

Building Alliances Across Differences

Center for Gender in Organizations

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Identity Politics, Coalition Building, and Social Movements: Illustrations from Alliance-Building in the Gay Movement

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Presenters:

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William Gamson began the seminar by discussing his work on social movements in order to help us understand the issues involved in mobilizing diverse participants and framing the discourse on the issues. Gamson discussed the problem of subtle social exclusion of the “other”, even within the context of movements mobilizing for justice and inclusion, and shared his ideas about tactics that have advanced social movement activism.

Sue Hyde followed up by taking Gamson’s ideas on *collective action frames* and their importance in social movements and applying them to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) movement in the United States. In particular, Hyde discussed Gamson’s work within the context of the overall situation of GLBTs in society and culture, the case of partnership benefits in the state of Vermont, and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s (NGLTF) Race and Economic Justice Initiative.

Gay, Lesbian, Transgendered, and Bisexual Social Movements by William Gamson

William Gamson began the seminar by discussing issues from his work on social movements that have special relevance to the GLBT movement. In social movements, participants must address who has been wronged in society, by whom they have been wronged, and who should be invested in changing the situation. *Collective action frames* provide a way of thinking about an issue or issues that impels mobilization and collective action. There are three components, or ways of thinking about an issue that produce a “hot cognition,” or move groups to act:

- Justice—the sense that society at large has failed to provide for a group for which they are responsible. The sense of moral indignation that is generated must be framed broadly enough so that there is a shared sense of injustice. This is difficult to do in identity-based movements.
- Agency—identifying who the “we” is who can make change. Here there is an advantage in making the “we” as broad as possible, and yet for many movements it is imperative not to make the “we” so broad that collective mobilization becomes too difficult. In social movements, the push is to create a sense of empowerment or agency that mobilizes groups rather than individuals.
- Identity—the “we”, or group, can be an instrument of social change when defined in opposition to a “they”. If “we” and “they” are too abstract, the two can be conflated, thus leading to *individual* rather than *collective* action. For example, environmentalists’ message, among others, is that pollution is bad for society. While some organizations that fight against pollution have identified a “they”, or polluters, the “they” can also be construed as all individuals. In the latter case, the action taken may be a push for individuals to recycle, which is individual rather than collective action.

Framing movements is thus a delicate process, in that it is important to frame the issues broadly enough to include underlying conditions of the issue, and yet the frame must also be concrete enough to impel action.

Multiple Identities in Social Movements

Referencing Sharon Kurtz’s forthcoming book *All Kinds of Justice* (University of Minnesota Press), Gamson discussed the tendency of social movements to devolve into what Kurtz has called “lowest common denominator” politics. It is difficult to hold onto multiple identity categories within a movement, for fear that by doing so, the movement will be weakened. For example, in labor struggles, gender, race, and sexual orientation issues are traditionally subsumed by class issues. Gamson thus asked:

- How can organizations and movements defined around an identity category, such as GLBT groups, build a movement without subordinating other identities (such as race, class, gender, ethnicity)?
- How can multiple identities be held within a movement without devolving into struggles over which identity group has been the most oppressed, thus weakening the movement and creating divisions rather than alliances?

Essentialism vs. Social Construction

Finally, Gamson pointed to the debate within the GLBT movement about whether GLBTs are born or made. The work done by poststructuralist scholars has convincingly critiqued the notion of heterosexuality as natural, and the notion of sexuality and gender as dichotomous (i.e., one is either man or woman, male or female). And yet, essentialist politics, or the idea that GLBTs cannot help being the way they are, can sometimes be more effective in promoting change than the social constructionist view that GLBTs are a product of society at large. How do we make sense of this in terms of promoting change?

From Either/Or to Both/And: Matrix of Domination and Identity Practices

In his article “Hiroshima, the Holocaust, and the Politics of Exclusion,” Gamson explains Patricia Hill Collins’ notion of thinking about “both/and” rather than “either/or” identity categories:

Rather than a model in which each struggle is defined by a single identity, the problem is reframed as a generalized “matrix of domination” that makes certain dimensions relevant for particular individuals in particular struggles. What is shared here is the challenge to systems of exclusion rather than to a single exclusion shared by all. . . . Unlike an identity in lowest common denominator politics, in which one is asked to accept a particular collective identity as primary, this alternative allows for the interaction of multiple systems of domination that may differ for participants with different backgrounds and experiences (12).”

Gamson also discussed Sharon Kurtz’s concept of *identity practices*. Kurtz suggests focusing on identity practices rather than identity categories in order to build a broader movement. Gamson defines identity practices as “a set of specific challenger behaviors and actions, many seemingly insignificant in their own right, that in aggregate construct the challenger’s collective identity (12).” Four examples of these practices that will affect who participates in a social movement are:

1. The ways in which a movement or issues are framed, and who is and is not included (in literature, slogans, signs, etc.).
2. Which other organizations/movements publicly support and are acknowledged as allies to a movement (outside support).

3. The ways in which language, music, food, etc. reflect a multiplicity of identities in a movement (internal culture).
4. The ways in which the structure and leadership in a movement reflects the multiplicity of identities.

Illustrations from Alliance-Building in the Gay Movement by Sue Hyde

Sue Hyde used William Gamson's work as a way to discuss:

1. The situation of GLBTs in society and culture.
2. A particular GLBT issue—partnership benefits.
3. The work that the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) is doing to reach out to people of color and low income people through their Race and Economic Justice Initiative.

GLBTs in Society and Culture

She began by referring to Gamson's discussion of "life integrity rights" in his article "Hiroshima, the Holocaust, and the Politics of Exclusion." In this article Gamson cites Fein's (1990) conception of life integrity rights as rights "to life; to personal inviolability; to be free of fear of arbitrary seizure, detention, and punishment; to own one's body and labor; to free movement; and to procreate and cohabit with family (4-5)." Hyde explained that GLBTs traditionally have not been granted these rights: their relationships and families are not legally recognized; they, for the most part, cannot openly be part of the military or the clergy; violence and prejudice against them are norms in society; and there is legislation—such as sodomy laws and the Defense of Marriage Act—that specifically targets and affects GLBTs. Further, they are regularly denied government services and/or, for several of their needs, public services are underfunded, and GLBT youth are vulnerable and unprotected in schools.

So in fact, GLBTs have regularly experienced both of what Gamson calls "indirect" and "active" exclusion. Much of the exclusion has been indirect, or has resulted in social and cultural invisibility for GLBTs. Yet the price that GLBTs pay when they violate the "don't ask/don't tell" bargain by becoming visible ranges from being ostracized to being murdered.

Framing the GLBT Movement

Because of these issues, a gay rights movement was born in the United States. While this movement has had several successes—particularly concerning legal reforms and many civilly recognized rights—the rights that have been gained have mostly benefited white, male, middle- to upper-class individuals, or the GLBTs who most resemble the most powerful people in the most powerful institutions.

Hyde suggested that a GLBT movement framed around *social justice* rather than *gay rights* would be quite different than the current GLBT movement in the United States. A *social justice* frame would demand:

1. Cultural freedom
2. Personal and sexual self determination
3. Economic opportunity
4. Equal access to education

A movement framed this way might allow for alliances across race, gender, and class. The common denominator among participants in this movement would be high expectations for outcomes of social change. It would be possible to have a multiple identity alternative that would forego the personal gratification of having one identity category as the common marker, and it would not accept legal reforms that leave large parts of one's constituency behind.

A Case for Building a Broader Constituency in the GLBT Movement: The Vermont Marriage Legislation

Hyde then used the Vermont marriage legislation case as an example of how a GLBT movement premised on social justice might build a broader constituency. Since three same-sex couples went to court to seek legal recognition of their relationships and won, the Vermont legislature is currently tasked with finding a way to grant same-sex couples the same rights as married couples in the state of Vermont. Hyde explained three alternatives to approaching partnership benefits in Vermont. She asked, while recognizing that any of these kinds of recognition would be a gain for GLBTs, if we take Gamson's notion of framing, which of these might provide the most likely number of supporters?

Alternatives	Who Would Benefit	Organized Base
Same Sex Marriages	Same Sex Couples	-GLBTs & Friends -Liberal, Social, Religious Entities -Major Media Elites -Etc.
Comprehensive Registered Domestic Partnership	Same Sex Couples Opposite Sex Couples	-Gay and Lesbian Employee Groups -Labor Unions -Human Resource Leaders -Corporate endorsers ("Good for business") -Etc.
Full Family Recognition	75% of Households with children	Fragmented Constituency

Across from each alternative is a list of who would be able to take advantage of these benefits. In the first two alternatives, same-sex marriage and domestic partnership, it is likely that those who would be able to take advantage of these benefits would still be considered 2nd-class citizens in comparison to opposite-sex married couples. In the column Full Family Recognition, we can see that several individuals could potentially gain from this kind of legislation, and opposite-sex married couples would not retain their special status. Full family recognition would include all non-marital, non-biological functioning family configurations and relations. For example:

- Same-sex couples
- All opposite-sex couples who choose not to marry
- Single-headed households
- Elderly who live with/support friends or relatives
- Stepparents
- Unmarried co-parents
- Families with more than 2 parents

In short, a definition that broadened rights to families who fall outside the legal/social recognized pattern of a household with one male parent, one female parent, and biological children would encompass, according to US Census Data, 75% of households in the United States today.

If we look at the movement's organized base for each of the alternatives, it is clear that full family recognition is the least organized, since there has never been a proposal for it. And yet, the potential allies would be numerous, depending on how the issue was framed. Potential allies might be, for example:

- Family and children's service providers
- Disability advocates
- Elder advocates
- Welfare rights advocates

Hyde pointed out that if we look across the three alternatives and encompass all of the groups, we can see that they all share a certain cultural status as outsiders and as enemies to the traditional family structure. The question then becomes, how would we create a movement that would encompass the multiplicity of identities that would be represented across all of these groups?

The gay rights frame has dominated for several reasons, including financial reasons (the constituency that supports gay rights also produces the most funds to support the movement) and the availability of individuals to do the work of a movement that is largely volunteer-run (mostly individuals who have economic security).

NGLTF's Race and Economic Justice Initiative

NGLTF is currently engaged in a new project, funded by the Ford Foundation, to broaden the GLBT movement beyond a gay rights agenda. The Policy Institute of NGLTF is exploring what it would take to reimagine/rebuild the gay rights movement into a social justice movement so that more people would benefit from the movement and so that the movement would look more like the communities it is aiming to represent.

The NGLTF Race and Economic Justice Initiative will:

1. Gather demographic information on people of color, elders, and low-income people within the GLBT population.
2. Produce and disseminate policy proposals (e.g., programs, ideas, legislation).
3. Involve grassroots GLBT organizations in the process of implementing policy and advocacy programs, which will therefore change what Kurtz has called the *identity practices* of the GLBT movement, so that the leadership, cultural expressions, and agendas for action are representative of the entire GLBT community with all of its multiple identities.

Conclusion

The issues of spanning differences and valuing inclusion are crucial in an era when identity politics has created a lot of the energy for contemporary mobilization efforts, but also holds the risk of dividing social change work into narrow silos of activism. The mix of concepts and examples that Gamson and Hyde discussed help us to understand the next frontiers of social change and the implications for activists in the workplace.

Readings

Gamson, W. 1995. "Hiroshima, the Holocaust, and Politics of Exclusion." *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 60, pp. 1-20.

The Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO) is an international resource for innovative ideas and practice in the field of gender, work, and organizations. Recognizing the pervasive role of work organizations in society and our individual lives, CGO seeks to advance learning and support organizations to strengthen both gender equity and organizational effectiveness. In our approach, we understand that gender works simultaneously with race, class, ethnicity, age and sexual identity in shaping organizational systems, cultures, and practices as well as individuals' identities and experiences at work. We work at the intersection of research and practice and we pursue our mission through action learning, consultation, research, education, convening, and information dissemination.

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