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Sexual identities and participation in liberal and conservative social movements

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ABSTRACT

The desire for social change, political activism, and sexual identities may all be related. Lesbians and gays generally contest heterosexism more than heterosexuals but we do not know how sexual identities sways participation in class, race, and gender based social movements. When analyzing the American National Election Surveys of 2012 ($n = 3519$), gays and lesbians were about twenty times more likely to join LGB justice campaigns than heterosexuals. Moreover, the greater activism of gays and lesbians also crossed over to recent Occupy Wall Street, peace, and environmental mobilizations. Finally, this analysis ends with logistic regressions that determine if any sexual identity gaps in movement participation are the result of demographic, contextual, and ideological covariates.

1. Introduction

Stigmatized and poor populations generally lack the resources to effectively challenge discrimination through elections, the courts, media campaigns, school curriculums, etc. When faced with this political disadvantaged members of stigmatized group have relied on the social movement tactics of boycotting, protesting, and civil disobedience when trying to force concessions in recalcitrant elites and when trying to secure even the most basic of civil rights (Tarrow, 1996).

Patterns of social movement participation is commonly patterned along gender, class, and racial cleavages (Brady et al., 1995; Schussman and Soule, 2005). Few members of stigmatized populations engage in activism for their own group but people of privileged groups are even less likely to work against their unearned social advantages. Thus, men far less often attend feminist rallies than women (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004), the affluent less often endorse unions than the working-class (Eggert and Marco Giugni, 2015), and heterosexuals are more reluctant to work for LGBT rights than sexual minorities (Andersen and Jennings, 2010; Fingerhut, 2011; Friedman and Ayres, 2013; Montgomery and Stewart, 2012; Smith and Haider-Markel, 2002; Swank et al., 2013).

While relatively few studies explore social movement involvement across different sexual identity groups (Andersen and Jennings, 2010; Battle and Harris, 2013; Duncan, 1999; Friedman and Ayres, 2013; Gray and Desmarais, 2014; Longerbeam et al., 2007; Smith and Haider-Markel, 2002; White, 2006), we do know that protesters for AIDS funding were overwhelmingly sexual minorities (Andersen and Jennings, 2010; Rollins and Hirsch, 2003) and gay pride marches have only a small contingency of heterosexual allies (Smith and Haider-Markel, 2002).

In assuming a “sexual identity gap” for social movements that deal with sexualities, the ways that a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual (LGB) status interacts with other types of social movements is far from certain. Terriquez (2015) and Swank and Fahs (2017) discovered that gays and lesbians protest more than heterosexuals, but these studies were unable to determine if this greater levels of protesting was restricted to LGB rights or not. A few studies contend that self-identified gays and lesbians join more feminist movements than heterosexuals (Duncan, 1999; Fisher et al., 2017; Friedman and Ayres, 2013; White, 2006) or that Black gay men protest racism more

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than Black heterosexual men (Battle and Harris, 2013). Moreover, studies that explore cross-movement participation suggest lesbians attended more civil rights and antiwar events than heterosexual women in the 1980s (Andersen and Jennings, 2010) and 41% of Canadian LGBs who went to gay rights protests also joined feminist, labor, environmental, peace, antipoverty, and aboriginal rights protests (Carroll and Ratner, 1996). Thus, LGBs may engage in more liberal social movements than heterosexuals but the reasons behind this phenomenon is understudied and mostly not known.

2. Literature review

To address the possible mechanisms behind greater LGB activism I turn to political science theories of political distinctiveness (Egan, 2008; Egan, 2012; Lewis et al., 2011; Swank and Fahs, 2017). In an extended theoretical discussion, Egan suggests that greater LGB liberalism could be due to issues of essentialism (i.e., there is something intrinsically unique for people of different sexual identities), selection (i.e., demographic and educational factors that lead to LGB identities also increases social movement participation), embeddedness (i.e., adolescent and adult involvement in the LGB community leads to more movement participation), and conversion (i.e., enduring heterosexist discrimination inspires the political outlooks associated with social movement participation). The following sections explore the possible relevance of specific essentialist, selection, embeddedness, and conversion variables in explaining greater liberal activism among LGBs.

2.1. Essentialism and social movement participation

Essentialism sees sexual orientations as innate and fixed identities that determine a person's outlooks, habits, and preferences (DeLamater and Hyde, 1998). In codifying the tenets of essentialism, Haslam and Levy (2006) identify six key features: 1) Discreteness: Boundaries between people of different sexual identities are sharp, decisive, and clear-cut; 2) Uniformity: People in the same sexual identity are remarkably similar to one another; 3) Informativeness: Knowing someone's sexual identity imparts a good deal of information about that person; 4) Reification: Sexual identities are objective realities that exist outside of subjective interpretations of the world; 5) Naturalness: Sexual identities exist as natural, spiritual, or biological entities; 6) Stability: Sexual orientations remain constant over a person's lifetime; and 6) Exclusivity: Everybody belongs to only one sexual orientation at a given time.

Meeting all of these requirements is a formidable challenge. Essentialism runs counter to the notion that the self is a social construct, that human tendencies are probabilistic rather than deterministic, and that sexual identities are fluid entities that change across cultures and a person's lifetime (Diamond, 2008). Moreover, essentialism does not explain why lesbians and gays might be more liberal than heterosexuals as it simply states that it is due to force outside of human control. Thus, political distinctiveness also offers more social and psychological explanations of sexual identity differences in politics.

2.2. Selection and social movement engagement

Selection argues that demographic commonalities among sexual minorities increases their liberalism. In making such an argument, Lewis et al. (2011) suggested that LGBs tend to be younger and better educated than heterosexuals (Black et al., 2000; Egan, 2012; Fine, 2015; Herek et al., 2010; Schaffner and Senic, 2006; Wilkinson and Pearson, 2015) and these differences could be responsible for greater LGB participation in social movements (Jennings and Andersen, 2003; Lombardi, 1999; Rollins and Hirsch, 2003; Smith and Haider-Markel, 2002; Taylor et al., 2009).

Egan (2008) also suggests that self-identified LGBs could come from distinctively liberal childhoods and backgrounds. In emphasizing the hardships of the "coming-out" process, Egan argues that people who publically embrace LGB identities are more likely to come from liberal families and tolerant communities than people who suppress or conceal any same-sex sexuality desires or actions. Or in Egan's (2008) own words: "acquiring a gay identity may come from backgrounds in which there is less moral approbation of homosexuality—and these backgrounds themselves are in turn strong predictors of liberal political attitudes" (page 14).

2.3. Embeddedness and social movement engagement

Social networks can inspire political activism (Tarrow, 1996) and integration into the LGB community seems to politicize individuals (Brady et al., 1995; Klandermans, 1997; Passy, 2001; Schussman and Soule, 2005). By seeking social support from "fictive kin" and LGB peers, sexual minorities often turn to LGB friends and organizations to cope with heterosexism in their family of origins and the broader heterosexual community (Frost et al., 2016). Conversations in gay affirmative settings can sensitize people to the systematic nature of discrimination, enhance group solidarity, and lead people into viewing U.S. society through the lens of LGB interests (Bernstein, 1997). Moreover, LGB social networks can also transmit beliefs that collective action is necessary, important, and worthwhile and impart information about specific political events (e.g., an invitation to activism via email, text message, social media, or face-to-face conversations).

Early studies have confirmed the importance of social embeddedness in LGB activism. Sexual minorities and heterosexuals show greater political engagement when they routinely talk with gays and lesbians (Barth et al., 2009; Fingerhut, 2011; Lombardi, 1999; Swank and Fahs, 2012) and having LGBT "best friends" seems especially crucial for heterosexuals who join public demonstrations against homophobia (Calcagno, 2016). Moreover, joining gay athletic clubs, churches, and LGB community centers often leads to greater activism among sexual minorities (Duncan, 1999; McClendon, 2014; Pacey et al., 2014; Smith and Haider-Markel, 2002;

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