# Morality Politics vs. Identity Politics: Framing Processes and Competition Among Christian Right and Gay Social Movement Organizations

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*This paper applies a social movement organization framing analysis to conflicts between gay-rights and Christian Right groups over issues of lesbian, gay, and bisexual inclusions in public education. As groups representing each side entered this new arena of debate over gay rights, they applied strategies they had used in other arenas. Both sides have pursued inflexible, polarizing strategies that target their constituencies and have relinquished the opportunity to offer new and creative understanding of their positions and to reach a potential new audience. This shows how opposing frames can become mutually reinforcing constraints.*

**KEY WORDS:** opposing movements; framing strategies; civil rights; morality politics; Christian Right; gay rights.

## INTRODUCTION

Consider the following statements:

> Because we are entrusted with the education of our young, it is perhaps especially startling that the schools treat as invisible the existence of their homosexual children. Cultural "taboos," fear of controversy and deeply-rooted, pervasive homophobia (an irrational fear of homosexuality) have kept the educational system in the United States blindfolded and mute on the subject. One can only speculate [about] the enormous losses among our young people because of this indifference. Discrimination not only harms lesbian and gay children, but also hinders the development of heterosexual children and obstructs the functions of education for society as a whole. (Friends of Project 10, 1997:v)

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> Today, the secular world tells us to learn tolerance. Our schools tell our children, "You must learn to be tolerant of all people and all behaviors." The current use of "tolerance" in our schools was concocted by the homosexual/lesbian lobby to interject into all our children's classrooms, and their tender accepting minds, that homosexuality is just another normal lifestyle. . . . Christians are to be held responsible to God for not opposing the evils of our time. Parents must protect their children from the homosexual teaching and recruitment going on right now in our classrooms, through homosexual courses like "Project 10." Our children's minds are being openly polluted by homosexual "tolerance" teaching. (Citizens for Excellence in Education, quoted in Simonds, 1998:1)

These quotations are examples of framing strategies used by opposing social movement organizations participating in the battle over lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender inclusions in public education. They illustrate the complete disagreement that exists between those who claim that the nation has a social responsibility to "its children" to promote tolerance of homosexuality in public schools and those who argue that the nation has a responsibility to protect children from such messages. These claims are rationalized through framing strategies, which rhetorically align the specific issue with larger cultural beliefs and values. This is a common technique used by groups to give authority to and mobilize supporters for their positions (Benford and Snow, 2000; Gamson, 1988; Snow and Benford, 1992; Tarrow, 1992; Williams, 1995). In this case, the use of "social movement ideology as a set of cultural resources" (Williams, 1995:125) occurs within the context of a ongoing struggle between larger opposing social movement organizations.

Gay-rights advocates and Christian Right[2] political organizations have butted heads over numerous social, cultural, and political issues in the past century. This article examines the conflict between these groups by focusing on one of the most heated arenas in which they currently battle, that of public education. The major issues being debated in this arena are the establishment of gay[3] student groups, the addition of "sexual orientation" to school harassment policies, and the addition of materials on gay people to public school curriculums. The analysis illustrates the effect of opposing movement dynamics on the framing strategies of both types of organizations in this new arena.

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[2]I use the term *Christian Right* throughout the paper rather than religious right, fundamentalist, or other possible terms. The choice, while not perfect, is based on Didi Herman's (1994, 1997) research on the religious opposition to gay rights. Herman argues that this term is the most accurate because *religious right* is too broad a term, and *fundamentalist Protestant* is too narrow. Conservatives from other religious faiths may also view homosexuality as a sin, but the most organized political opposition has come from conservative Christians. In addition, while evangelical Protestants are the most organized politically, Catholics and other Christian sects have also opposed gay rights.

[3]The term *gay* is used throughout the article for simplicity, but is to be read as an umbrella term for *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, and *transgender*.

One of the most interesting and significant features of the conflicts among gay and Christian organizations is that they often debate each other over the same issue from completely different realms of politics. In general, gay-rights groups engage in framing strategies centered firmly in the arena of identity politics (Berstein, 1997; Gamson, 1996; Seidman, 1996), while Christian Right organizations generally implement framing strategies situated within the context of morality politics (Billings and Scott, 1994; Johnson, 1994; Lugg, 2000; Martin, 1996). As the following analysis shows, in the resulting political debates these two factions often appear to be speaking past each other rather than truly engaging in a political dialogue that might lead to compromise or new understanding. In order to frame the issues in the most politically effective way for their group, they must remain in their separate political contexts. To argue in their opponent's political realm is to lose the ideological strength of their political framing strategy and thus weaken their own position.

## ENTERING A NEW ARENA: THE POTENTIAL FOR NEW FRAMING STRATEGIES

In the late 1980s, gay students began to speak out about their identity and experiences, and to ask that their local schools tolerate, include, and protect them in the same ways they do other students. What started as the actions of individuals in local schools became community-wide discussion and debate over the origins and morality of homosexuality, the rights of students, and the responsibilities of America's public schools. As these localized debates increased in frequency and entered national headlines, the scope and reach of the debates broadened. In Massachusetts, students fought to get a statewide "safe schools act" passed. This state law protects students from discrimination and harassment, and establishes programs aimed at educating students, teachers, and administrators about gay issues (Perrotti, 2002). In Utah, students fought a long and heated battle for the right to have a gay–straight alliance (GSA) student group. In Wisconsin, Jamie Nabozny successfully sued his school, and was awarded $960,000 in compensation for the severe abuse he suffered at school because he is gay. These more visible cases sparked what could be called a grassroots social movement of student groups in schools across the country. More than 2000 gay–straight alliance groups have been established in public schools throughout the United States since 1985 (GLSEN, 2004).

National gay and Christian Right groups became interested in these struggles as arenas in which they might further their larger social, cultural,

and political goals. For gay-rights organizations, the struggles of these students spoke to the larger political issue of the civil rights of gay citizens. For Christian Right groups, these local debates were symptomatic of the threat they believe the "gay agenda" poses to American culture and family values, and to religious freedom. These interests led national social movement organizations to become involved in local battles and bring their views on the importance of these issues into the national political spotlight.

While Christian Right groups have for decades targeted public schools as arenas in which to battle for the protection and assertion of their interests, gay-rights organizations noticeably avoided and/or ignored schools in their efforts to create social change. Christian Right groups apparently understand that schools are powerful institutions in the creation and perpetuation of social and cultural values and beliefs because of their socializing influence on children. This led these groups to fight for abstinence-only sex education, against the teaching of evolution, for the right of religious-based student groups to meet on school grounds, to defend school prayer, and so on. These among many other issues influence the legitimization of religious beliefs and values in schools. We can easily assume that gay-rights groups have also long understood the socializing impact of schools and their role in maintaining cultural stereotypes and social inequality. However, these very stereotypes and inequalities made it difficult for gay-rights groups to choose to address schools and students' rights head on. The gay–straight alliance movement that organized to support student efforts tried to separate itself somewhat from the gay-rights movement by focusing only on students' rights, hoping to avoid some of the potential negative reactions and suspicions about motivation (Miceli, 2005). This paper demonstrates that these efforts at separation largely failed because the framing strategies employed by the GSA movement pulled them into the now standardized face-off between gay-rights groups and the Christian Right.

## THE EFFECT OF OPPOSING MOVEMENTS ON POLITICAL FRAMING STRATEGIES

Research on social movements recognizes that the actions and demands of organizations often stimulate the formation of a countermovement that becomes their main source of opposition (Lo, 1982; Mottl, 1980; Tarrow, 1992). This is clearly what has happened in this case. As students began establishing gay–straight alliances in their individual schools, community members who identified with the Christian Right often countered their efforts (Miceli, 1998). As students became more organized, so did the

countermobilization. Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) define countermovements as "networks of individuals that share many of the same objects of concern as the social movements they oppose. They make competing claims on the state on matters of policy and politics and vie for attention from mass media and the broader public" (1632). Tarrow (1992) points out that it is only logical that social movement organizations spark the creation of their own competition. The claims of social movements inherently stand in opposition to some elements of the social structure and/or cultural value system—otherwise, they would have no reason to mobilize. Therefore, it is nearly inevitable that some group will work to protect against the change from the status quo or to argue for an alternative change.

The role of the Christian Right is crucially important to the analysis because it has a strong effect on the political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes available to and used by advocates for gay inclusions in public education. There has been a rather recent trend in social movement theory to examine the effects that movements and countermovements have on each other (Brown, 2000; Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996; Zald, 1996). The duration of the struggle between gay-rights groups and Christian Right groups has solidified the conflicts between them. Given this prolonged battle, Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) argue that they should be understood as opposing movements, rather than as a movement and a countermovement. "In this conception, opposing movements influence each other both directly and by altering the environment in which each side operates. The opposing movement is a critical component in the structure of political opportunity the other side faces" (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996:1632). Examining the full effect of these two opposing social movements on all three of the major dimensions of social movement success—political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing strategies (McAdam *et al.*, 1996; Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996)—is beyond the scope of this article.

The analysis here is limited to an examination of framing strategies. Benford and Snow (2000) offer a critical assessment of the collective body of research that has been published on framing processes. In their assessment, this research indicates that opposing movements have both a positive and negative affect on the success of each other's framing strategies:

> "[A]n [organization's] prognostic framing activity typically includes refutations of the logical efficacy of solutions advocated by opponents as well as the rationale for it's own remedies. . . . The important point is that opposing framing activity can affect a movement's framing, on the one hand, by putting movement activists on the defensive, at least temporarily and, on the other hand, by frequently forcing it to develop and elaborate prognoses more clearly than otherwise might have been the case." (617)

Part of this dual positive and negative dynamic between established opposing movements is that the opposition becomes predictable. As Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) state, "[O]nce a movement enters a particular venue, if there is the possibility of contest, an opposing movement is virtually forced to act in the same arena" (1648). This predictability has a significant effect on the development of the framing strategies used by both sides in any specific arena of conflict. Both sides know the master frames of their opposition well and can therefore easily predict what the opposition's framing strategy is likely to be in any new venue and construct their own counterstrategy before entering the debate. This can be both an asset and a hindrance to effective political mobilizations.

Well-established positions, or "master frames," of a social movement organization may be effective partly because they resonate reliably with a particular audience; however, they also, at times, serve as constraints (Snow and Benford, 1992; Tarrow, 1992; Williams, 1995; and Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996). Movements occasionally get so locked into their own established position, or master framing strategy, that they become unable to adapt to changing social circumstances or to move beyond their initial political gains. When this potentially constraining effect of master frames is combined with the dynamics that exist between opposing social movements, the result can be political conflict between groups that no longer actively engage one another in political dialogue. This is the case in the conflict between gay-rights and Christian Right groups. Once in this state the movements are no longer forcing each other to construct more sophisticated strategies as Benford and Snow (2000) suggest. Instead, each becomes stuck, spinning its wheels in the same master frames and continually defending against its opponent's frame.

This dynamic spilled over into the GSA movement. When gay and straight students first began this movement, they simply stated what they wanted and why they wanted it without thinking about framing strategies or anticipating oppositional frames. This lack of a plan freed students from these constraints for a while. However, as a result of organized efforts to increase students' chances of success, the movement eventually developed a set of framing strategies that parallel those used by the gay-rights movement in its culture war with the Christian Right. In a sense, the movement's leaders were forced to do this in order to pragmatically anticipate and counter this most vocal form of resistance to their goals (Miceli, 2005). In doing so, however, they curtailed the potential this new arena offered to develop innovative framing strategies that could break free of the polarized discourse.

### ANALYSIS OF THREE OPPOSING FRAME STRATEGIES REGARDING GAY INCLUSIONS ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

The remainder of this paper analyzes the framing strategies used by organizations that are part of the GSA movement and groups from the Christian Right that oppose them. The analysis applies the dynamics of opposing-movement framing that has been established in contemporary social movement literature to this specific arena of struggle. The data used in the analysis was collected from organizational materials and published statements from various national groups that have politically mobilized in support of or in opposition to gay inclusions in education. Data was collected over an 8-year period from the websites and published material of organizations such as GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network), PERSON (Public Education Regarding Sexual Orientation Nationally), Project 10, the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), FRC (Family Research Counsel), Focus on the Family, Christian Coalition, ADL (Alliance Defense Fund), and CEE (Citizens for Excellence in Education). Each of these national organizations has taken a position on the issue of gay inclusions in public schools and, to varying extents, all of them have publicized that position and mobilized to influence the outcomes of local, state, and national debates on the issue. The data was coded and analyzed. The coding focused on the larger cultural themes that organizations used in their framing strategies, how the organization's framing strategy developed over time, and the opposing-movement relationship between the framing strategies of both sides of the debate.

### From Framing Contest to Frame Isolation: The Result of a Prolonged Struggle Between Opposing Social Movement Organizations

The term *framing* is generally defined as "the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action" (McAdam *et al.*, 1996:6). Social movement organizations try to win advantage with authorities and the public by framing their demands in ways intended to persuade people that their cause is valid (Zald, 1996; Williams, 1995). The most effective way of doing this is to link the frame discursively with larger cultural themes and values. Doing this makes the frame accessible to larger audiences, because it will "resonate," (Snow and Benford, 1992:140) with their established cultural understandings (Gamson, 1988). "Social movements exist in a larger societal context. They draw on the cultural stock for images of what is an injustice, for what is a violation of what ought to be.

. . . Contemporary framing of injustice of political goals almost always draw upon larger societal definitions of relationships, of rights, and of responsibilities to highlight what is wrong with the current social order, and to suggest directions for change" (Zald, 1996:267). Framing strategies generally do not redefine cultural norms or social understandings; rather, they work within preexisting ones (Tarrow, 1992). What is creative about effective framing strategies is their ability to transform these common understandings into calls for new social action.

In a prolonged battle between opposing movements, these framing strategies become intensely fought battles for control over the social, cultural, and political meaning of the issue. Sometimes the very conflict between groups is framed as having larger cultural meaning. "The likelihood that opposition to a movement will take the form of a sustained countermovement is directly related to the opposition's ability to define the conflict as one that entails larger value cleavages in society" (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996:1639). This is exemplified in the history of battles between gay-rights and Christian Right organizations. In fact, the definition of "larger value cleavages" has been so strong that gay-rights and Christian Right groups have come to represent completely opposite cultural value orientations. To align with one over any issue is symbolically to choose sides in a political war that does not define a middle ground. With these frames, in a sense, the opposing organizations paint themselves into their respective corners: they cannot dialogue with one another or with any audience that has not already chosen, or is not willing to choose, a side in what has been deemed a "culture war" (Hunter, 1991). Gay-rights and Christian Right groups present framing strategies that bifurcate the understanding of the source of the social issue, the origins of sexual orientation, the rights of minority groups, and the resolution of this social issue.

### Opposing Strategies for Framing the Issue as a Subject of Social Concern

The frame-alignment strategies developed by social movements are meant to influence the opinions of those who make decisions about institutional policies and practices. If organizations can get the media to cover the issues that concern them in the ways that they have framed them, such coverage can accelerate their efforts. Gay–straight alliance social movement organizations and Christian conservative groups have both worked to get their interpretations of the problems faced by gay youth and the purpose of GSA clubs covered by newspapers, and both have had some success. Many local debates over gay student organizations in public schools have become nationally publicized news stories—through Associated Press

stories in newspapers around the country; articles in major news magazines, including *Time* and *Newsweek*; and coverage on televised news programs. This has resulted in some societal recognition of the problems and issues faced by gay students. Another important factor drawing public attention to the issue has been news coverage of the research on the "risk factors" of this population of adolescents—substance abuse, dropping out of school, sexual promiscuity, homelessness, depression, and suicide. Gay–straight alliance and Christian Right groups attempt to frame these news stories in ways that mobilize audiences to react in very different ways. However, both had the same initial task, to define these stories as evidence of a social rather than an individual problem.

Conservative Christian organizations attempt to do this by arguing that gay and lesbian inclusions in education are causing further problems in America's schools. The broadest theme of their framing strategies is that of a "homosexual agenda" that seeks to infiltrate social institutions and destroy American values and culture. The threat of a gay agenda is a common theme used in all arenas of conflict between gay-rights and Christian right organizations—marriage being the most visible one recently (Bull, 1996). The following passage from Focus on the Family's report on the 2003 GLSEN national conference illustrates the framing of the threat to public schools.

> GLSEN is a cultural hurricane that's hitting our schools with the kind of force and devastation that may take years to fully assess. Let me try to paint the picture. GLSEN is a self-styled pro-gay education network targeting our kids in public schools. The danger is how they seek to accomplish this mission. In effect, GLSEN's objective is to cut out parents and adult leaders in the child's life who don't agree with the [gay] agenda. Every speaker at the national conference made this very clear." (Fey, 2003:1)

In this arena the "gay agenda" threatens not only schools, but also families, parental authority, and, most seriously, the minds of children. This undermining of core social institutions and, therefore, the future of the nation is the social problem that must be addressed according to Christian Right groups.

> "If all forms of harassment are wrong, then all forms of harassment—without distinction—should be banned. In fact, singling out "sexual orientation," and including it with traditional categories like race and sex, serves not a "safety" function but a political one. When harassment based on sexual orientation is explicitly banned, school staff are inevitably trained that the *reason* that such harassment is wrong is not because all harassment is wrong or that all people should be treated with respect, but because "*there is nothing wrong with being gay or lesbian.*" Such an assertion is not only offensive to the moral standards of most Americans and to the historical teachings of most major religions, but it flies in the face of hard scientific data showing the high rates of promiscuity, physical disease, mental illness, substance abuse, child sexual abuse, and domestic violence that result from homosexual behavior." (Sprigg, 2004:2)

Christian Right groups strongly align their frames with religious and cultural definitions of the immorality of homosexuality to provide discursive power and legitimacy to their claim that gay inclusions in public education must be opposed, because such definitions resonate with a very large audience. The frame relies heavily on its resonance with common stereotypes and religious teachings, and does not actually provide any "hard scientific data," to support its assertion, assuming that the suggestion of proof alone is enough to win support.

The following statement was made at a July 2, 1996, Capitol Hill briefing regarding the Defense of Marriage Act sponsored by the Family Research Council. The statement illustrates what the Christian Right believes is the threat posed to the essential values and morals of American society by gay inclusions in public education.

> At one time in the history of our country, education was virtually synonymous with moral training. The traditional virtues and cultural mores were passed down from generation to generation because they work. Our students have been guinea pigs in Russian roulette with their futures long enough. Same-sex "marriage" is a result of a destructive, narcissistic way of thinking and of "value-neutral" curriculums. One can only shudder to consider the horrific possibilities which may occur on the sexuality continuum with the perpetuation of such policies. (Page, 1996:4).

This statement argues that teaching of tolerance or value-neutrality regarding homosexuality is against the traditional moral training of students in "American" values that public schools were meant to uphold. In this frame alignment, teaching tolerance for, or acceptance of, homosexuality is counter to the proper function of public education. In accord with this general functionalist argument, Christian Right groups argue that a shift toward acceptance of homosexuality in one institutional realm (schools, marriage, media, etc.) will disrupt the accepted and necessary moral order of American society, which is considered linked to normative heterosexuality.

Catherine Lugg's (2000) research on the Christian Right reveals that a shift in dominant Christian ideology from fundamentalism to reconstructionism was important in motivating religious groups to intensify their opposition to efforts of the gay-rights movement to win institutional rights. "Reconstructionists differ from traditional fundamentalists in that they believe Christ will not return until his kingdom is established on earth. Consequently, they are dedicated to reconstructing a national government based explicitly on Christian tenets" (Lugg, 2000:625). The use of the term *reconstruction* rather than *construction* in Lugg's statement is significant. Reconstructionists believe that the increasing separation of church and state has caused the moral decline of what was once a Christian nation and that the nation's social ills will only be relieved when the two are unified. This belief

has made political activism a moral imperative for members of these religious communities—creating a religious "political ethic."

Didi Herman's extensive research on the Christian Right and its influence in American politics agrees with Lugg's analysis. Herman (1994; 1997) argues further that an anti-homosexual agenda is central to this religious political ethic that conservative Christians feel morally obligated to uphold. They believe that any institutional policy that signals a tolerance for homosexuals is tantamount to the institutionalization of sin, and this takes them further away from the goal of the unification of church and state, which is required (among other things) to bring forth the millennium. The Christian Right's conviction that the policies and ruling principles of the government and institutions of the United States must conform to a narrow and specific fundamentalist Christian doctrine explains the ardency with which they have led a public antigay agenda for more than three decades.

Gay–straight alliance organizations have an opportunity in this new arena of conflict to expose these wider motivations of the Christian Right. They could counter accusations of a "gay agenda" by asserting that the Christian Right has an agenda that motivates their efforts to block gay inclusions in schools and the rights of gay students. This strategy could mobilize those who may not be motivated specifically to support gay students, but who would take action to oppose these larger goals of the Christian Right to end the separation of church and state and institutionalize their religious beliefs. This opportunity has not been seized. Instead, the organizations involved in the GSA movement stick to a basic civil rights discourse. Their frames define the function of public education as well as American values very differently than do their opponents. According to GSA organizations, the central functions of public education are to uphold democratic principles and to encourage tolerance of differences.

> Is it not precisely the role of education, and schools, to prevent ignorance? Yet, schools continue, through their own ignorance and fears, to censor all fair and accurate information about [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered] people. And what is the result? Obviously, [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered] young people grow up isolated, afraid, lacking self-esteem or role models, disliking themselves. . . . [Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered] young people, denied their right to the truth about themselves through appropriate schooling, experience a host of societally-imposed problems: harassment, hate violence, parental abuse, job discrimination, medical mistreatment, etc. Schools are failing in their responsibilities to these young people." (Marshall *et al.*, 1995)

This statement is a strong assertion of the social cause of the difficulties faced by gay youth. However, merely experiencing problems caused by social forces is not sufficient cause for social reparations.

Media coverage resulted in the recognition by a good portion of the American public that gay adolescents exist and that they suffer some rather severe problems. However, this recognition did not bring about an understanding that these are *social* issues, with *social* causes and consequences. The audience could still view the stories as tales of problems that gay youth face because of their "immoral lifestyle choice." Gay-rights groups are used to having to counter such explanations of any problems they face (Berstein, 1997; Brown, 2000; Jenness, 1995; Valocchi, 1999).

The following mission statement from GLSEN aims to isolate issues of morality and define the general social meanings of the problems faced by gay students. "Since homophobia and heterosexism undermine a healthy school climate, we work to educate teachers, students, and the public at large about the damaging effects these forces have on youth and adults alike" (GLSEN, 1997:352). Organizations in the GSA movement use such statements to assert that the problems of gay youth are caused by the lack of information and the intolerant environment in public schools. Thus, the schools are framed as the causal agents for the sufferings of these students. This strategy avoids a direct moral debate with the Christian conservative opposition. Rather than making a counter moral claim of their own—that the mistreatment of these students is immoral and that fair treatment and tolerance of them is moral—GSA organizations frame the issue as a matter of civil rights. Before a group can use such a strategy successfully, however, it must also prove itself a valid and worthy minority.

### Opposing Frames of the Minority-Group Status of Gay People

While most gay-rights groups seek to portray their objectives in terms of civil rights, their opponents frame the issues as moral ones and frequently cite biblical teachings and their prohibitions against homosexuality. Haider-Markel and Meier (1996) argue that, "morality politics issues are highly salient with little need to acquire any information (technical or otherwise) to participate in the debate. Everyone is an expert on morality. The combination of high salience and low information structures the nature of the politics involved" (333). The Christian Right's strategy of morality politics uses the power of religious beliefs and social stereotypes to win support for their perspective on gay issues rather than evidence or fact. This is in sharp contrast to identity and civil rights politics, which require that groups must first prove they are valid minority groups. To do this, they must provide evidence and/or arguments to counter the heavily ingrained social, cultural, and religious beliefs that homosexuality is abnormal, deviant, and/or immoral.

As stated earlier, frames that resonate with existing cultural beliefs and values are generally more successful than those that do not. To make claims that run counter to established understandings or that offer a completely new perspective is to decrease a group's chance of success. Therefore, the choice of discourse for each group is guided largely by public opinion about homosexuality. Public opinion research about homosexuality and the rights of gay and lesbian people consistently concludes that while opinion has changed over time, the change is split on two issues—morality and civil liberties (Dejowski, 1992; Herek, 1988; Kite and Whitley, 1996; LaMar and Kite, 1998; Loftus, 2001; Prate, 1993; Seltzer, 1993; Yang, 1997). These studies all find that Americans distinguish between the morality of homosexual behavior and the civil liberties of gay and lesbian individuals. Americans' opinion about the morality of homosexual behavior grew increasingly negative from 1973 to 1990. Since 1990 this opinion has begun to inch in a positive direction, but more than half the population still feels that homosexuality is "always wrong" (Loftus, 2001). Interestingly, this same time period saw a steady decline in Americans' willingness to restrict the civil liberties of gay and lesbian people—by 1998, 12% supported restrictions, while 65% opposed them (Loftus, 2001). These research studies explain these changes and patterns in the public's attitude in various ways, including changes in American demographics, particularly increasing education levels; changing cultural ideologies, specifically becoming more liberal or conservative regarding sexuality in general; the efforts of gay-rights movements to legitimize gay people as an unjustly treated minority group; and the efforts of Christian Right groups to counter these claims.

According to Loftus's (2001) study, the efforts of gay-rights groups to frame issues of homosexuality as matters of civil rights for a minority group appear to have been at least partially responsible for the increase in public support for the civil liberties of gay and lesbian people. However, the framing strategy of the Christian Right to define homosexuality as only about deviant and immoral sexual behavior has also been rather successful at maintaining the public opinion that homosexuality is "always wrong." These opposing movements each attempt to work the opinion polls to their advantage by constructing frames that instruct the public to respond to gay student issues in a way that is consistent with their existing opinions of homosexuality. Significantly, neither side offers much of a direct challenge these opinions in their framing strategies.

The main framing processes used in debates over inclusions in education at the individual, local, and national levels are strongly tied to those that major gay-rights organizations have used in the past. The gay and lesbian mainstream has defined common lesbian and gay identities in a

way that designates this group as a minority group, not by choice but by birth, that deserves the same rights and protections granted to other minority groups in America. This "minoritizing" strategy firmly aligned the gay and lesbian rights movement with civil rights politics, and the movement then proceeded draw from the framing strategies used by the civil rights and women's rights movements. A common framing strategy in all of these movements has been to identify the group as one that is, but should not be, discriminated against in a democracy. This always requires redefining the qualities that the society and culture commonly use to understand and oppress the group (Calhoun, 1994; Cohen, 1985; Melucci, 1980; Wiley, 1994).[4]

To succeed in collectively defining gay students as a legitimate minority group, GSA organizations have had to combat the commonly accepted, socially constructed meanings and understandings of sexual identity—as a natural human deformity or a deviant and immoral lifestyle choice. Such views are a major obstacle in legitimating gay individuals as a "true" minority population.[5] To overcome this roadblock, most organizations in the GSA movement make strong statements about "the truth" of sexual identity.

> It is the basic assumption of this program that homosexuality is a normal variation
> in both orientation and sexual behavior. Negative attitudes toward homosexuals

[4]The political strategy of claiming an ethnic minority status that some gay-rights activists use has clearly achieved considerable political gains. However, queer theorists and activists argue that these gains come at the cost of sacrificing the chance for true equality by eliminating the binary. Those who support the assertion of a common homosexual identity point out that the approach to identity deconstruction used by queer activists—while possibly powerful in the abstract and on a theoretical level—provides little basis for practical gains for the rights of gay individuals in the American political system. In American politics, "politically controlled resources are 'distributed along ethnic lines'; ethnic groups mean larger voting blocs and greater influence in electoral systems. Ethnic categories serve, moreover, as the basis for discrimination and repression, both official and informal, and thus as a logical basis for resistance" (Gamson, 1996:409).

[5]The contemporary debate around the strategies of sexual identity politics illustrates the central paradox of identity politics more generally. The same category of identity used to subordinate and oppress a group must be used as a collective basis from which to resist this oppression. The universalizing of characteristics, experiences, and identities becomes a strategy of these movements because the structure of politics dictates that such claims must be made to receive compensation. Queer theorists and activists argue that although such a strategy can make some gains, it also serves to solidify the group's categorization and entrench the group in institutional structures that reinforce such categories (e.g., see Foucault, 1980; Gamson, 1994; Namaste, 1996; Rust, 1993; Seidman, 1996; Stein and Plummer, 1996; Warner, 1991). The discursive rhetoric of framing strategies at times reinforces and at times subverts the dominant social, cultural, and institutional paradigm for understanding sexual identity. It is important to emphasize that while these two internally competing frames are significantly different in their perspectives and specific goals, they are alike in some general political orientations. Both strategies focus on identity and civil rights and actively combat those who seek to frame gay concerns as a moral or individual issue (Epstein, 1999).

> are primarily the result of homophobia, a prejudice similar in nature and dynamic to all other prejudices, including anti-Semitism, racism, and sexism. Continued exposure to societal prejudice results in a stigmatization of the homosexually oriented through which their social and personal identities are, to use Goffman's (1963) term, "spoiled." As a result, gay people become members of a minority group, a term defined as any segment of the population that suffers unjustified negative acts by the rest of society. (Friends of Project 10, 1997:vi)

The above statement clearly illustrates that Project 10 understands the importance of defining homosexuality as a "natural" or "normal" biological human variation in order to legitimately claim that gay students are part of a minority group. Here homosexuality is argued to be inherent (orientation), and membership in a minority group involuntary (through societal discrimination they "become members of a minority group"). Once defined as such, it can be argued that they suffer unjustifiable social discrimination. Literature published by Project 10 frequently includes strong statements, backed by research or quotations from a medical doctor or Ph.D., asserting that "sexual identity is not a matter of choice" (Friends of Project 10, 1997:6). The importance of this assertion is, of course, that if sexual identity is considered to be a "choice," then the resulting problems are individual and the solution is to fix the gay person, and not social institutions.

The literature produced by GLSEN also devotes attention to separating the issue of sexual identity from the notion that it is a moral issue or choice. GLSEN's approach to articulating this "fact" is, however, less forceful than that of Project 10:

> Our sexual behavior and how we define ourselves (our identity) is usually a choice. Though some people claim their sexual orientation is a choice, for the vast majority, this doesn't seem to be the case. ... Possibly in an ideal world devoid of homophobia, few people would construct a personal identity based on sexual orientation. Since we do not live in this ideal world, however, people define themselves to assure their visibility in a society that wishes to shove them into a closet of denial and fear. (GLSEN, 1997:321)

This statement conveys an understanding of identity that is more complex than the statement of Project 10. While Project 10's statement is largely informed by a "homosexual mainstream" approach to defining the essentialist nature of sexual orientation and identity, GLSEN's definition illustrates the influences of a "queer" approach to the issue. The statement articulates a separation between the terms *sexual orientation*, which is biologically defined, and *sexual identity*, which is socially defined. It asserts that social forces create sexual identity categories and make declarations of sexual identity politically necessary and leaves open the possibility of choice, even if only for a few. The statement also attempts to argue for the decentering of sexuality as an identifying category for individuals by recognizing the socially constructed nature (i.e., "a world of homophobia") of

sexual identity categories. However, the statement also retreats from this more complex discussion of sexuality, which appears to have been brought up to diminish the importance of such concerns and return to a more essentialist frame.

The Christian Right strongly opposes the efforts of gay-rights groups to establish gay people as a legitimate minority group. They have repeatedly attempted to undermine the efforts of the gay-rights movement to gain basic civil rights by discounting the claims to a biologically imposed common identity that are politically necessary to gain access to such rights. To do this, Christian Right groups have played upon socially and religiously produced knowledge of homosexuality as an immoral or deviant lifestyle, which already inform public understandings of gay individuals. The quotation from Citizens for Excellence in Education that I used in the introduction illustrates the Christian Right groups' rejection of gay people as a valid minority group worthy of inclusion or tolerance in American culture or in public schools.

Christian Right groups have taken two main approaches to dismantling the civil rights claims of gay-rights organizations. The first is to assert that homosexuality is not a natural sexual orientation with which a minority group of individuals is born but is a deviant behavioral choice or psychological or moral sickness that can and should be redirected or cured. To back up this claim, Christian Right groups often provide testimonies from "reformed" homosexuals as examples of the ability to "correct" homosexual behavior through religion and/or counseling.

> [S]ingling out "sexual orientation" for special protection cannot be justified on logical grounds, and it could have consequences not clear at first glance. Lumping "sexual orientation" together with "race, color, national origin, sex, and disability" for special protection is illogical because the latter qualities are inborn (except for some disabilities), involuntary, immutable, and innocuous—none of which is true of homosexuality, despite the claims of its advocates. Evidence that homosexuality is inborn (that is, unalterably determined by genetics or biology) is ephemeral at best; while same-sex attractions may come unbidden, homosexual behavior and adoption of a "gay" identity are clearly voluntary; the existence of numerous "former homosexuals" proves that homosexuality is changeable; and the numerous pathologies associated with homosexuality demonstrate how harmful it is. (Sprigg, 2004:2)

This statement and the preceding one from GLSEN focus on asserting one explanation of homosexuality over another. The main assertion is that homosexuality does not have natural origins.[6] However, the statement goes

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[6]Interestingly, in more recent articulations of this frame, such as the one above, "evidence" is mentioned to support the assertion. Earlier statements such as this relied only on the widespread public acceptance of the belief that homosexuality is a lifestyle choice of sick or deviant individuals. In recent years it has become common for Christian Right groups to cite evidence—almost always research done by their organization and/or academics at religiously based universities or foundations.

on, as GLSEN's did, to give slight recognition to the claims of the opponent. Sprigg concedes that the sexual drive might be involuntary, but identity and behavior are clearly choices that bring about negative consequences for the individual and society. Therefore, individuals' behaviors must be changed rather than encouraged or condoned through the extension of civil rights.

The second approach to attacking gay-rights claims for minority status and civil rights has been to dismantle the validity of any identity and minority group's claim to civil rights. Patton (1995) argues that, since the early 1980s, the Christian Right has been working to discursively change the meaning of civil rights in such a way as to make identity and minority group claims invalid grounds upon which to be granted civil rights. The Christian Right argues that "true" civil rights are meant for groups who, regardless of their race or ethnicity, prove their loyalty and good citizenship through assimilating into "American culture" and upholding "American values."

> The 1960s was rewritten not as a high point for the civil rights movement but as a drift away from the "original" (Post-American Revolution) civil rights ... the new right quietly sought to destroy the grounds for making remedies to those who faced systematic oppression. "Civil rights" ceased to mean the inclusion of groups excluded by an evolving hegemony and became instead the erasure of the marks of difference through which those exclusions had been publicized. (Patton, 1995:217)

From the perspective of the Christian Right, groups experience discrimination or oppression because of their lack of effort or ability to prove themselves good citizens, and not because of their race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. This perspective leaves room for the idea that sexual orientation is a condition with which individuals are born; however, it is not a basis for claims of discrimination or civil rights. According to this meaning of civil rights, gay people do not deserve "the extension of 'special privileges'" because they are "viewed as having disavowed the Christian, family lifestyle, which was the condition for those deserving the benefits of the social contract" (Patton, 1995:233). Often both of these strategies are implemented in a single statement about gay inclusions in education, such as the previous example from Sprigg (2004) of the Family Research Council. In that statement gay people are framed as not a minority group both because homosexuality is not an inherent fixed condition and also because it is an immoral deviant and "un-American" lifestyle.

## Opposing Frames for the Resolution of the Issue

As demonstrated above, both groups frame the issue as a social problem, not an individual or isolated one. Following from this logic, both also go on to make claims that a social solution is necessary. The different ways

in which each group defines the social nature of the issue result in opposing framing strategies for the solution. For gay-rights organizations, the solution is the same as it has been for every other minority group—civil rights, equal treatment, and social tolerance. For Christian Right groups, the solution is to defend and re-establish the morals and values that form the foundation of the country.

After making framed arguments, in an effort to define gay students as a true minority group with a collective identity and a common set of experiences, GSA organizations can more effectively use the symbolism and ideology of equality in America's pluralistic democracy to argue for their cause. The language of democracy and the symbolism of America as a rich and diverse mix of cultures are conjured up in their most idealistic terms for the purpose of legitimating the rights of these students within the system of public education. The general articulation of this frame is to state that if public education is meant to uphold and insure the democratic values of American society, then public schools have a responsibility to provide and guarantee the equal treatment of all students, including gay students. Kevin Jennings, the executive director of GLSEN national, offers a clear example of such frame alignment:

> Our program calls upon people to overcome their stereotypes, to leave behind old ways of thinking, and to embrace a new way of relating—one that is, in the end, healthier, happier, and more in line with American values of justice, equality, and fairness. . . . Why am I so confident? Because I went to public school in this country, schools where each day I pledged allegiance to a flag which, I was taught, stood for "liberty and justice for all." Homophobia is un-American; it violates the pledge we've all said since we were little kids in elementary school. . . . I can't imagine a better lesson for any educator—gay, lesbian, or straight—to teach. (GLSEN 1997)

This statement makes the concepts and imagery of the ideals of American democratic foundations vivid for the reader, connects these values to the goals and purpose of public education, and personalizes the issue to the common experiences of every American citizen who attended public school. Framing the issue in terms of a violation of American values and asserting the solution to the problem as the fulfillment of these ideals extends to the organizations' tag lines: for GLSEN, "teaching respect for all"; and for Project 10, "with liberty and justice for all." In other words, if you are a true and good American you must support this cause. Again, statements like these avoid overt mention of the morality of this position, framing it instead in terms of civil liberties.

Christian Right groups offer the polar opposite view of what moral American citizens must defend. In his study of the history and current state of the Christian Right, William Martin (1996) found that "one of the aspects of culture that deeply troubles most pro-family activists is an increasingly

widespread view of homosexuality as normal, and even more galling, of homosexuals as people entitled to special protection against discrimination" (347). In interviews with leaders of Christian Right groups, Martin draws out the connection between their stand on homosexuality, civil rights, and inclusions of gay topics in public education. The following statement from an interview with Gary Bauer, who was then president of the Family Research Council, is an example of the discursive linkage of these issues.

> We have devoted a great deal of time and energy to the gay-rights issue because we see this issue as saying a great deal about the country and how we think about liberty and virtue. Most Americans believe in "Live and let live. What your neighbor does behind closed doors is his business." But when the gay-rights agenda goes into the public square and says "We want the right to teach children in school that homosexuality is no better or worse than heterosexuality," or "We want to be included in civil-rights laws," so that we will have to consider sexual orientation as much as we do now race and gender, then we think it's imperative to counter that agenda. (347)

Using the symbolism of American traditions and ideology to legitimate their claims is arguably more difficult for Christian Right groups than for gay-rights organizations. Christian Right groups are in the precarious position of arguing that including and tolerating this group of students is un-American. While they repeatedly claim that homosexuality is immoral—according to religious morality, which is equated with American morality—Christian Right groups avoid references to democracy and equality in their frame alignments on this topic. They generally raise these issues only to summarily dismiss homosexuality as a topic that warrants consideration of such rights. (Gay-rights movements, of course, do the same thing when people bring up the issue of morality in debates over this issue.) This is illustrated in the Family Research Council's position statement on "the homosexual agenda in public education":

> [The Family Research Council] believes that homosexuality is unhealthy, immoral and destructive to individuals, families and societies. [The Family Research Council] opposes any attempts to equate homosexuality with civil rights or to compare it to benign characteristics such as skin color or place of origin. The Family Research Council opposes sex education programs that treat homosexuality and heterosexuality as equally desirable, that teach any sexual behavior between consenting people is a human right, and that idealize homosexuality and the homosexual lifestyle. (Family Research Council, 1997)

Their frame loses its power outside of the realm of morality politics, and it is therefore in their interest to avoid discussing the issue in terms of civil rights. In much the same way, it is in the interest of GSA organizations to frame the issue in terms other than those of morality politics, in which their position has little resonance.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis of the conflict between gay-rights and Christian Right social movement organizations over gay inclusions in public education highlights the effects of opposing movement dynamics on political framing strategies. The analysis supports the literature on the framing processes of social movements, which argues that effective frames resonate with larger cultural values (Snow and Benford, 1992; Gamson, 1988; Tarrow, 1992; Zald, 1996). These master frames can mobilize those who share these cultural value orientations, but they may also be constraining. Opposing social movement organizations get locked into their master frames and seem unable to respond creatively to changing political circumstances or issues. This constraining effect of master frames proposed in the literature (McAdam *et al.*, 1996; Snow and Benford, 1992; Williams, 1995) is exacerbated by the prolonged battle between these opposing movements over a variety of specific issues.

The long-standing framing conflicts between these gay-rights and Christian Right groups have resulted in the predictable use of framing strategies with little innovation. As the groups entered this new social arena for debate, they largely stayed with the same strategies they have come to use in every arena. By doing so, they polarize their audiences and relinquish the opportunity to offer new and creative understanding of their positions and to reach a potential new audience. This suggests the need for analysts of social movement frames to investigate not only how movement and countermovement dynamics influence the process of frame development, but also their effect on the long-term political effectiveness of established opposing movements.

Over time, the differing master framing strategies of gay-rights and Christian Right groups have developed into completely irreconcilable definitions of any issue over which they argue. These framing strategies each carry the power of larger cultural and social values specific to a particular political realm, but they have little or no power outside of this realm or with each other. While each of these opposing movements appear to have chosen to remain in their polarized camps and avoid direct dialog, this will limit each side's long-term success.

These groups' frames assert that it is contradictory to see the issue of gay inclusions in education as both a moral and a civil rights issue. However, the trends in public opinion about homosexuality indicate that a significant portion of the population does believe that homosexual behavior is immoral and also that gay and lesbian individuals deserve civil rights. Even though each group focuses its energies where they are most effective in the short term, they both must work to renew their framing strategies

if their goal is to win additional support for their positions. If Christian Right groups aim not only to maintain and strengthen the belief that homosexuality is immoral but also to persuade school officials, judges, and the public that gay students should be denied civil liberties, they will have to address the issue of civil rights more directly. If the goals of the GSA movement include not only legal rights and protections for students but also social and cultural acceptance, which would decrease the homophobia fueling the harassment and discrimination, they will have to confront the issue of morality more directly. Specifically, GSA groups should seize the opportunity in this arena, where the public is more inclined to be sympathetic to the suffering of youth, to forge a moral frame of their own. The possibility exists here to define the action of protecting and supporting gay students as a moral imperative as well as a legal matter of civil rights.

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