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Cycles of Sameness and Difference in LGBT Social Movements

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Abstract

Research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movements has accelerated in recent years. We take stock of this literature with a focus on the United States. Our review adopts a historical approach, surveying findings on three protest cycles: gay liberation and lesbian feminism, queer activism, and marriage equality. Existing scholarship focuses primarily on oscillations of the movement's collective identity between emphasizing similarities to the heterosexual mainstream and celebrating differences. We contrast earlier movement cycles mobilized around difference with efforts to legalize same-sex marriage. Our review highlights the turning points that led to shifts in protest cycles, and we trace the consequences for movement outcomes. Scholarship will advance if researchers recognize the path-dependent nature of social movements and that sameness and difference are not oppositional, static, or discrete choices. We conclude by recommending directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid rate at which lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals have gained acceptance in US society represents the most impressive civil rights triumph of our generation. Yet as recently as two decades ago, LGBT activism received little attention in the sociological literature (Epstein 1999). Although sexuality scholars had published research on the topic (Adam 1995), it was rarely acknowledged by social movement scholars, and the findings seldom made their way into existing theoretical frameworks. This oversight is most apparent in writings on “new social movements” (Larana et al. 1994), where we would expect theorists to treat LGBT concerns as exemplary given their interest in identity and culture (Melucci 1980). Instead, social movement scholars have generally treated LGBT protest as “an afterthought” (Warner 1993b, p. ix).

Over the past two decades, scholarship on LGBT movements has accelerated at a rate characterized by Gamson & Moon (2004, p. 47) as “at once queer and phenomenal.” A central debate in this literature is the ongoing tension between sameness and difference. Numerous studies have shown that LGBT activists oscillate between collective identities that alternatively celebrate and suppress their differences from the straight majority (Bernstein 1997, Gamson 1995, Taylor & Whittier 1992). Since the movement’s inception, activists have strategically examined whether they should embrace what makes them unique and protest the heteronormative assumptions that inhere in existing institutions such as marriage, or if they should assert their common humanity with heterosexuals and integrate into societal structures, work with straight allies (Grzanka et al. 2015, Myers 2008), and push for government noninvolvement in their lives (Duggan 2003). In this article, we review the recent outpouring of research on LGBT movements in the United States with a focus on its main questions and conceptual contributions. Our goal is to bring this scholarship into conversation with social movement theory by highlighting their synergies.

Activists of all stripes must deliberate whether to mute or magnify the distinctions that rationalize their disadvantaged social position (Polletta & Jasper 2001), but scholars agree that these “difference troubles” (Seidman 1997) have been especially pronounced within LGBT movements (Bernstein & Taylor 2013; Ghaziani 2008, 2011; Stein 2012). Sociologists have replicated this finding many times and have characterized it as the “movement of gay politics between radical separatism and assimilation” (Seidman 1993, p. 131), “boundary defending” versus “boundary stripping” (Gamson 1995, p. 400), “identity for critique” or “identity for education” (Bernstein 1997, p. 538), “debates of identity and difference” (Epstein 1999, p. 32), “unity through diversity” (Armstrong 2002, p. 153), “assimilationist and liberationist approaches” (Rimmerman 2008, p. 5), and “absolute opposition or a focus on similarities” (Moon 2012, p. 1371).

Existing research provides compelling evidence that the sameness/difference tension among LGBT activists has spurred distinct protest cycles, each characterized by specific patterns of organization (Armstrong 2002), frames (Valocchi 1999b), collective identities (Taylor & Whittier 1992), strategies and tactics (Stone 2012), and internal conflicts (Ghaziani 2008). Scholars of social movements generally use the concept of cycles of contention to describe the outbreak of protest activity across the political system by different constituents (Tarrow 1998); by contrast, our review draws on research that uses the protest cycles concept to analyze waves that recur within a movement animated by the same aggrieved group (Taylor 1989, Whittier 1997). Protest cycles are characterized by the rapid diffusion of activism, an increase in both its organized and spontaneous forms, organizational change (Zald & Ash 1966), the emergence of new collective identities, tactical innovation, and intensified interactions between movement actors and authorities. Extant research points to the persistence of LGBT activism in the United States since its inception in the 1940s and 1950s (Stein 2012). Most scholars mistake the turning points of these movements as representing

the death or birth of new forms of insurgency; by contrast, our longitudinal review suggests a continuous approach, and we emphasize the path-dependent ability of social movement actors to integrate the “carry-overs and carry-ons” between different cycles of mobilization (Gusfield 1981, p. 324). LGBT activists draw on lessons learned in the past as they make decisions about plausible goals and tactics in the present, and these inform their future actions (Blee 2012, Epstein 1996). More generally, the analysis of protest cycles enables scholars to see the “thresholds or turning points in mobilization” (Taylor 1989, p. 772) that correspond to expressions of sameness and difference and to understand how identity movements balance unity and division alongside continuity and change (Ghaziani & Baldassarri 2011).

The primary question that has puzzled scholars is why LGBT activists favor certain identity expressions and tactical repertoires while distancing themselves from others. Most research has focused on internal dynamics, especially activists’ resistance to collective identities that fail to include racial (Johnson & Henderson 2005), class (Barrett & Pollack 2005, Chasin 2000, Valocchi 1999a), and gender diversities (Brown-Saracino & Ghaziani 2009, Taylor & Rupp 1993). Recently, scholars have moved away from movement-centered explanations and have focused on the broader political and social context that enables or constrains possibilities for insurgency. Bernstein (1997) found that the decision to celebrate or suppress differences from the majority depends on the structure of movement organizations, activists’ access to the polity, and the strength of opposing movements. Political context influences the course of a movement by opening and closing opportunities for action (McAdam 1982, Meyer 2004), making some identities and tactics more feasible and effective than others (Bernstein 2003). Our review emphasizes how internal and external dynamics incite turning points (Blee 2012, Taylor 1989) for new protest cycles mobilized around shifting expressions of sameness and difference.

We review research on three cycles: gay liberation and lesbian feminism, queer activism, and marriage equality. These cycles have been critical to the movement’s mass mobilization and success over time. Gay liberation, lesbian feminism, and queer activism provide illustrations of mobilizing around difference. We compare and contrast these earlier protest cycles with efforts to legalize same-sex marriage, which represents a recent turn toward sameness. Our analysis shows that as LGBT activists deliberate whether to emphasize their similarities to heterosexuals or their differences from them, they redefine the field of perceived political threat, clarify how power works within it, and adjust their strategies, tactics, goals, and targets in response (Armstrong & Bernstein 2008). We also identify the causes of shifts in protest cycles and their outcomes. We conclude by offering new insights on the relationship between protest cycles and expressions of sameness and difference, discussing implications for other social movements, and suggesting directions for future scholarship.

GAY LIBERATION AND LESBIAN FEMINISM

Most scholars date the origins of the modern gay rights movement to the Stonewall riots of 1969, when street queens, queers of color, butch lesbians, and others fought back against routine bar raids that were taking place in urban areas with emerging gay subcultures (Armstrong & Crage 2006, Duberman 1993). Before the Stonewall rebellion, gays and lesbians adopted a cautious approach, seeking to normalize their sexuality by emphasizing what made them similar to heterosexuals (Adam 1995). The Second World War and the Cold War called attention to discrimination in the military, and the postwar crackdown on homosexuals in government employment—the “Lavender Scare,” which lasted even longer and affected more people than the Red Scare—cultivated a collective identity based on same-sex desire (Johnson 2004). Gays and lesbians formed local networks and organizations, including the Mattachine Society, ONE in Los Angeles, and the

Daughters of Bilitis in San Francisco (D’Emilio 1983, Gallo 2006). Although small in numbers, the homophile movement, as it was called, sought to improve the situation for gay men and lesbians by fighting discriminatory laws and practices through publications, conferences, research, and media appearances; by providing support for people with same-sex desires; and by resisting cultural tropes of criminality, deviance, sickness, and sin (Cutler 2003, Esterberg 1990, Loftin 2012, Meeker 2006).

Gay liberation and lesbian feminism emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as spin-off movements spawned by the 1960s wave of militant contention (D’Emilio 1983, Staggenborg 2011). The Gay Liberation Front formed in New York shortly after Stonewall, and the spread of similar groups to different cities and college campuses across the country was the turning point that marked the transition to gay liberation as a new protest cycle. Operating in loosely structured groups influenced by the New Left, antiwar, and Black Power movements, gay liberationists proclaimed themselves anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and revolutionary. The scholarly literature on gay liberation acknowledges that it was a predominantly white male movement, although some women and people of color played central roles (Armstrong 2002, Stein 2000). Many homophile women activists shifted their participation to the resurgent women’s movement of the late 1960s, where they also had to fight for recognition of their own issues. This set the stage for the emergence of lesbian feminism (Rupp et al. 2016). Betty Friedan’s infamous reference to lesbianism as a “lavender menace,” discussed widely in the literature on second-wave feminism, mobilized women in the Gay Liberation Front to protest the National Organization for Women’s attempt in 1970 to silence lesbians and dismiss issues related to sexuality (Echols 1989).

Gay liberation and lesbian feminism are among the earliest articulations of sexual difference by activists, and their logic departed from the “strategies of respectability” (Stein 2000, p. 211) that defined the homophile movement of the 1950s and 1960s (Timmons 1990). Unlike homophiles, who expressed an aversion to the “queer and gender-transgressive qualities” of gay public life (Boyd 2003, p. 162), gay liberationists advocated coming out, authenticity, and pride (Cruikshank 1992, Eisenbach 2006, Stein 2012), while lesbian feminists promoted social and cultural separatism (Stein 1997, Taylor & Rupp 1993, Taylor & Whittier 1992). From the outset, gay and lesbian activists did not define themselves as a minority group seeking civil rights. Rather, inspired by the radical ideas circulating within the broader 1960s cycle of contention, they viewed gay liberation as part of a network of movements working against interlocking oppressions. For example, the name “Gay Liberation Front” expressed solidarity with the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (Staggenborg 2011, p. 119). Gay liberationists defined homosexuality as natural and normal, an alternative that society must free from the moral restraints of the church, the legislative restrictions of the state, and the pathological classifications of medical professionals (Warner 2002). Activists also embraced the prefigurative politics (Breines 1989) that characterized social movements from the 1960s more generally, generated oppositional cultures, and attempted to unify participants around a distinct, militant, and visible gay identity.

A separate sexual subculture began to form in large urban areas during the “great gay migration” of the 1970s (Weston 1995), making it possible for gays and lesbians to mobilize in major cities across the country. In 1970, the first “gay freedom day” parades to commemorate the Stonewall riots emerged in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. These pride parades, as we now call them, spread across the country as a form of collective action that gays and lesbians used to assert their identities and to resist heteronormative cultural codes through public displays of sexuality and gender transgression (Bruce 2013). In the next two decades, gay liberation groups sprang up across the United States to challenge conventional ideas about sexuality, gender, and the nuclear family (Duberman 1993). The largest and most influential of these formed in New York City and San Francisco, but gay liberation groups were typically short-lived due to their lack of organization

and endemic internal conflicts (Adam 1995). In addition, a political context favorable to radical organizing began to decline in 1968 with the election of Richard Nixon and the growing influence of the religious Right (Fetner 2008).

Despite mobilizing through separate networks and organizations, gay liberationists and lesbian feminists took a similar path. They each targeted the broader culture as the source of oppression, favored direct action, established free spaces to nurture a political consciousness (Evans & Boyte 1986, Polletta 1999), and championed coming out to promote the visibility and growth of gay and lesbian communities and to combat discrimination (Weeks 1990). Taylor & Whittier's (1992) study of lesbian feminist groups across the United States found that visibility politics was a key tactic of the movement. Lesbian feminists created distinct women's communities through music festivals, theaters, conferences, art, journals and small presses, record companies, and other businesses (Staggenborg 2001, Staggenborg & Lang 2007). The convergence of lesbian separatism and a growing women's counterculture spawned cultural feminism, a strand of feminist thought that valorized women's difference from men, critiqued heterosexuality as a form of internalized male domination, and promoted separation from men and relationships with women as a political strategy (Echols 1989, Gerhard 2001). In a similar way, the chant "out of the closet, into the streets" (Humphreys 1972) illustrates how gay liberationists smashed open the doors of secrecy and silence to dispel stereotypes, assert a public identity (Gamson 1998), and normalize homosexuality (Seidman 2002).

Although mobilizing around a politics of difference was sometimes generative (Ghaziani 2008), existing research emphasizes that it also led to factions and schisms. Cross-dressers, drag queens, and transsexuals were more accepted by gay liberationists than they were by homophile activists (Marotta 1981), although not by much, and women and people of color accused the gay liberation movement of sexism and racism (Jay 1999). Similarly, women of color challenged the assumption of a united collective identity among lesbian feminists (Stein 1997), as did bisexuals and transsexuals who felt excluded from the women's community (Gamson 1997).

Our review of the literature on gay liberation and lesbian feminism suggests that cycles centered on militant difference can result in positive outcomes for social movements, which in this case included the removal of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Waidzunus 2015) and challenges to employment discrimination and sodomy laws (Engel 2013, Murdoch & Price 2001). Gay liberationists and lesbian feminists also stimulated nonprofit and commercial organizations (Armstrong 2002), community newspapers (Streitmatter 1995) and magazines (Stein 2012), media visibility (Walters 2001), and the development of gay neighborhoods (Ghaziani 2014) that would nurture future protest cycles. The key to ensuring these diverse outcomes was the expression of a distinct, celebratory, public, and highly visible gay and lesbian identity coupled with strategic coalitions and alliances with other movements.

QUEER ACTIVISM

Gay liberation and lesbian feminism established a "quasi-ethnic" gay identity (Epstein 1987, p. 12), which inspired their communities, neighborhoods, and institutions to grow rapidly in number and scale in the 1970s and 1980s. The emergence of the National Gay Task Force in 1973 and the Human Rights Campaign Fund in 1980 (D'Emilio 2002), along with the organization of the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights and the National Third World Gay and Lesbian conference in 1979 (Ghaziani 2008), represented a new national phase of organizing. Although LGBT movements had defined their internal differences as a source of unity and strength since the days of homophile organizing, scholars have shown that African American, Latina/o, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and transgender groups felt marginalized by

the contradictions between the movement's rhetoric of diversity and its leadership profile, which was largely white, middle-class, and male. These critiques hastened the death of gay liberation by the end of 1971 alongside the decline of the New Left. Although lesbian feminism persisted into the 1980s, movements for radical social change became difficult to sustain in an increasingly conservative climate (Armstrong 2002).

Scholars who have examined the political context of the 1980s agree that LGBT movements confronted external threats posed by the religious Right (Fetner 2008), the Supreme Court's criminalization of sodomy in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), and the Reagan administration's slow response to the life-threatening crisis posed by HIV/AIDS (Gould 2009). The president avoided using the word "AIDS" in a public address for the first six years of the epidemic, and even after doing so, he failed to acknowledge that gay men were dying in disproportionate numbers. As government officials refused to respond to the growing public health crisis and as stigma and discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS worsened, LGBT activists took matters into their own hands. Research on the anti-AIDS direct action movement demonstrates that, although the disease disproportionately infected men, lesbians were key participants in the movement, and the feminist women's health movement of previous decades was an important inspiration for AIDS activism (Roth 2016, Schneider & Stoller 1995). Feminist beliefs about control of one's body, resistance to medical authority, patient inclusion in medical decision making, and discriminatory practices in health care fueled the formation in 1987 of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in New York City. The potent combination of community development, diversification of voices, and exogenous threats provided a turning point in collective identity, one that renewed gay rage and motivated activists to assert their differences from the straight majority. Anti-AIDS activism reignited an emphasis on militancy and flamboyant defiance, which became the hallmarks of the next protest cycle.

Queer activism emerged in this complex context. It took shape through organizations like ACT UP, Queer Nation, the Lesbian Avengers, Transgender Nation, and the North American Bisexual Network, all of which were based on the notion of social movements as utopian "nations" and of activists as embodying "peoplehood" (Walker 1997, p. 505). Characterized by an in-your-face style of confrontational protest, queer activists blended material and cultural targets (Gamson 1989). They pursued a program of cultural provocation and a theatrical politics of parody (Warner 1993a) through street protest, while confronting pharmaceutical companies, doctors, biomedical researchers, and scientists about their treatment of AIDS (Epstein 1996).

Social movement scholars suggest that activists' goals of challenging multiple targets at the state and nonstate levels inspired tactical innovations and a heightened pace of insurgency. Signature initiatives of queer activists included kiss-ins, mall takeovers, infiltration of straight bars, distribution of flyers and of self-published countercultural zines in urban neighborhoods, medical outreach and education about HIV and AIDS, and spray painting of sex-positive graffiti in public spaces (Berlant & Freeman 1993, Gamson 1989). Other common tactics included camp (Sontag 1966), drag (Rupp & Taylor 2003, Rupp et al. 2010), and the challenging of the "activist/theorist opposition" (Duggan 1992, p. 26). The goal in each case was to revise what society defined as normal (Warner 1999) and what it included in the "charmed circle" of morally sanctioned sexuality (Rubin 1993, p. 13). Participating in queer protest events enabled activists to think about social movements as sites for the production of new collective identities and visions for a more just world (Gould 2009).

Queer activism was in close conversation with academic queer theory, which emerged in the late 1980s in conferences at elite US universities (Seidman 1996). Queer theorists oppose invariant sexual categories, arguing that binary labels such as heterosexual and homosexual are not "monolithic empirical units of analysis" (Green 2002, p. 521) but are socially constructed. This is

why queer theorists rally around Foucault's insight that the modern homosexual was born in 1870 when sodomy was redefined from an act to a disposition: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (Foucault 1978, p. 43). Queer theorists also reject conceptual dualisms, holding that power operates through the imposition of discursive binaries such as gay *or* straight, male *or* female, masculine *or* feminine. They hold that the process of lumping and splitting the world into dichotomous outcomes is inconsistent with the fluid and continuous nature of sexual desire and behavior. Research by Hennen (2008) on gay masculinities illuminates how effeminacy and homosexuality were wed in opposition to masculinity and heterosexuality in the eighteenth century, despite the fact that masculinity as a form of gender expression can exist apart from the male body (Halberstam 1998). Because categories of sex, gender, and sexuality imperfectly map onto people's lived experiences (Valentine 2007), some queer theorists seek to expand individual identity options through the recognition of multiple categories that position sexuality on a continuum. Others call for reconceptualizing the logic we use to create the categories themselves. This deconstructionist impulse has a long history in sociology (Green 2007), and it led queer theorists to advocate discursive struggles rather than electoral politics as their favored form of protest. The radical potential of queer politics lies in the coalitions that activists can form across race, class, gender, and sexual orientation that can redefine identity categories (Cohen 2001, Johnson & Henderson 2005, Muñoz 1999).

Although queer activists embrace a politics that asserts their differences from the straight majority, scholars agree that queer protest embodies plural and at times contradictory logics (Epstein 1994, Lorber 1996, Stein & Plummer 1994, Valocchi 2005). Queer activists aim to bring together individuals who feel perverse, odd, deviant, and different while affirming a common identity on the fringes of the mainstream. These boundaries have frequently marginalized those who fail to conform, a contradiction codified in the very name of the activist group Queer Nation. Whereas the word "queer" denotes difference, "nation" emphasizes sameness. Queer nationals are "torn between affirming a new identity—'I am queer'—and rejecting restrictive identities—'I reject your categories,' between rejecting assimilation—'I don't need your approval, just get out of my face'—and wanting to be recognized by mainstream society—'We queers are gonna get in your face'" (Berube & Escoffier 1991, p. 14).

The 1990s protest cycle of queer activism shared a radical ethos with earlier cycles of gay liberation and lesbian feminism, but it differed in its anti-identity stance that sought to destabilize collective identities. Scholars of LGBT movements call this the "queer dilemma" (Gamson 1995, p. 390), one that suggests the simultaneity of sameness and difference logics. In examining the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade that had as its theme "The Year of the Queer," Gamson (1995) found that participants tried to gain recognition for a wide variety of sexual identities, call attention to interlocking forms of oppression, and destabilize binary categories. His analysis suggests that it can be "as liberating and sensible to demolish a collective identity as it is to establish one" (Gamson 1995, p. 402). Scholarship on queer protest shows that activists in this cycle delicately balanced opposing logics of collective identity, with some struggling for acceptance by the mainstream and others advocating a radical rejection of homonormativity (Ward 2008).

Like gay liberation and lesbian feminism, queer activism also had a short life span. It emerged in the late 1980s, and some studies suggest that it became neutralized by the mid-1990s for not presenting a viable vision and structure around which LGBT movements could rally (Ward 2008). Despite its brevity, queer activism introduced a political logic that pointed to the role of anger and other oppositional emotions in social movements (Gould 2009), the effervescent qualities of radicalism (Rechy 1977), the binary-breaking fluidity of gender and sexuality (Stryker 2008, Ward 2015), and the need for LGBT movements to embrace bisexuality and transgender issues (Stone 2009).

Queer activism was well suited to addressing cultural sources of oppression, such as stigma and stereotypes, media representations, and public opinion. In these domains, it makes strategic sense for activists to expose binary sexual identities as fabrications. However, our review of the literature suggests that protest cycles that emphasize difference are not always organizationally sustainable. With the exception of AIDS activism, queer politics was ineffective at targeting legal and policy sources of domination, such as laws and discrimination in the workplace. Successful mobilization in these arenas requires activists to create solid boundaries and legible identities, regardless of whether they signal sameness or difference. Queer activism shared a radical ethos with gay liberation and lesbian feminism but differed in its goals of deconstructing and destabilizing collective identities. There is compelling evidence from research on queer activism that movement organizations can neither thrive nor succeed in achieving legislative and policy change under conditions in which the political is collapsed into the cultural, reduced to the textual, and rendered “subjectless” (Gamson 1995, p. 400).

MARRIAGE EQUALITY

Nothing better illustrates the tension between assimilationist and queer politics than the LGBT movement’s pursuit of the right to marry. The campaign for marriage did not begin with mainstream LGBT movement organizations but came from couples outside the movement who simply wanted to wed. Some couples brought lawsuits as early as the 1970s, and others expressed their mutual commitment through public rituals that the state did not legally recognize (Hull 2006). Many LGBT activists and movement organizations believed that lesbians and gay men contended with such an oppressive social and political climate in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s that the pursuit of same-sex marriage was unthinkable (Chauncey 2004). Since 1974, the religious Right has sponsored over 200 antigay ballot measures challenging LGBT rights at the state and municipal levels. Almost 70% were successful, making gays and lesbians the target of the largest amount of discriminatory legislation directed at a single group in US history (Stone 2012). These defeats created a moral shock and provided fuel for activists to mobilize through national organizations, such as the Human Rights Campaign, National Lesbian and Gay Task Force, Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights, as well as local and state organizations that LGBT rights activists formed to fight the Right’s ballot initiatives (Boutcher 2010).

For both ideological and strategic reasons, LGBT social movement organizations initially resisted getting involved in court cases by couples seeking to marry. Movement scholars agree that it was the conservative countermovement mobilized by the religious Right that initiated the marriage equality protest cycle (Dorf & Tarrow 2014, Fetner 2008). The shifting legal opportunity structure (Andersen 2006) gave LGBT activists and movement organizations access to the courts and the support of political elites, including Barack Obama, who became the first sitting president to support same-sex marriage in 2012. This provided an opening for LGBT activists to mobilize the law and public opinion in support of marriage equality, and it motivated them to embrace strategic articulations of sameness.

Along with efforts to end the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that kept openly gay men and lesbians from serving in the military, the fight for marriage symbolized to queer critics the movement’s desire to normalize gay and lesbian identity and fit into, rather than change, US society (Bernstein & Taylor 2013). This created a rift with queer activists, who felt silenced by national and state organizations’ use of mainstream tactics such as fundraising, political messaging, lobbying, and litigation in the battle for the right to marriage (Bernstein & Burke 2013, Burke & Bernstein 2014, Warner 1999). Despite the ambivalence toward marriage that queer activists expressed, the

HIV/AIDS crisis and the lesbian baby boom of the 1980s led increasing numbers of lesbians and gay men to a growing awareness of their need for legal rights and relationship protections (Hull & Ortyl 2013).

The LGBT movement put marriage on its national agenda for the first time in 1987 at its third march on Washington (Ghaziani 2008). Couples, Inc., a Los Angeles-based organization fighting for legal recognition for gay partners, organized The Wedding, a ceremony celebrating gay relationships and demanding that gay partnerships receive the same legal rights as married heterosexual couples. Although several thousand couples participated, it was the most controversial event of the march. Echoing feminist critiques and foreshadowing the queer position on marriage, critics argued that The Wedding promoted traditional monogamous relationships and patriarchal family forms that were inconsistent with the sexual freedom espoused by gay liberationists, signaling a dangerous redirection of the movement toward a mainstream homonormative agenda (Duggan 2003).

In the 1990s, as D'Emilio (2002, p. ix) observes, "The world finally did turn and notice the gay folks in its midst." Representations of gays and lesbians increased in the media (Walters 2001), debates over homosexuality played out in statehouses, the military, churches, and religious denominations, and public opinion began to shift in favor of marriage equality, with more than half of the US population in support of it (Powell et al. 2010). As gays and lesbians achieved greater societal acceptance and cultural assimilation (Ghaziani 2011), the religious Right mounted a massive and well-funded countercampaign through its infrastructure of church networks, its own media (along with the mainstream media), and its greater access to the political sphere. Fetner (2008) argues that activity among opposing movements in the 1990s brought lesbian and gay issues from the margins to the center of politics and public discourse. This put LGBT movements on the defensive, and activists could no longer afford to sit on the sidelines while the Right introduced one legislative challenge after another through statutes criminalizing same-sex sexual contact; limiting child custody, adoption, and foster care by lesbians and gay men; and banning antidiscrimination legislation (Duggan 2003, Stein 2001).

The marriage campaign began to take shape when LGBT activists jumped into the fray surrounding a lawsuit filed by same-sex couples seeking marriage licenses in Hawaii in 1993 (Andersen 2006, Bernstein & Taylor 2013). In *Boyer v. Lewin*, the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled initially that banning gays and lesbians from marriage violated the equal protection clause of the Constitution. The possibility that lesbians and gays might obtain the legal right to marry catapulted same-sex marriage to the top of the Right's political agenda, resulting in the 1996 federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) restricting marriage to "one man and one woman" and allowing states and the federal government to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states. Appeals mounted by the Right eventually led the Hawaii Supreme Court to rule that same-sex couples did not have the right to marry, and the legislature passed its own state-level DOMA in the form of a constitutional amendment. In the meantime, same-sex couples filed copycat suits in other states. LGBT activists in Vermont scored a victory in 1999 when the state Supreme Court ruled in *Baker v. State of Vermont* that same-sex partners must be granted the same benefits as married heterosexual couples. The Court ordered the legislature to remedy the situation, and the result was a compromise that granted all of the benefits of marriage but denied symbolic equality by creating the separate term "civil unions" for same-sex relationships (Andersen 2006, Bernstein & Burke 2013). The passage of antigay initiatives increased after the Hawaii and the Vermont cases, and over the next decade, the Right placed DOMA initiatives on the ballot in 35 states.

On the defensive against a seemingly all-powerful foe and betrayed by the federal government, in 2004 LGBT activists increased the pace of collective action to promote marriage equality. Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage, creating opportunities for

mobilization by LGBT movements and their opponents. LGBT activists also created a new direct action tactic intended to capture public attention. Same-sex couples began showing up at licensing counters across the United States, demanding marriage licenses and holding weddings in city halls and other public places. The largest protest took place in San Francisco when Mayor Gavin Newsom directed the city to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples (Kimport 2014, Richman 2008, Taylor et al. 2009). During the month-long “winter of love,” more than 4,000 same-sex couples married at City Hall, creating a public spectacle that seized media attention (Moscowitz 2013, Pinello 2006). The San Francisco protest led to a series of lawsuits opposing the weddings. After the California Supreme Court voided them in August 2004, however, a groundswell of support for marriage equality resurfaced. Four years later, the California Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional to exclude same-sex couples from marriage, making it possible for 18,000 couples to wed during what LGBT activists called “the summer of love.” In the same year, opponents introduced Proposition 8 (Prop 8) to ban same-sex marriages in California. The most heavily funded antigay ballot initiative ever mounted by the Right, the media campaign to pass Prop 8 was vitriolic, portraying same-sex parents as a danger to children and their marriages as a threat to tradition (Oliviero 2013). Prop 8 passed in November 2008 with 52% of the vote, ending same-sex marriage in California.

The passage of Prop 8 was a game changer for the LGBT movement. In fighting it and other ballot initiatives in southern and heartland states, movement organizations had debated but deliberately avoided visibility strategies that focused on publicly claiming gay identity (Stone 2012). After the Prop 8 defeat, however, LGBT groups mobilized through emotion-laden direct action tactics, such as wedding protests organized in shopping malls, parking lots, and other places; courageous conversations that involved coming out to friends, neighbors, and coworkers; and storytelling by gay couples who intended to educate the public about the discrimination that their families faced (Taylor et al. 2009). In public education campaigns, the national organization Freedom to Marry and other LGBT groups also abandoned the framing of marriage as a civil right (Hull 2001), which failed to win public support in the campaign to defeat Prop 8, and switched to a less oppositional framing of marriage as the equal right to love and commitment (Moscowitz 2013). Marriage Equality California founders Molly McKay and Davina Kotulski initiated the marriage counterprotests, and they dubbed the advocates “love warriors.” The passage of Prop 8 galvanized numerous state and national groups to promote marriage equality, as well as queer activists who were committed to larger social justice issues alongside marriage, including JoinTheImpact Protest, GetEqual, and One Struggle One Fight, all of which used direct action, flash mobs, and other forms of militant protest on behalf of marriage rights (Weber 2015). Legal activists also stepped up their efforts to secure marriage rights through the courts.

In August 2010, United States District Court Judge Vaughn Walker overturned Proposition 8 in *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*, ruling that it violated the due process and equal protection clauses of the Constitution, but he also issued an injunction pending appeal. The State of California elected not to appeal because it agreed with the Court’s decision, leaving proponents of Prop 8 to seek an appeal. A panel from the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals asked the California Supreme Court to rule whether proponents had legal standing, since the State elected not to join the appeal, and the Court ruled that they did. The Ninth Circuit affirmed the federal district court’s decision in February 2012. However, the stay remained in place and prevented same-sex couples from marrying while the appeals made their way to the US Supreme Court, which heard oral arguments in *Hollingsworth v. Perry* in March 2013.

The string of legal cases also prompted Chad Griffin, president of the Human Rights Campaign and a cadre of political consultants, to form the American Foundation of Equal Rights (AFER) for the purpose of filing a federal civil rights challenge to Prop 8 and DOMA. National LGBT

organizations, such as Freedom to Marry and Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, initially questioned the wisdom of this strategy, preferring an incremental state-by state approach that would be less risky than a Supreme Court decision. Ultimately, groups like the American Civil Liberties Union, Lambda Legal Defense, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights joined the case. With funding from Hollywood celebrities Rob Reiner and Norman Lear and gay business owner David Geffen, AFER raised 3.5 million dollars to pay attorneys Ted Oleson and David Bois to select plaintiffs and build a media war room to mobilize public support (Becker 2014).

In preparing plaintiffs for the Prop 8 case [*Hollingsworth v. Perry* (2013)] and another that challenged DOMA before the Supreme Court [*United States v. Windsor* (2013)], AFER used “identity for education” (Bernstein 1997, p. 538) and recruited same-sex couples whose stories of discrimination would resonate with the general public by emphasizing their similarities to heterosexual families. This strategy defended same-sex marriage based on an equal right to love and commitment. The testimony of one plaintiff in the Prop 8 case illustrates how she and others were coached to deploy strategies of sameness. Kris Perry began her testimony by stating, “When you are gay, you think you don’t really deserve things.” When she learned that the state of California nullified her marriage license, her first thought was “I’m not good enough to be married.” She continued, “I believe for me, personally as a lesbian, that if I had grown up in a world where the most important decision I was going to make as an adult was treated the same way as everybody’s decision, that I would not have been treated the way I was” (Becker 2014, pp. 105–6).

In 2013, the US Supreme Court invalidated Prop 8, ruling that the Ninth Circuit Court erred in allowing the appeal because proponents of the measure, which was a state ballot initiative, did not have legal standing to appeal in a federal court. This left the original federal district court ruling against Prop 8 as the final outcome, and same-sex marriages resumed in California. At the same time, the US Supreme Court struck down Section 3 of DOMA, which defined marriage under federal law as only the union of one man and one woman, as unconstitutional in *United States v. Windsor* (2013). The case was brought by an elderly lesbian who would have been left homeless since, unprotected by federal policy, she could not afford the taxes on their house after her partner died. The LGBT movement’s promotion of a “post-gay” identity (Ghaziani 2011), one that emphasizes similarities to the straight majority and mutes what is distinctive about sexual orientation, created opportunities to form alliances with other groups. A frequent tactic that LGBT activists used in same-sex court cases was to seek support from allies, including women’s and civil rights activists, academics, medical and professional organizations, and businesses, all of whom filed amicus briefs or legal petitions to influence judicial outcomes.

The rift between some queer activists and mainstream LGBT movement organizations widened during the campaign for marriage equality. Gay liberationists (Wittman 1970), lesbian feminists (Morgan 1970), and queer theorists (Duggan 1992, Warner 1993a) had called for the abolition of marriage as an oppressive institution because it promotes restrictive gender roles and undermines sexual freedom. The legalization of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts sparked the formation of new anti-marriage queer organizations, such as Beyond Marriage.org and Gay Shame, that feared that same-sex marriage would undermine a queer ethos. Bernstein & Taylor (2013; see also Bernstein 2015) suggest that the queer debate over marriage boiled down to three concerns: marriage would assimilate LGBT people into the heterosexual mainstream; emphasizing gays’ and lesbians’ similarities to the majority would depoliticize their identities and destabilize their communities; and the LGBT movement’s emphasis on marriage would benefit white, middle-class, cisgender gay couples (Warner 1999), further marginalizing poor queers, queers of color, bisexuals, and transgender people (Cohen 1999). One of the most vocal opponents, queer theorist Lisa Duggan (2003, p. 188), condemned the campaign for same-sex marriage as “a strategy for privatizing gay politics and culture for the new neoliberal world order,” putting LGBT people

behind a white picket fence where they would no longer challenge heteronormativity. Although queer opponents have been outspoken in their objections to marriage, research suggests that the majority of the LGBT movement's constituents have been less ambivalent (Hull & Ortyl 2013).

As with other protest cycles of the LGBT movement, relatively little research has focused on the participation of women in this wave of activism, despite the fact that lesbian individuals and organizations played central roles in both advocating and opposing same-sex marriage. Some scholars suggest that the traditional association of women with marriage, weddings, and parenting gave lesbians a central role in marriage equality activism. In a study of couples who married in the 2004 San Francisco protest, Kimport (2014) found that the meaning of marriage varied significantly based on gender and parenthood. Lesbians made up 57% of the couples who wed, and they outnumbered gay male couples by nearly two to one in states where marriage became legal (Badgett & Herman 2011). Lesbians were also more likely than gay men to be parents, and couples with children offered social recognition of their families as a reason to marry, although this was less true for people of color, for whom marriage was not as essential in defining a family. At the same time, lesbians were also more likely to use feminist critiques to express ambivalence about marriage. Marriage has gendered meanings, and the LGBT movement's campaign for marriage rights resonated especially with women.

Women also brought a gendered perspective to movement tactics. Both men and women participated in cultural actions such as dressing as grooms and brides and strolling down city streets to protest their exclusion from marriage and to sell marriage equality to a largely unreceptive US public. However, wedding dresses evoke marriage more strongly than tuxedos. When Molly McKay, who spearheaded the 2004 San Francisco marriage protest, applied for a marriage license year after year, she exchanged her lawyer's suit for a wedding dress, making her intentions visible (Taylor et al. 2009).

The LGBT movement's growing organizational leverage, its use of litigation and of identity strategies that stressed similarities with straight couples, and its framing of marriage as an equal right to love and commitment produced positive outcomes. The Supreme Court's 2013 decision in *United States v. Windsor* set the stage for numerous state lawsuits sponsored by LGBT organizations that resulted in legalized same-sex marriage in 37 states. Several other states, mainly in the South but also the Midwest, refused to lift their bans, and the Supreme Court agreed to hear four cases challenging them in Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and Tennessee. In a historic decision on June 26, 2015, the US Supreme Court found that bans on marriage equality are unconstitutional, ruling that gay and lesbian couples have the same right to marry as other US citizens. This prompted President Obama to tweet "#LoveWins," echoing the movement's own language. The case, *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), was brought by an Ohio man who rushed to marry his dying partner inside a medical transport plane on the tarmac of the Baltimore airport, where same-sex marriage was legal. Because of its ban, the state of Ohio refused his request to be listed on his husband's death certificate.

Legalizing same-sex marriage did not put an end to antigay legal initiatives. In the year following the Supreme Court's 2015 landmark decision granting same-sex couples marriage rights, opponents introduced legislation in 17 states to create or alter existing state religious freedom laws to allow county clerks and their employees to refuse to issue marriage licenses to same-sex applicants. In some instances, these Religious Freedom Restoration Acts allow businesses to refuse to provide goods and services for same-sex weddings.

California's Proposition 8 was a major turning point in making marriage equality the central and most controversial issue of the LGBT movement in the early years of the twenty-first century. And ironically, it was not of the movement's own making. Collective campaigns oriented toward a specific goal often spur movement growth (Staggenborg 2011). A singular national focus on

marriage equality prompted LGBT movements to veer away from a collective identity based on difference, societal transformation, and sexual liberation and instead to articulate similarities to the heterosexual majority (Bernstein 2015, Bernstein & Taylor 2013, Kimport 2014, Walters 2014). Although queer legal theory argues that litigation tactics derail grassroots activism (Barclay et al. 2009), our review of marriage equality suggests that grassroots organizing and legal strategies can go hand in hand and have positive consequences for policy change.

CONCLUSION

In the past two decades, research on LGBT movements has flourished. We have used the lens of sameness and difference, a central theme in the literature, to review scholarship on three major protest cycles: gay liberation and lesbian feminism, queer activism, and marriage equality. This body of work demonstrates that debates over sameness and difference, conceptualized by scholars as varied expressions of collective identity (Bernstein 1997, Gamson 1995, Taylor & Whittier 1992), have incited thresholds (Taylor 1989) and turning points (Blee 2012) that mark distinct protest cycles. Gay liberation and lesbian feminism successfully created a quasi-ethnic public identity. After the decline of these movements, queer activists expanded their boundaries to reflect the emerging interests of a new generation of bisexuals, transgender individuals, and others who resisted normative societal prescriptions. In each cycle, disputes over sameness and difference created an imprint that lingered in the movement's later campaign for same-sex marriage, illustrating that activist identities are historically contingent and strategic.

Our review of these protest cycles pushes past historical descriptions of political opportunity structures and cross-sectional comparisons of multiple movements to examine how turning points affect expressions of sameness and difference among political generations (Whittier 1997) of activists over time. In addition to clarifying complex periodization within the same movement, we offer the protest cycles concept as a theoretical approach to explain how a movement maintains continuity and coherence between its different stages of mobilization (Taylor 1989), to assess how its internal dynamics shape trajectories of participation (Corrigall-Brown 2011) such that the gains made in one cycle become resources that the same aggrieved group can use in later struggles, and to understand its temporal holding patterns and path-dependent developments (Mizruchi 1983, Zald & Ash 1966).

Many researchers who have sought to understand LGBT activism have taken a movement-centered approach, which treats collective identity as a proximate cause of strategies and tactics, organizational structure, persistence, and success over time. Other scholars have adopted multi-causal explanations that link shifts in movement cycles to internal disputes (Gamson 1997, Ghaziani 2008) and external opportunities and constraints, including access to the polity (Andersen 2006, Bernstein 1997) and threats posed by opposing movements (Dorf & Tarrow 2014, Fetner 2008). Our review of this research has emphasized the continuity of LGBT movements, identified the role of internal tensions and external triggers, and traced the sequenced nature of movement collective identities.

Despite recent attention to LGBT activism by sociologists, there remain significant opportunities for future research. First, more scholarship exists on cycles of queer politics and lesbian feminism than on gay liberation and contemporary LGBT movements. As a result, we have scant knowledge of variation in levels of LGBT mobilization using standard indicators in the literature such as protest events, media coverage, individual recruitment, and the birth of new organizations. Second, the sameness/difference tension is not unique to LGBT activism but applies to other identity-based movements, including civil rights (Carson 1981, Meier & Rudwick 1973) and women's organizing (Mansbridge 1986, Rupp & Taylor 1987) among others. Dominant

paradigms in social movement theory have failed to acknowledge shifts in collective identity as a key element of protest cycles. As scholars pursue such research, they could borrow insights from queer theorists (Sedgwick 1990, Warner 1993a) and researchers who have pushed past binary conceptions (Reger et al. 2008). This work suggests that sameness and difference are not oppositional outcomes but rather lie on a continuum from one gradient to the other. Social movements are internally heterogeneous and depend on a “thin coherence” and “partial unity” for their long-term survival (Ghaziani & Baldassarri 2011, p. 196).

Third, research that finds a causal relationship between collective identity and a movement’s tactics, organization, and outcomes has been largely qualitative and based on case studies of one cycle of activism (Epstein 1996; Gamson 1989, 1995; Taylor & Whittier 1992), a single protest event (Rupp & Taylor 2003, Taylor et al. 2009), or analyses of recurring demonstrations (Ghaziani 2008). Case studies have been useful for providing thick descriptions of identity processes in LGBT groups, but it is necessary to augment them with historical comparisons across two or more cycles or multiple cases within a single cycle that hold important variables constant to determine the relative effects of internal and external factors on other movement dynamics. Bernstein’s (1997) comparative analysis of sodomy campaigns takes this approach, but we need similar work on other protest cycles. Scholars can also combine studies with small sample sizes with quantitative methods to achieve results that are more powerful. Our analysis has focused on changes in collective identity over time, but we can benefit by comparing LGBT movements in different countries to determine whether the debate over sameness and difference is unique to the United States.

Finally, existing research that pays attention to turning points stresses the centrality of human agency in social movement activism. Further research is necessary to assess what incites the turning points themselves, determine whether certain cycles are more consequential, analyze the relationship between turning points and activists’ articulations of sameness and difference, and trace the impact of these variable articulations on legislation, policy change, and public opinion. To date, historians have conducted some of the most influential research on LGBT movements (D’Emilio 1983), likely because of the stigma attached to studying sexuality in sociology (Irvine 2014, Taylor & Raeburn 1995). Sexuality scholars in the humanities could enrich their future work by paying closer attention to the burgeoning research on social movements. Similarly, incorporating findings from research in the sociology of sexualities will allow social movement theorists to treat collective identity and expressions of sameness and difference as fundamental explanatory concepts.

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