli military.*

Since the State of Israel was established in 1948, it has, amongst other, fought five major wars. Evidently, the Israeli military is key to the existence of the state, especially in the Israeli perception of their 'mission of the renewal of the Jewish homeland': Israelis rely on a strong military to ensure their safety (Belkin & Levitt 2001: 542). The Israeli military serves as a common denominator by which a 'shared responsibility to defend the nation' prevails over 'the threat towards military stability'. A common goal does not mean, however, that the Israeli military includes a consensual daily reality when it comes to gays and lesbians performing full duty (ibid.).

The Israeli military has never formally prohibited service by homosexuals, and has accepted homosexuals ‘with no questions asked’ since the 1970s, although before 1980 known homosexuals were usually discharged (Belkin & Levitt 2001; Gal 1994; Habermann 1993). However, in 1983 the Israeli military formulated official restrictions for the first time: known homosexuals had to undergo security checks and mandatory psychological screening, in order to assess their prospective adjustment to certain units. In Reuven Gal’s description, the screening was designed to determine whether the homosexual individual could be a ‘security hazard’, or whether the individual had sufficient mental strength and maturity to endure the pressures of serving in the IDF (1994: 185). Many homosexuals have stated that psychological testing has been ‘intrusive and threatening’ (Habermann 1993). Further, sexual minorities were excluded from serving in top secret and intelligence positions as well as combat units deemed to be highly intensified, and in which soldiers would have to perform under high stress. Gay soldiers were presumably not encouraged to serve in conditions of closed and secluded living accommodations (Belkin & Levitt 2001, Gal 1994; Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000).

Before the gay ban was lifted in 1993, the Israeli government had “already” eliminated sodomy as a crime in 1988, and banned job discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in late 1991 (Habermann 1993). It must be said that there has never been a specific code in the IDF governing homosexual conduct: military regulations prohibit all sexual activity in general on military bases, whether homosexual or heterosexual, as well as sexual relations between officers and their subordinates (Gal 1994). Officers coercing subordinates into sexual relations is clearly forbidden, yet concerns raised by female soldiers tell us that this military code has been frequently violated (Alon 2003; Belkin & Levitt 2001; Christensen 2008; Levin 2011; Mazali, 2003; Sasson-Levy 2003, 2007, 2011).

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Although there was one national gay movement in Israel, the Society for the Protection of Personal Rights (SPPR), which was founded in 1975, public consciousness and political activity increased only by the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s (Shokeid, 2003). Ziv (2010: 539) states that the political struggles of the LGBT community merely emphasized issues which were a direct concern to the community: equal rights, discrimination, and homophobia. In their struggle two pressing issues were: abolishing discrimination against gays in the IDF and the right to same-sex parenthood, and motherhood particularly. This refers to the centrality of soldierhood and motherhood in the Israeli state attaching great value to these notions in terms of citizenship (Lieber, as cited in Ziv 2010).

In February 1993, a major step was taken by the gay and lesbian community in Israel to claim their identity and rights (Shokeid, 2003: 389), which eventually led to the Israeli government formulating a new military policy regarding homosexuals. It meant that no restrictions shall be placed upon the recruitment, assignment, or promotion of homosexual soldiers, civilians, both males and females, due to their sexual inclination (Gal 1994: 185; Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000; Shokeid 2003). Segal, Gade, and Johnson (1993) explain that the gay and lesbian activist movement has often 'served as a catalyst for changing policies and practices' with respect to homosexuality in the military, even though most LGBT movements are also anti-militarist. According to Gal (1994), Israel's new policy had been a result of 'behind-the-scene' attempts by various civil rights movements. However, a few SPPR members argued this was because 'outspoken Labor Knesset member' Yael Dayan took up their cause and invited a group of homosexuals to appear at a Knesset forum to address the committee (Shokeid 2003). A disclosure followed by Uzi Even, the chairman of Tel-Aviv's University's Chemistry Department (Belkin & Levitt 2001), who held a top-secret research position during his military service, but was stripped off his rank of officer and disqualified from doing sensitive IDF research in 1980s because of his sexual orientation (Gal 1994; Habermann 1993; Shokeid 2003). It was his claim for public tolerance (Shokeid 2003: 392) that created a 'public storm' and a wave of protest against the military. In accordance with this important event, from 1993 on gay and lesbian soldiers were to be treated equally to their heterosexual "counterparts".

According to Jeffrey Weeks (1998: 35-36), ‘the erotic is neither a thing in itself, nor predominantly a natural phenomenon, neither something that can be detached from the body, nor cut off from the mind [...] It has become a land of possibility where need, pleasure, commitment and passion can be explored.’ In contemporary Western societies, previously marginalized people now define themselves in terms of personal and collective identities by their sexual attributes and subsequently claim recognition, rights and respect for their identities (ibid.). Weeks (1998) explains that sexual citizenship brings to the forefront issues and struggles that were previously only implicit or silenced. The lift of Israel’s gay ban stresses notions of sexual citizenship, and public engagement in the existence of sexual identities. It comes along, however, with one major challenge: not only is the notion of sexual or intimate citizenship an attempt to make previous notions of sexuality more comprehensive, it simultaneously brings forth different analytical categories, which we should accommodate, such as the influence of the heterosexual/homosexual binaries, and the institutionalization of heterosexuality (Weeks 1998: 39). Additionally, one should make a distinction between official IDF policy on sexual minorities and the realities of informal IDF practices and culture (Belkin & Levitt 2001; Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000: 402). As will become clear in the following three main sections, the blurring of sexual binaries is constantly present and enacted upon.

## BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES I: SEXUAL BINARIES

### *The Institution of Heterosexuality: Heteronormativity*

In his article *The National Closet: Gay Israel in Yossi and Jagger*, Yosef (2005: 284) cites Sedgwick, who identifies two contradictory views of homosexuality in Western society when discussing ‘the closet’: a minoritizing and a universalizing view. A minoritizing view assumes only certain people are homosexual; hence the definition of homosexuality is only important for those who are interested in adopting a gay identity. As a consequence, ‘real homosexuals’ have to define their gay identity by deciding to stay in the closet or to come out; the universalizing view suggests that homosexuality is only part of a ‘general phenomenon of intimacy between

people of the same sex that everyone can experience, and does not belong to a singular and distinct minority group.' The latter view then focuses more on sexual acts, rather than persons (Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000).

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Discussion about women and sex forms a uniting factor among Israeli soldiers, and as a result, heterosexuality is identified as the "right" kind of sexuality. There is no place for homosexuals (Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000). In her study, Levin (2011) examined the military experiences of female soldiers along lines of gender and sexuality, and found that at least one-third of her participants identified with a sense of heterosexual dating and heteronormativity in the Israeli military – the latter term signifying a normative pressure to act and live 'straight' and a valuation of 'normal' sexual relationships being between men and women. The participants described prevalent assumptions that their main purpose for performing military duty was to "find a man" (16). Also, Levin (2011) found that some participants felt that they were defined in terms of the man they were with: "if your boyfriend is kravi (in a combat unit)... you are judged on your boyfriend's status in the army more than your own" (17). According to her findings, Levin (2011) argues that being a woman meant being most valuable as a dating or sexual partner, and appeared to be a most pressing norm in the interaction between men and women during service on base (18). In the Israeli military, then, homosexuality could be defined as a distinct minoritizing identity; consequently, heterosexuality constructs homosexuality as 'the Other'. In this regard, a hetero/homosexual binary is created and upheld, which informs our entire understanding of gender and sexuality (Yosef 2005).

Bourdieu (2001) argues that gays and women also often apply dominant androcentric principles to themselves, though they precisely are the victims of such principles: "in case of a subversive revolt leading to the inversion of categories, the dominated tend

to adopt the dominant point of view themselves” (119). Here, he mainly points to a gendered heterosexual binary of male and female roles, such as lesbians strongly affirming a strong notion of manhood. And in that same sense, gays adopting a ‘straight’ style of behavior as opposed to the stereotypical ‘effeminate’ style (ibid.). Remarkably, Ziv (2010: 540) brings to attention how the LGBT movement in Israel adopted a rather gender-normative position: the way the LGBT community presented itself to the ‘straight’ world is one comprised of educated, professional gay men and women – and most importantly who have performed military service, and have long-term relationships also raising children. This, in fact, reflects a heterosexual model of conduct or lifestyle and indicates the notion of heteronormativity is also powerful in Israeli society.

### *Coming Out*

Most gay male soldiers still feel pressured to hide their sexual orientation, keep it to themselves and only come out when it is safe to do so: more homosexuals revealed their sexual orientation after the gay ban was lifted, but the majority did not choose to do so and there was no “mass coming out of the closet” (Belkin 2003; Belkin & Levitt 2001). Segal et al (1993: 41) state that as a general pattern, homosexuals mostly do not “come out” in the military and prefer to keep their sexual orientation private. In fact, even if policy and practice allow homosexuals to perform military service, and even in the most liberal societies, only a few soldiers will come out as self-identified homosexuals. This could stem from the stigma still attached to homosexuality, which could trigger fear of official sanctions, such as loss of career opportunities, or exclusion from their fellow soldiers (Belkin 2003; Segal et al 1993). The amount of self-declared homosexuals in the military, therefore, remains very small. Kaplan and Ben-Ari (2000) found in their study of 21 self-identified gay men that during their military service five of them were known as homosexual by at least one member in their unit. The role of the soldier’s commander in this process is perceived to be important. When a commander is conservative or homophobic, clearly, coming out will not help the gay soldier become part of the unit (Belkin & Levitt 2001; Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000).

Yosef's (2005: 287) focus shows the "blurring of boundaries" of the "closet" between homosexuality and heterosexuality by discussing the Israeli movie *Yossi and Jagger* (2002). The movie depicts a love relationship between two homosexuals as an 'open secret' only for the viewer, rendering homosexuality to be seen as normal. In the movie, however, Yossi cannot declare his love to Jagger and their straight comrades do not know about it. Clearly, heterosexuality needs knowledge about homosexuality to construct its own definition, but it must also disavow its knowledge for fear of the dangerous intimacy between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The closet hence functions as a transit point between revelation and concealment, between knowledge and ignorance. The logic of the closet not only allows for homosexuality to be included in a national discourse shaping a (male) homosexual identity, but it also reproduces and perpetuates oppressive heteronormative practices, rather than challenge them (Yosef 2005: 286). This becomes visible in a scene in the male military group when Jagger asks Psycho: "Say, Psycho, what would you do if I was a faggot?" and Psycho replies, "Man, you are as pretty as a girl. Of course we'd fuck you." He uses the word "we" to indicate he would not be the only one who could envisage having sex with a man. Simultaneously, he allows for the inclusion of the homosexuality of Jagger, who is actually signified as a heterosexual. Bourdieu argues that under constraining circumstances gays can adopt 'straight' categories of perception – as opposed to 'crooked', maneuvering between the fear of being 'discovered' and the desire to be recognized by other homosexuals (2001: 119).

In their study on humor used by soldiers in two elite combat units, Sion and Ben-Ari (2005) found that jocularity about sexuality was explicitly heterosexual. They state that one finds in the Israeli military rhetoric of sexual performance and genital size as the 'personal qualities of men' (664). A heterosexual discourse also emerges, in which jokes portray women as abstract sexual beings, who are symbolically strongly tied to pornographic objects provided for men's sexual gratification (665). This is in accordance with Levin's findings (2011) of Israeli women soldiers' perceptions of sometimes being identified only by categories of sex and sexuality. The sexuality referred to is undoubtedly heterosexual, but

does not only occur in jokes about women, but also in comments about homosexuals. The homosexual is seen as potentially more dangerous than women for men because he is an intricate part of the group of male soldiers, and thus he forms a threat to their heterosexuality. The use of humor is intriguing and entails double meaning: on the one hand, it allows men to explore a taboo subject; on the other hand, it gives them an opportunity to affirm their heterosexuality (Sion & Ben-Ari 2005). As a result, homosexuality is needed to demarcate the boundaries and acceptable (heterosexual) norms. The following 'joke-y' quote illustrates this: a soldier looks for Vaseline for his parched lips when a fellow soldier says: "sorry, I used it all last night" (666).

According to Sion and Ben-Ari (2005), jokes and jests about women and homosexuals having an inferior social position bear meaning about the relationship between heterosexual men and imply in fact a constant power struggle over who is dominant and active and who is submissive and passive (667). In such a hostile competitive environment, humor may thus serve as a catalyst for safety, because it creates room for reinterpretation and confirmation of certain norms.

## BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES II: HOMOEROTICISM AND HOMOSOCIALITY

### *Homoerotic Discourse and Homosocial Bonding among Males*

A second blurring of boundaries can be found in the dynamic between homosociality, that is heterosexual male-to-male relatedness and homoerotization, the expression of sexuality and eroticism (Kaplan 2005). This dynamic is shown by one of the interviewees from Kaplan and Ben-Ari's study on male gays in combat units in the Israeli military (2000: 412): "You do not know who puts his arms around you as a sign of friendship or to feel your

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body.” Most of the interviewees attempted to make a distinction between the closeness that developed among soldiers and homoerotic behavior. On the one hand, homosexuality defines the boundaries of what is acceptable: in male groups intimacy is constrained. As Sion and Ben-Ari cite Messner: “erotic links between men become natural through open homophobia” (2005: 666). On the other hand, in most combat units mutual affection and attraction between male soldiers is highly present. Soldiers then comply with the military doctrine, which emphasizes shared responsibility and mutual support, and thus encourage homosocial bonds. As such, kissing, hugging, nudity and certain verbal expressions of love may be part of male bonding:

*“It is such a close friendship in the army that there are guys there, the straight ones, that do things like gays [...] They would kiss each other, and hug each other. It was like a joke. They were very affectionate!”* (Weinstein 1999, as cited in Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000: 411).

Kaplan has done research on both homoerotic aspects of male socio-interaction (2005) as well as on male bonding and male friendship in Israel (2007). In the first study, Kaplan (2005) explores how (heterosexual) male friends “communicate intimacy in public spaces.” He suggests how homosocial performance accredits its closeness whereby arbitrary and ambivalent language is used. Kaplan argues that men challenge their peers by means of teasing, which is supposed to tempt them to engage in a deeper interaction. This generates a dynamic of seduction:

*“And sometimes I see him, and give a hug or a kiss, and when his wife is watching we do it on purpose, because... I’ve gotta tell you this, I would always (eat) bananas so his wife would say, “Why do you keep eating bananas the whole day long?” So once I told her “I’ll give one to Yoni as well.” I took it in my mouth and passed it to Yoni, mouth to mouth, and he ate it. To this day his wife tells me: “Go and eat your bananas together!”* (Kaplan 2005: 586).

The homosocial attempt of eliminating homoeroticism demonstrates a counter-intuitive implication, namely not a struggle among comrades for autonomy, but the production of desire and

a sense of intimacy, in the previous quote through the mediation of a woman's presence. Another example is the quote at the beginning of Kaplan's (2005: 571) article: "I could say to him, 'You son-of-a-bitch!' and he would understand that I loved him." According to Kaplan (2005), communication would involve both markers of humor and aggression, in a context of game-playing with physical pleasure and physical pain, which would create emotional space and allow closeness and affection.

Because the use of such communication among men would not be 'intelligible' to an outsider, feelings of exclusivity and intimacy emerged among the participants. That being said, the use of language is also not always intelligible to the participants themselves, which forces them to decode the underlying implications of what is said or done. This ambivalence, claims Kaplan, produces seduction (2005: 591). The following quote does well demonstrate this ambivalence:

*"If some guy would go mad he would turn on everybody, then we'd go to the showers and piss and throw people and then go sleep together in the same bed... it's not like fags or anything, but we'd give little love hugs. And we used to bite each other, too. You really would see a lot of things that could look [...] really bad. Like, just for the hell of it, we would sleep with no clothes; always naked... You would open the door and see three guys spread out naked in bed together [laughs]" (Kaplan 2005: 289).*

Another quote illustrates the concept of homosocial embrace, which Kaplan (2005) found to have different meanings among the participants in terms of importance and whom they would embrace:

*"A bunch of us were sitting between the beds and started to talk. All of a sudden one of them, Ofer, came to me and started hugging me. There was nothing homosexual about it, but he loved me so much that he just lay on top of me for half an hour. It was the ultimate closeness you could expect in the army, with no fooling around and no games" (Kaplan 2003: 209 as cited in Kaplan 2005).*

In the second study, Kaplan (2007) distinguishes between two ideal-type folk models of male friendships, both strongly tied to

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The Israeli military then can be seen as a powerful institution producing “hard men”, constructing images of masculinity, making the institution “machoistic” and stressing a male-oriented subculture

images of hegemonic masculinity in Zionist ideology, including 1. sociability, adventure-seeking, and ‘cool sharing’, which involves nonverbal means of communication and physical support and 2. intellectuality, exchange of ideas and ‘soul talk’, which is more concerned with psychological support and verbalized expression of emotions. In this study, he focused on the link between gendered ideology and emotion, by investigating how masculine ideology shapes emotional experience among Israeli dyadic bonds (50). In this study most participants dealt with a heteronormative context: they were married to women, and Kaplan describes how “homosocial adventuring” as opposed to restrictions on extramarital heterosexual adventuring, can provide male friends with a sense of “extramarital thrill” (2007: 54). Kaplan notes an interesting generalization in his study: two friends need to negotiate intimacy when they find themselves in a wider group of men, which encourages a “cool” sharing interaction; their position is not fixed and accepted, they have to achieve a certain status. This could be compared to the image of the *sabra*, Israeli born Jews having a rough and tough

masculinity. Interestingly, such cool sharing emerges in a context of group sociability, which in the Israeli case is often “military sociability” (2007: 66). Kaplan (2007) also describes how most participants did not refer to unacknowledged emotions, such as homophobia. Seemingly contradicting, physical closeness among men may indeed raise anxiety of homosexuality as well and therefore limit the display of physicality in their friendship (Kaplan 2005). Interestingly, male friendship outside and male comradeship within the military may entail different implications for men’s behavior.

Kaplan & Ben-Ari (2000) state that understanding the experience of homosexuals in the military must consider both the complexity of negotiations around the emergence of a gay identity on the one hand, and the organizational setting of a heterosexist masculine military culture that encourages same-sex acts on the other: it is the *masculinity* in the army that in fact allows for pseudo-sexual activities and homoerotic discourse.

### BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES III: HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND MASCULINITIES

*Masculinary culture and Manhood in the Israeli Military*

War is often presented as an exclusively male experience, whereby masculinity is defined in terms of being tough and selfless, and having courage, ‘guts and endurance’, a high resistance to pain and discomfort and control over emotions (Beynon 2002: 67). The term masculinity most generally refers to views of ‘the male’, the definition of manhood and more specifically, how that is revealed by practices, imagery, symbols, behaviors and attitudes of males (Whitehead 2002: 8, 19, 34). Militarism then poses an oppressive but efficient regime of competition, physical hardness, conformity, and a sense of elite memberships, not only creating serious consequences for women, but also for men who fail to measure up to the competitive, ‘hard’, conformist norm (Jones 2006). From an organizational standpoint, the aim of the military is to turn a citizen into a soldier (Herbert 1998; Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000). From a cultural perspective, this process is also accompanied by a symbolic maturation process of turning a boy into a man: *a rite de passage* to male adulthood emerges, where soldiers are being taught physical toughness, the ability to employ violence, as well as having the skill, endurance and perseverance and control, trying to eliminate what is ‘effeminate’ (Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000). The Israeli military then can be seen as a powerful institution producing “hard men”, constructing images of masculinity, making the institution “machoistic” and stressing a male-oriented subculture (Beynon 2002, Dar & Kimhi 2001; Grassiani 2009; Herzog 2004; Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000; Ben-Ari & Lomskey-Feder 1999; Klein 1999). Sion and Ben-Ari (2005) note how the phrase “having balls” points to male strength, such as men who have “the guts” and “the nerves” (664) as opposed to the expression “to fuck someone in the ass” which refers to a male weakness being talked about in terms of potential anal penetration (667). This is also shown by a quote from one of Kaplan and Ben-Ari’s interviewees (2000: 412):

*“[C]ome on, if you are a real man, let’s give a blowjob one for the other.’ You know, the minute you throw out to a guy like that all this man business, he’ll say, ‘you mean to say I don’t have balls? I’ll do it!’”*

Enloe (1988) argues the military plays a significant role in the construction of patriarchy for the notion of combat is central to the construction of ‘manhood’ and the justification of male superiority. In other words: military forces are patriarchal institutions (Connell 2002: 141), in which masculinity defines successful ways of ‘being a man’ in particular places at a specific time (Beynon 2002: 16). In the Israeli military’s male-oriented subculture, it is combat service that is the focus of masculinity. They are the archetypes of the military organization: combat roles are the most important roles, claiming the highest status and defining the meaning of military service both at a personal and collective level (Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000; Sasson-Levy 2002). The combatant is the ‘emotionless warrior’ (Beynon 2002: 68): stoic, quiet, dignified and self-controlled. Emotions are a sign of weakness, he must be an ‘iceman’ and remain cool under extreme pressure, unless his emotions demonstrate patriotism and lusting after women (Ben-Ari 1998; Beynon 2002; Jones 2006). It is combat that is the ultimate trial of manhood: until he has engaged in collective, violent, physical struggle against an objectified enemy, his manhood cannot be proven (Enloe 1988: 13). Ben-Ari (1998) states the military does not simply train men, but actually employ ideologies that activate specific cultural understandings. The IDF involves a wider context of manhood by enhancing the concept of heroism and Western notions of (self-)mastery and rationality, which translates back in dominant notions of manhood in military units.

The ideal masculine combat soldier is often portrayed in contrast to ‘the Other’: women and homosexuals (Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000). Although it is probably uncommon for Israeli commanders to use the word ‘faggot’, poor combat performance is often equated with ‘childishness’ and ‘femininity’. Herein, stereotypes of homosexuality are effeminacy, mental illness, promiscuity, loneliness and insecurity (Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000). Studies of men and masculinities (Beynon 2002; Whitehead 2002: 16, 33) consider the multiplicity, historicity and dynamism of gender representation,

hence masculinity as a notion of men may not be understood as a unitary identity that is fixed and final. Rather, masculinities are 'plural and multiple', space-, time- and context-bound, embedded in specific sociocultural moments and highly intertwined with other variables, such as sexuality, class, age and ethnicity.

Masculinities are powerful, consisting of ideological and discursive elements allegedly providing 'truths'. Thus, also a hegemonic or dominating masculinity is fluid, relational, contingent, shifting and established either through consensual negotiation or through power: it is not a given set of traits, rather a series of ideals that constantly have to be attained (Beynon 2002: 16; Connell 2002; Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000; Whitehead 2002). Kaplan & Ben-Ari contend the Israeli military is 'the cultural site' for the construction of a hegemonic masculinity, which they call a *masculinary culture* (2000: 401). Hence, it recognizes dominant interpretations and definitions of being masculine to be embedded in male-dominated institutions; the hegemony itself refers to a "set of circumstances in which power is won and held," in this case, by particular groups of men, that legitimate and reproduce the social relations their dominance generates, which becomes the standard (Jones 2006: 453; Whitehead 2002: 88).

In their thought-provoking article, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) formulate numerous critiques on the concept of hegemonic masculinity. For instance, they argue that a hegemonic masculinity is a repressive ideal type that can never be fully achieved and boys and men do not fully live up to them, that is they not have to actually carry out this ideal type. Men will either attempt to achieve such hegemonic status or otherwise position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity (832). Hegemony works through the authorization of symbolic masculine exemplars, such as professional sports stars. Hegemonic masculinities can be constructed, while they do not necessarily correspond to the lives of any actual men. Such exemplars then reflect desires and ideals. Hence, power cannot truly be 'won and held'.

Clearly, a hegemonic masculinity can be distinguished from other masculinities by its presumption of non-hegemonic masculinities,

such as subordinated masculinities which can be referred to in terms of “geeks”, “faggots”, “pansies, and “wimps” (Jones 2006) or which can relate to versions of manhood, such as the manager, the craftsman or the technician which are all subordinate to the warrior ideal (Ben-Ari 1998). Men can also adopt a complicit masculinity, that is, men receiving the benefits of patriarchy without carrying out masculine dominance (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Although masculinities are diverse and linked to each other, the relation between them is hierarchical and hence, the male warrior does entail a hegemonic masculinity.

Furthermore, Connell and Messerschmidt argue that hegemonic masculinity should not only be conceptualized in terms of socially reproducing hierarchies, policing men and excluding women (2005: 844), but the concept should also be approached in a more “positive” sense: by recognizing how hegemony among men does not have to exclude gender equality (853). The authors state that gender relations are always arenas of tension, to which hegemonic masculinity could also provide a solution, by serving

as a stabilizing force or by eradicating power differentials. Furthermore, Connell and Messerschmidt propose several reformulations of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, such as a more complex model of gender hierarchy that recognizes the agency of women and other subordinated groups as much as it recognizes the power of dominant groups. This will result in a more holistic understanding of the gender dynamics of how hegemonic, subordinate, complicit and marginalized groups are mutually constitutive.

Bearing this in mind, Kaplan and Ben-Ari (2000) concluded that gay men soldiers in combat units in the IDF mainly comply with the heterosexist masculine hegemony, and are driven – consciously or not – to prove their manhood constantly. As a result, masculinity is not a fixed accomplishment or “a set of given traits”; rather, it recurs that men “persistently attempt to affirm and prove their manhood,” which

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are reinforced in a military culture and forced by that same culture. They demonstrated this by two strategies, *engagement* and *compartmentalization*, and asked 21 self-identified gay men how they coped with their military experiences in a combat unit. The *first* strategy emphasizes active participation in the challenges of combat service and sociability. This strategy entails identification with values of military training and trials of manhood. Strong ties in combat units are important, enrolling in the hegemonic discourses and practices of heterosexuality, sometimes even active attempts at physical contact with other men: "There was a strong attraction, a wish to get close, just like that. A lot of touching," (Kaplan & Ben Ari 2000: 412) or "I could say things like 'Wow what a chick? What a cunt?'...I did not need to be personally attracted to her [...] I fit in" (411).

The *second* strategy deals with partitioning of different features of military life, including a strong focus on the professional performance of tasks and duties. Soldiers using this strategy take distance from values of training, and at times even express clear criticism: "You like the feeling after a forced march [...] [Y]ou curse the moment you were born, and when you finish you say, 'wow, what fun' [...] But all in all, it's not a very smart race" (Kaplan & Ben Ari 2000: 416). In social interaction, they set up boundaries: the soldier disengages from the heterosexual discourse and excludes himself from any homoerotic experience in military setting: "all the guys talked about girls, and I really didn't know hot to join this talk, I didn't know hot to play the game" (418).

Coping with discontinuity with regard to their experiences is most clear in the compartmentalization strategy, whereby soldiers succeed in the professional and formal aspects of their job by cutting off various social aspects of the organization. This gap is less evident in the engagement strategy: here, there is an ongoing attempt to compete in the social sphere set in a hegemonic male discourse. Kaplan & Ben-Ari (2000) conclude that their study indicates how hegemonic cultural values have dominated the perception of their participants. As a consequence, gay male soldiers on the one hand constantly have to negotiate between complying with the heterosexual hegemonic masculine standard to 'rise above the stigma' of being gay and prove their manhood: "You either

have to play the straight game and talk about girls and screwing or you find yourself outside the group” (418).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has consisted out of two parts. The first part presented a contextual explanation of the case by shortly discussing the centrality and importance of the military in Israel, and a reflection of the LGBT movement in Israel claiming gay rights in the Israeli military and in Israeli society. In the second part I have elaborated on three important areas of informal practices or daily reality in the Israeli military, challenging the boundaries of binary thinking, which are in fact highly blurred. By employing secondary data, empirical proof has been provided for the following blurring of boundaries: heterosexual identity as opposed to homosexual identity in terms of heteronormativity and coming out; homosociality as opposed to homoeroticism with regards to male-to-male relatedness; and a hegemonic masculinity as opposed to nonhegemonic masculinities embedded in military context which upholds specific ideas of manhood. Although both men and women, not asked about their sexual orientation, are officially included in the Israeli military presenting itself as an egalitarian institution, the military in fact includes a gender inequality regime (Sasson-Levy 2011) and a complex dynamic of sexual and social interaction.

It is important to note, then, how not only gay men, but also straight men have to maneuver in a context that upholds a hegemonic masculine and heterosexual norm in order to compensate for their possible failure of “not being good enough” being gay or being possibly perceived as gay (Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argued, men cannot simply attain a hegemonic masculinity: it is a process in which they constantly have to prove themselves. Hence, in the Israeli military, men still have to face a cultural-organizational context, which is characterized by a masculinist culture implying heteronormativity, which is particularly striking to the experiences of gay men. As a result, gay male soldiers mostly only disclose their sexual orientation when it is safe to do so. This does not mean, nonetheless, that

homosexuality is an absent category. On the contrary, homosexuality is needed in order to define the boundaries of what is the accepted norm of heterosexuality: “it must convince itself that it does not know what it does not want to know, even though it knows it all along,” out of fear homosexuality “comes too close” (Kaplan & Ben-Ari 2000; Shokeid 2003: 284).

The blurring of boundaries allows for ambiguity in the application of these binary categories; nonetheless, it does not challenge the very existence of such categories. Weeks (1998: 49) believes the ‘denaturalization’ of the sexual, such as the end of heterosexual/homosexual binaries is an important issue in ‘post-millennial’ politics. Eliason (1996) opposes the sexual binary, and has criticized the existing literature on lesbian and gay coming out processes: they were lacking by having included narrow samples, a narrow focus on sexuality, a linear nature, and a lack of attention to a larger socio-historical context. Additionally, Kaplan and Ben-Ari (2000) have accurately accounted for a diffuse and negotiable interpretation of sexuality, referring to homosexuality-heterosexuality binaries, and distinguish between emphasizing sexual acts in a universalizing view and a separate people who really are gay in a minoritizing view.

Bourdieu (2001) then asks a compelling question, which needs to be raised not necessarily with regards to an LGBT movement, but rather to anyone challenging sexual binaries: “how can people [...] revolt against a socially imposed categorization except by organizing themselves as a category constructed according to that categorization, and so implementing the classifications and restrictions that it seeks to resist (rather than, for example, fighting for a new sexual order in which the distinction between the different sexual statuses would be indifferent?)” (p 120). How can a self-identified gay male soldier and his ‘straight’ friend, for instance, challenge a sexual dichotomization without actually utilizing it themselves? It remains a theoretical as well as a practical challenge to escape, transcend and

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reformulate the very sexual binaries, which are in fact deeply embedded in how we think about issues of gender and sexuality.

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