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Understanding the Construction of Homophobia as a Social Problem in Postwar America

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present an understanding of how the campaign to advance the recognition of homophobia as a social problem started and subsequently evolved into the modern gay rights movement. Best's work (2008) presents a natural history model of a successful social problem campaign as a cyclical one, fueled by an interactive dialog occurring between actors operating within six different stages; claimsmaking, media coverage, public reaction, policy making, social problems work, and policy outcomes. Furthermore, Best asserts that this campaign cycle is occurring within a social structure that provides or limits access to beneficial resources and persuasive rhetoric; the quality and quantity of which determine the success of the movement. This model and social context framework were the tools used to analyze which historical events are most responsible for effecting the trajectory of the social movement process and why an event either contributed to successful diffusion or fell flat during the time period it occurred.

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[1] The popular use of the word "homophobia" has undergone a series of changes in the past 40+ years. Originally used to reference heterosexual men who feared that others might perceive them as homosexual, it was expanded to include any person who had a fear response towards homosexuals. It was later deliberately reconstructed, in publications produced by early homophile organizations, as a term that implied prejudice; not just fear (Herek, 2004, pp. 6-8). Popular usage has adopted that implication and the term now refers to any range of negative feelings towards gays, lesbians, or homosexual acts; presence of a clinical phobia is not necessarily implied (Homophobia). For this paper, the term "homophobia" will refer to any negative perception of an individual based solely on their sexual orientation or participation in a homosexual act. This modern definition will apply, regardless of which time period is being examined or what the popular meaning was during that time.

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The generally accepted assertion is that the modern gay rights movement was born in the very early hours of June 28, 1969, when patrons of a Greenwich Village gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, resisted a police raid (Carter, 2010, prologue). However, when gay and lesbian history is researched within the framework provided by Best's (2008) natural history model, it becomes clear that the movement was not born overnight, but instead started slowly in the years immediately following WWII; accumulating resources and waiting for the time of political and cultural opportunity that the summer of '69 offered.

Today, activist and expert claimsmakers assert that homophobia poses a social problem worth addressing, because there is civil injustice that occurs when gays and lesbians are not afforded the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts to be married, serve openly in the military, or adopt/foster children (Human Resources Campaign, Issues). These modern claims are, naturally, more aggressive than those made in the years directly following World War II when homosexuals were labeled "sexual psychopaths" by the military state and represented by psychologists as having a "Sociopathic Personality Disturbance" (Miller, 1995, p. 232). At that time, lofty claims about civil injustice would have fallen flat for lack of resources at nearly every stage of the natural history model (Best, 2008). Gay activists today couldn't readily address the need for equal marriage rights if an earlier campaign to decriminalize sodomy had been

unsuccessful. Progress towards a homophobic-free America, then, is occurring incrementally as the social context of each historical period allows.

It would be easy to argue that social constructs changed more in the years following World War II than in any other period in American history. Postwar America is, to the sociologist, what the Industrial Revolution is to the economist. Planes landed, ships returned to port, and the country seemed to take a deep, collective breath and ask "Now what?" The answer was, for most families, a return to the homestead.

Millions of women left their newly found positions in the work force and returned home to accept their husbands and sons returning from war. Young children met their fathers, some for the first time, while wives reacquainted themselves with their husbands in a time when alcoholism among veterans was common. The divorce rate started to climb, along with the birth rate and consumer spending. Many families moved from the city to the rapidly expanding suburbs; encouraged, in part, by government incentives that allowed veterans to purchase a home with a one dollar down payment (Benokraitis, 2008, pp. 77-79). It is also during this time in American history that the construction of homophobia as a social problem begins to emerge.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the mobilization of human resources for the war effort was immense. Young men and women from every corner of America left their homes and joined the war effort. The identity of gays and lesbians was strengthened as they were placed in sex-segregated environments; they found companionship and a gay subculture was born (Miller, 1995, p. 231) The policies and recommendations on how to handle gays (and lesbians) and punish homosexual acts were internally debated during the war years, so the exact processing of an individual who had been discovered in the service varied from case to case. Generally, they

faced discharge or incarceration (Miller, 1995, pp. 233-237). Military boards, especially in the army, rarely gave honorary discharges to soldiers they knew to be homosexual. (Bérubé, 1990, p. 168) The social stigma associated with such dishonorable discharges, coupled with the new sense of community and solidarity they experienced with other homosexuals made it difficult for many to return home; this caused the population of gays and lesbians in port cities, especially New York and San Francisco to swell (Miller, 1995, p. 239). Not only were dishonorably discharged soldiers denied the benefits typically offered to veterans, the social stigma caused considerable difficulties in civilian life, too (Bérubé, 1990, p. 169). Homosexuals were being excluded from the greatest economic boom of the century. These inequalities faced by gay veterans became the impetus for the 1945 creation of the Veterans Benevolence Association (VBA) in New York (Archer, 2002, p. 111) and the grounds for the first round of claimsmaking regarding the effects of homophobia. They did so by means of piggybacking on the claims made by social movement organizations that represented civil rights for black veterans; who had also been the recipients of a disproportionately high number of dishonorable discharges (Bérubé, 1990, pp. 169, 232, 241). In response to the claims from all groups and also some insider claimsmakers, the House Committee on Military Affairs convened on the subject and discharge policies were subsequently revised. Unfortunately, homosexuals still received a disproportionate number of undesirable discharges under the newer system. (Bérubé, 1990, p. 243) The VBA had been unsuccessful in their attempt to motivate meaningful policy change, or to even launch homophobia into the limelight of any critical arena for the consideration of social problems or policy reform. Maybe their underpreparedness to frame a persuasive argument was to blame, or perhaps the opportunity structure of the day was simply unable to support the claims. Whatever

the reason for the failure, the social movement had begun; gay men and women from every corner of the country had answered the call of duty and, as a result, faced their homosexuality and felt the injustice of homophobia.

The VBA continued to operate in New York until 1955 as mostly a social club; it did not overtly work to develop or advance claims (Bullough, 2002, p. 338). However, it did provide for the expansion of the human resource mobilization that was a critical element to this, and any, successful social problems campaign. This is not to say that all gays and lesbians embraced their sexuality. Of the estimated nine thousand dishonorably discharged gay servicemen, the VBA only managed to attract a few hundred participants (Miller, 1995, p. 327)(Bullough, 2002, p. 338). At least half of the homosexuals identified by the military were said to have "begged" for doctors to cure them of their homosexuality (Miller, 1995, p. 241). Many more homosexuals were able to actually remain in the service undetected, later trying to fit in to "normative" society after the war.

The influence of psychological science was increasing at this time in history and it understood homosexuals to lie somewhere on the continuum of sexually underdeveloped to psychopathic. Expert claimsmakers in the field of psychological study had already presented the issue of homosexuality as a pathological problem. This medicalization of homosexuality affected not only the views of society-at-large, but also the views of gays and lesbians themselves. Furthermore, this understanding of homosexuality became the premise on which 26 states built sexual psychopath laws.

To successfully frame an anti-medicalization and, by extension, decriminalization counterclaim, activists would need to shape their rhetoric within a frame that would be able to

reach not only a large number of heterosexual conscience constituents, but also the frightfully closeted gay and lesbian beneficiaries themselves. The homosexual groups of the late 1940s, were just starting to mobilize. They didn't have the structure nor momentum of a fully operating social movement. Their action to address the treatment of discharged gay veterans had been piggybacked on the claims of black rights leaders and, in the end, failed to motivate any kind of progress for homosexuals. The successful progression of the social problems process now seemed to require that the socially stigmatized, sexually deviant, psychopathic homosexual activist be able to successfully craft an anti-medicalization counterclaim against expert psychologist claimsmakers. Frame transformation is notoriously difficult in any circumstance, but these early homosexual groups in particular did not have the rhetoric nor cultural resources to fulfill this high order; especially in their period of abeyance. Homosexual groups, on both the East and West coasts, had established a presence and culture, but were generally not overtly participating in the social problems dialog.

In 1948, a well-timed cultural opportunity presented itself and homosexuals were in the national spotlight after Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, commonly known as the Kinsey report. The findings indicated that while only 4% of males are exclusively homosexual, 37% of adult males had, a least once, experienced sex with another male to the point of orgasm. These findings didn't merely rock the boat of conventional wisdom on homosexuality, they became the catalyst for players to emerge in all stages of the social problems process; and the impetus for a great divide. Discussions about homosexuals or homophobia were no longer relegated to military board rooms, the psychologist's office, nor the private gatherings of gays and lesbians on the nation's coasts. They were occurring in nearly every news and

popular culture arena of the day. Kinsey became a household name.

While research on homosexuality accounted for just a fraction of the report contents, nothing disturbed critics more than the findings on homosexual behavior. Expert claimsmakers from the fields of science, religion and politics weighed in. Even though they feared that appearing soft on sodomy laws would tarnish their name, the American Law Institute (ALI) addressed the issue of sodomy in the Model Penal Code, which was released in 1955, after several decades of discussion around the modernization, secularization and simplification of criminal law. They adopted the principle that criminal law should follow the harm principle: only behavior that causes harm should be regulated. Impacted, in part, by the findings of the Kinsey Report, ALI supported dropping the charge of sodomy as even a misdemeanor (Rosario, 2008). Although the ALI didn't formally align themselves in any way with the movement to address homophobia, their recommendations played a big role in gaining later ground in the decriminalization effort. The recommendations of ALI also, of course, fueled further action by counterclaimsmakers, particularly those with religiously-inspired ideals. The content of the claims that emerged in response to Kinsey's work ranged from assertions that his methods were erroneous, to the fear that the moral fiber of the whole country was in collapse (Miller, 1995, p. 251) (Bullough, 2002, p. 21).

The red scare was in full force during this time. Americans were obsessed with loyalty. Societal fear, fueled by propaganda and underwritten by the politicians of the far right, of communist spies and atomic bombs led to hysterical witch hunts and black lists. Committees were formed and tasked with the ferreting out of anything un-American. During one such committee meeting, John Peurifoy, Undersecretary of the State, was asked how many state

department employees had resigned while being investigated as potential security risks. "Ninety-one persons in the shady category," Peurifoy answered. "Most of these were homosexuals." And so, homosexual "perverts" would be added to the list of potential domestic enemies. (Miller, 1995, p. 259) Right wing political officers and experts had already successfully persuaded the public about the dangers of communists; their frame only needed be amplified to include homosexuals. Their campaign would ultimately be a success in gaining support for the anti-homosexual movement and in effecting policy; Executive Order 10450 was signed by President Eisenhower which allowed for the investigation and dismissal of federal employees on the grounds of suspected sexual perversion (Executive Order).

The prominent homosexual organization of the time was the Mattachine Society, which had chapters operating in cities all over America. The main missions of the organization were to unify gays and further research about homosexuality. The group was unable to reach consensus on the best methods for achieving progress, suffered over frame disputes, and even faced separation over disagreement about the best bureaucratic structure for the organization itself. Despite the factionalism over differing ideologies about, among other things, how to view the "sissier" males among them, some form of the group was active for over a decade, holding meetings and distributing literature to their members (Bullough, 2002, p. 79, 341). The cold war climate of the 50s was too hostile a marketplace for transformational work to take place with regards to the campaign-at-large. However, the group was able to successfully effect a change in policy that allowed them to continue distributing their materials to members via US postal mail, which had come into question given the "deviant" nature of their content.

Their progress throughout the age of McCarthyism, though small if measured by

considering actual policy reform, can still be understood as integral to the construction process. Despite Executive Order 10450 making insider claimsmaking all but impossible, outside expert and activist claimsmakers from all fields emerged, all with their own rhetoric, and, in spite of major frame disputes, critical further mobilization of human and intellectual resources occurred. The media at large still portrayed gays as deviant, if it portrayed them at all, and progress to gain wide public support never occurred in a significant way. The movement, however, continued in spite of slow progress and near impossible odds, staging relatively small protests to counter the increasing list of liquor licensing restrictions that were established to prohibit gays from being served alcohol in bars in the late 50s and early 60s.

On the west coast, liquor laws were tightened by San Francisco mayor, George Christopher, who was working to combat criticism by political challengers that he had allowed the city to turn into a "national headquarters of organized homosexuals in America" (Miller, 1995, p. 346). While on the east coast, New York had started the process of "cleaning up" the city in preparation for the World's Fair. The tension caused by these increased restrictions led to the Stonewall Inn riots that would be largely recognized as the beginning of the gay rights movement as we now know it.

The political and social climates in the years around the time of the riots at Stonewall were changing in a noticeable way. The advent of birth control, among other things, brought about the sexual revolution; over a quarter million people joined together at Woodstock and Vietnam War protestors were seemingly steadily gaining in number. The climate was right for social reform and, after being ignited by Stonewall, gay and lesbian activists were on the front line. The Gay Liberation Front (GLF), along with other gay and lesbian social movement

organizations (SMO) would be formed and started to make progress that the homophile societies

of previous decades could not, given the cultural limitations of their time. The age of hippies and

free love was a more sympathetic climate and the movement to end homophobia took advantage

in a big way. For the first time, SMO efforts were deliberate and focused on activism, not just

unity. The name of the organization, Gay *Liberation*, summarizes the momentum of the early

days of the moment; it was about freedom. Gays and Lesbians no longer wanted to be prisoners

in a society that hated and mistreated them.

Each individual's "coming out", or act of going public with one's own homosexuality, was

a political statement. It was risky, too, as there were still no laws to protect homosexuals from

being discriminated against on the basis of their orientation. Stories about homosexuals started

appearing more and more in both the news and popular culture, but the message was starting to

change. Sometimes, of course, homosexuals were still depicted as psychotic, but they were

starting to sometimes be seen in a sympathetic tone as well. The exchange of dialogue between

media outlets, activists and the public was ongoing. Gays started using words like "pride" and

wanted to be seen as a discriminated against minority; not a rightfully-imprisoned group of

deviants. They framed their rhetoric in a way that made for easy bridging between their claims

and those of the civil rights movement; that comparison was often made in the media, as well as

comparisons to the feminist movement.

There were plenty of religious and medical expert counterclaimakers too, reminding

America that gays and lesbians weren't a discriminated against minority; they were sick

individuals, or possibly that their rise was something to be feared. After the removal of

homosexuality as a mental illness from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the

American Psychological Association (APA) in 1973, there was no authoritative, secular body that could justify the continued stigmatization of homosexuals. Religious counterclaimakers mobilized to fill that void. Media outlets, encouraged by pressure from protestors, began to slowly adopt the APA's change of ideals. (Fejes, 2008, p. 45; Fetner, 2001, p. 418)

The APA policy change was the result of pressure from outside and inside claimsmakers, including a closeted gay member of the APA who wore a mask for anonymity during the discussions (Lamberg, 1998). The change marked the first major successfully completed cycle of social change and, naturally, gave birth to a new round of claims, most notably, that gay and lesbians should enjoy minority status protection of their rights against discrimination. Society was slow to adopt that view, even as laws and policies started changing as a result of the APA's editing of the DSM.

Across the country, sodomy laws were being repealed and sexual orientation was being added to lists of protected statuses against discrimination in housing and employment. These changes were mostly small and it seemed that little overt attention was paid by media or the public; although gays and lesbians were receiving increasingly more positive media attention overall. The progress to change both societies' views and official policy alike had been slow, but steady, since the official de-medicalization by the APA; it continues today.

On the national level, large SMOs began lobbying government agencies and legislators for the first time but, most of the progress occurred at a local level, especially in coastal and college cities (Fejes, 2008, p. 53). It was during these smaller victories that activists would begin to embrace the term "sexual orientation" over "sexual preference" because the former indicated predisposition, not choice (Fejes, 2008, p. 54). Additional rhetoric would evolve around the use

of the word "homosexual", which most gays and lesbians preferred to use as an adjective, considering the use of it as a noun pejorative. In every stage of the social movement process, activists were reaching and revising goals, assembling resources and, for the first time in history, making noticeable progress.

In the postwar years, law and medicine had defined homosexual behavior as a crime and an illness. Since this secular position paralleled the views of religious doctrine, religious activists were not motivated to create an anti-homosexual countermovement, other than to occasionally restate their moral condemnation of homosexual behavior.

In working towards policy change, gay rights activists had initially given little or no thought to how religious establishments would view the changes. For them, this was an issue of civil rights and no exemptions were considered for religious beliefs, even though homosexuality was condemned by the teachings of most major religions (Fejes, 2008, p. 76). However, once the effort to decriminalizate and demedicalize started to make noticeable ground, religious experts became the outspoken authoritative body to condemn homosexual behavior. (Fejes, 2008, pp. 71-72) This religiously-inspired countermovement to stop the progress of homosexual SMOs was intentionally born in response to these early victories and continues to exist as the main opposing force of the campaign to end homophobia.

The first official anti-homosexual SMO was the "Save our Children" (SOC) campaign, lead by popular singer and model, Anita Bryant. The main objective was to repeal a change of ordinance in her county of Dade, Florida that added sexual orientation to a list statuses protected by anti-discrimination laws. Bryant was encouraged by the pastor of her church to lead the movement, since his own involvement would put the church at risk of losing the non-for-profit

organization tax breaks that the church enjoyed. (Fejes, 2008, p.78)

From the beginning, SOC knew to frame biblical issues into a "pro-moral" or "pro-family" model, one that remains in the modern anti-gay movement. The campaign handed out leaflets drawing comparisons between gays and pedophiles, warning parents that gays wanted to convert their children into homosexuals. They claimed that if the ordinance were not overturned, that nothing would stop gays and lesbians from being hired as school teachers and officials, with unfettered access to harm children. Additionally, gays deserved no civil rights, because their lifestyle is a choice and not demanding of protection, like race or skin color. The efforts by Bryant's group were successful in overturning the anti-discrimination law and launched a nation-wide countercampaign that targeted homosexual behavior, abortion, and the advancement of the feminist movement as enemies of the family. (Fejes, 2008, pp. 81-82) (Dowland, 2009)

The dialog between gay activists and counteractivists has continued now for over 30 years and has, in terms of policy reform and public opinion, yielded homosexual activists progress, although slow. The movement has, since after the APA redefinition, been framed in terms of a civil rights issue; as indicated by the very title of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). The HRC is the self-proclaimed largest civil rights organization campaigning for the rights of gays and lesbians (as well as for bisexual and transsexual individuals) in the nation. It was formed to counter the influence of several right-wing groups that were gaining political influence in the years following the SOC campaign, the most notable of these being the Moral Majority (MM) (Human Resources Campaign, History). The founder, Jerry Falwell, became an outspoken religious claimsmaker and the MM was able to integrate effectively with the Republican Party in the late 80s (Fetner, 2008, p. XIII)

The emergence of AIDS in the 1980s had a tremendous negative effect on the gay rights movement as the already scarce financial, emotional and human resources were diverted to combat the new problem effecting gay men's health (Fetner, 2008, p. 56). The AIDS epidemic also fueled claims by Falwell and other members of the Moral Majority that God's wrath was on America and that the "spread of homosexuality [will] bring about the demise of American culture as we know it" (Dowland, 2009). If public opinion can be measured by the content of joke cycles and urban myths, it could be assumed that the fear-mongering tactics had some ability to influence the public. Stories about AIDS-infected needles were circulating rapidly: any unknowing mother or child could be infected by the virus when pricked by a needle placed strategically in a coin return or under a gas pump handle.

Stories about violent crimes against gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered (GLBT) individuals would begin to punctuate the news, including: the assassination of San Francisco city supervisor Harvey Milk; the beating of Pulitzer Prize winning author Tennessee Williams; the rape and murder of Brandon Teena, whose death would be depicted in the film "Boys Don't Cry"; and the gruesome fatal attack on Matthew Shepard. In response, the gay movement was able to consistently reiterate their claims that it was *not* homosexual behavior that is a threat to America, but the homophobic attitudes that were the cause of these horrific crimes.

The movement used terms like gay bashing and gay bullying; which would later be helpful in extending the issue to be included in claims about the harms of all forms of bullying, especially among school children and college students. Activists work to combat violence against GLBT individuals in the form of promoting the passage of "hate crime" prevention acts (Human Resources Campaign, Hate Crimes)

Counterclaimants argue that ALL crimes are hateful and that homosexuals should not receive special protection from crime (Sprigg, 2010, Hate Crimes). They also warn parents about the "pro-homosexual indoctorinization" of their schoolchildren through anti-bullying campaigns masquerading as "seemingly innocent-sounding 'safe schools' programs which treat traditional values as being equivalent to racism" (Sprigg, 2006). The pro-family, "traditional values" platform is clear in their rhetoric and it is clear that they view rights for gays and lesbians as a threat to those values.

There is also an emergence by counterclaimsmakers that their rights, as believers in traditional values, are being violated by a state that is increasing more accepting of gays and lesbians. These become the basis of claims against the advancement of issues that seem to be of no direct importance to children or families, such as the allowance of gays and lesbians to serve in the military. In an article addressing the possible overturn of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy that only allows homosexuals to serve in the military if they do not let their orientation be known, counterclaimsmakers assert that "repealing the law would cause greater problems for [military] recruiting and retention, as new forms of discrimination against those with traditional values would drive many such people away." (Perkins, 2010)

Since claims made in secular arenas cannot effectively depend on religious text to garnish wide support, religious claimsmakers have published a multitude of information and studies on the problems of homosexual behavior and its harmful effects to society; some notable groups include The Family Research Council and The Family Research Institute. Notable research by these groups often indirectly questions the legitimacy of the APA's decision to remove homosexuality from the DSM, by including claims that homosexuality is not mentally nor

physically healthy, innate, or natural. Additional research becomes grounds for the claims that children suffer when they are raised by gays and that gays are more likely to harm children. (Sprigg, 2010, Myths)

Pro-gay claimsmakers have and present opposing research with regards to all these issues and further claim that *if* higher instances of psychological disturbance are present in gays and lesbians, it is due to them living in a society that discriminates again them; thus using data provided by counterclaimsmakers to further their own cause against homophobic bullying and hatred.

Religiously-inspired counterclaimsmakers no longer use the "hate speech" of Falwell in the 1980s, but instead say they "love the sinner, hate the sin" and present options for gays and parents of gays to get religiously-based counseling on how to overcome their homosexual feelings. Gay and Lesbian activists assert that homosexual feelings are innate and unable to be changed. Since there is no widely-accepted psychological or biological understanding of what definitively causes homosexuality in humans or animals, the debate with regards to nurture/nature and changeability/innateness cycles forward as somewhat central to the frame of both sides.

These well-established opponents of gay activists have been involved in an ongoing dialog as they reliably offer counterclaims, which lead to the repackaging and modifying of the original claims, and so forth. This religiously-inspired ideological oppositional countering, coupled with the practical need for claimsmakers to incrementally make progress in steps that can be supported by the resources, opportunities and caring capacity of that time period has kept the cycle of claimsmaking with regards to homophobia in the social problems marketplace for

the last several decades. As the discussion cycles forward, anti-homophobia activists are proving

to be as ideologically inspired to champion the advancement of civil rights as are religiously-

inspired idealists to hinder the progress of that movement. Claims and counterclaims invoking

all manner of rhetoric are presented, seemingly ad infinitum, and the media's capacity to cover

those claims has stayed strong. Policy initiatives from both sides have been made, defeated,

overturned, and made again. The seemingly unending players and factors of influence affecting

this highly contested issue leaves it poised to remain a central topic in our national political and

social dialog for the foreseeable future.

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