

NICHE ACTIVISM: CONSTRUCTING A UNIFIED MOVEMENT IDENTITY IN A HETEROGENEOUS ORGANIZATIONAL FIELD*

Sandra R. Levitsky[†]

This article draws on a study of interorganizational relations in the Chicago gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movement to elaborate a theory for how activists integrate divergent organizational approaches to social reform into a coherent “movement identity.” Departing from the resource mobilization and collective identity literatures, which tend to reduce organizational specialization either to a competition over resources or to ideological differences among movement participants, I argue that organizational interests and shared beliefs play interrelated, but nonreducible roles in the construction of movement identity. Activists understand social reform as requiring competencies in a wide range of cultural and political venues. Focusing on specific forms of movement activity, or niches, organizations develop proficiencies that activists share as part of a collective effort in which each organization is seen as playing a necessary, but insufficient part. Rather than undermining a unified movement identity, then, organizational specialization is seen here as producing it.

American social movements are frequently constituted by a *field* of organizations reflecting differences among activists over principles and priorities, strategies and tactics, and varying forms of organizational governance. Such organizational diversity can assist organizations in the competition for resources and adherents (for example, Minkoff 1994; Zald and Ash 1966; Zald and McCarthy 1980), as well as provide opportunities for individuals to participate in collective action in ways that accord with their beliefs, tactical preferences, and self-identities (Jasper 1997; Polletta and Jasper 2001). Much of the social movement research on organizational heterogeneity assumes the presence of a social movement identity or community (Buechler 1990; Staggenborg 1998) that links these diverse organizations into a single social movement. Yet, to paraphrase Alberto Melucci (1995: 43), the empirical unity of a social movement (in particular, a social movement constituted by diverse organizations) should be considered an *outcome* rather than a starting point—a fact to be explained (see Armstrong 2002). In this sense, our understanding of the effects of organizational heterogeneity on social movements would benefit from attention to the relationship between organizational structure and collective identity. In particular, how does organizational diversity contribute to or detract from a sense of solidarity of purpose among movement actors?

This article draws on data from a case study of interorganizational relations in the Chicago gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) movement to elaborate a theory for how activists conceptualize the relationship between organizational diversity and a coherent *movement identity*. Unlike models that reduce organizational specialization to a competition over resources, I suggest that activists often maintain a collaborative understanding of the complexity of movement goals, viewing social reform as taking place in both political and cultural arenas, and requiring a variety of strategic approaches. By focusing organizational resources on specific forms movement activity or *niches*, organizations develop “expertise” in

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[†] Please direct correspondence to Sandra R. Levitsky, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, 4111 LSA Building, 500 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1382, email: slevitsk@umich.edu.

specific tasks—litigation, lobbying, protest, consciousness raising, direct services—that they then deploy as part of a multipronged social reform effort. This conception of organizational specialization is referred to here as *niche activism*. The niche activism model departs too, from models that reduce organizational specialization to differences in activists' ideologies and self-definitions, as it suggests that movement identity has an important *structural* dimension. As organizations focus their resources on very specific issues, strategies, or tactics, they increasingly rely on the proficiencies of differently specialized organizations in the movement. Cooperative interorganizational relationships forge ties among activists with radically different identifications to the movement. Thus, rather than undermining a unified movement identity, organizational specialization may in fact *produce* it (cf., Durkheim 1933).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANIZATIONAL DIVERSITY

Social movement scholars who have explicitly analyzed organizational heterogeneity in social movements have generally relied on one of two approaches. The dominant theoretical approach, favored primarily by those working in the resource mobilization/organizations tradition, emphasizes the *field*-level dimensions of specialization—in particular, the effects of organizational specialization on the competition for resources and adherents (for example, Minkoff 1995a; Zald and McCarthy 1980). A second perspective, shared by identity theorists, views organizational heterogeneity as a reflection of *individual* preferences and the diverse ideologies and self-definitions of movement participants (see Polletta and Jasper 2001). Because these two approaches emphasize different levels of analysis, they arguably represent more complementary than oppositional accounts of organizational diversity. But as the following discussion elaborates, each perspective neglects an important component for understanding how activists integrate divergent organizational approaches to social reform into a coherent movement identity.

Analyzing organizational diversity in social movements requires, at a minimum, attention to the full range of organizations affiliated to a movement. Early resource mobilization theorists were among the first social movement researchers to aggregate social movement organizations into social movement *industries* and *sectors* (McCarthy and Zald 1977; McCarthy and Zald 1973). In this early research, however, industries themselves were not the subject of analysis; researchers instead used the concept of social movement industries to study the effects of other movements on focal movement organizations (McAdam and Scott 2005).¹ More recently, researchers seeking to integrate organizational theory into social movement research (Clemens and Minkoff 2004; Davis, McAdam, Scott, and Zald 2005; Minkoff and McCarthy 2005) have promoted the concept of *organizational fields* as a more effective model for explaining social movement organizational diversity. Precise definitions of *organizational fields* vary (Scott 2004), but, in general, organizational theorists have relied on the concept to delineate the universe in which organizations are embedded and the nature of interorganizational relations that link diverse organizations into a common system or network (Aldrich 1999; Scott 2004). The concept is considered a valuable analytic lens for social movement scholars, as it allows for analyses of interactions among organizational actors in context, rather than within one or between several organizations (McAdam and Scott 2005).

But the use of industry- or field-level models in social movement research has thus far facilitated the analysis of only *some types* of interorganizational relations. In contrast to the organizations literature, in which specialization is often understood as producing both competitive *and* cooperative organizational interdependencies (Aldrich 1999; Barnett and Carroll 1987; Carroll 1984), social movement scholars relying on organizational models to study organizational diversity almost exclusively have examined organizational specialization as it relates to *competitive* interactions alone. Movements are conceptualized in this literature as multiorganizational fields (Klandermans 1992) in which organizations compete with each other

for limited resources—activists' time and attention, funding, media coverage, and public support (Benford 1993; Haider-Markel 1997; Minkoff 1994; Minkoff 1995a; Zald and McCarthy 1980). In this view, organizational specialization—or “product differentiation” as Zald and McCarthy (1980) have termed it—is seen as an adaptive mechanism for organizations seeking to gain an edge in the competition for resources, similar to the concept of *niche* formation in natural and organizational ecology (cf., Olzak and Uhrig 2001; Zald and Ash 1966). Organizational niches express the particular role of an organization in the movement, its unique capabilities, its distinctive “way of earning a living” (Hannan, Carroll, and Polos 2003: 310). Whether organizations differentiate themselves by pursuing particular goals, representing specific constituencies, or deploying specific tactics, their specialization is seen by these theorists as a way to avoid interorganizational conflict and ensure survival (Browne 1990; Haider-Markel 1997; Hannan and Freeman 1989; Wilson 1995).

This emphasis on the competitive advantages of organizational diversity has largely overshadowed the *cooperative* dynamics that also exist among specialized organizations in a given field (but see Aldrich 1999; Barnett and Carroll 1987; Downey 2006). The omission in social movement research is striking, for unlike competing species in the natural world—and unlike many of the interest groups and private firms studied by organizational theorists—shared beliefs and pursuit of a common cause play an important role in defining the social movement “communities” in which specific organizations are located. While social movement scholars relying on competition-based models² often imply the existence of “a loosely defined common purpose” in social movements (Minkoff and McCarthy 2005: 290), they neither problematize its construction nor consider how organizational diversity contributes to, or detracts from, such a sense of solidarity of purpose.

Such questions are central to a second, collective identity perspective. Moving away from instrumental rationality and structurally given interests as explanations for organizational diversity, collective identity theorists focus instead on individual-level beliefs, values, and perceptions. Identity scholars maintain that organizational diversity is a reflection of the multiplicity of ways in which individuals can meaningfully identify with and participate in collective reform efforts. In this view, individuals support collective efforts not for *what they can get* from collective action, but because participation accords with *who they are* and *what they believe* (Jasper 1997; Polletta and Jasper 2001). Collective identity is seen as not only central to people's willingness to participate in or support collective action, but as shaping how people view the sociocultural system they are trying to change and the strategies, tactics, and organizational forms they see as appropriate for effecting change (Gamson 1992).

Because the concept of collective identity can be slippery, some definitions are useful here.³ At its most basic level, *collective identity* refers to a shared sense of “we-ness” (Hunt and Benford 2004). A more specific definition, borrowed from Taylor and Whittier (1992), conceptualizes collective identity as “the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity” (see also Polletta and Jasper 2001). Elaborating on this concept, some theorists further distinguish *movement* identities from *organizational* identities.⁴ Jasper (1997: 86), for example, describes a movement identity as arising “when a collection of groups and individuals perceive themselves (and are perceived by others) as a force in explicit pursuit of social change.” By contrast, *organizational identity* refers more specifically to identification with a particular organization and the goals, tactics, ideologies, and deliberative logics that it represents (Barkan 1979; Clemens 1997; Friedman and McAdam 1992; Jasper 1997; Lichterman 1996).

While identity literature has successfully reintroduced cultural and ideological factors into discussions of movement participation dominated by the resource mobilization and political process paradigms, it arguably has gone too far in distinguishing identity from instrumental logics of action (see also Bernstein 1997; Gamson 1992; Polletta and Jasper 2001). Armstrong (2002), for example, examines how gay and lesbian organizations in San Francisco appeared to coalesce around a “unity through diversity” consensus in the 1970s. She

argues that many activists viewed organizational diversity as a way to celebrate, rather than resolve, differences in the movement. Under an “identity political logic,” she argues, each organization in the GLBT movement pursued its own objectives, but remained connected to other movement organizations by a shared gay identity (cf., Gerlach and Hine 1970). In this sense, Armstrong, like others in this literature, treats the politics of *identity*—or how activists define themselves and what they believe—as distinct from the politics of *interests*—or the strategic work of obtaining benefits for GLBT constituencies (see Polletta and Jasper 2001).

This article seeks to bridge the competition- and identity-based approaches to studying organizational diversity to argue that organizational interests and identity play *interrelated, but nonreducible* roles in the construction of movement identity. Thus, unlike theorists who view specialization exclusively through the lens of competition, I seek here to illuminate the collaborative effects of organizational niches. And unlike those theorists who analyze organizational diversity mainly through the lens of individual ideology and self-definitions, I emphasize the strategic and structural underpinnings of movement identity. As the following discussion of niche activism elaborates, the proficiencies derived from specialization not only assist organizations in the competition for resources, but they play a key role in establishing a sense of solidarity among movement actors. Conversely, activists view organizational specialization not only as a way of expressing their diverse values, beliefs, and self-definitions, but also as a strategic resource for attaining complex social reform goals.

To illustrate this argument, I examine the relationship between organizational diversity and movement identity in the specific case of the Chicago GLBT movement. Scholars date the surge of organizational proliferation in the GLBT movement back to the 1960s, when gays and lesbians became engaged in more visible and aggressive organizational tactics than they had previously used (Armstrong 2002).⁵ As the number of organizations multiplied, the political diversity of the movement became evident: tensions fractured organizations over questions of movement goals and strategy (D’Emilio 1992), and over the very construction of gay and lesbian identities (Hemphill 1991; Phelan 1993). Reflecting this diversity in views and priorities, organizations in the 1970s and 1980s became increasingly specialized, some focusing on particular tactics, such as protest, media monitoring, lobbying, and litigation, and others forming around particular constituencies, such as gays and lesbians of color, bisexuals, the transgendered, and members of trade and professional associations (Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 2002). Today, Chicago is home to several GLBT legal and political advocacy organizations, a flourishing gay press, a gay chamber of commerce, numerous associations for GLBT professionals, and a wide-ranging network of grassroots organizations that specialize in a variety of movement activities and issues. The heterogeneity in GLBT organizations thus allows for an analysis of how activists in organizations with diverse ideologies, agendas, and preferences view the relationship between their respective organizational niches and a unified movement identity. In the following section, I describe the methods used to analyze organizational diversity in this case. I then elaborate the dynamics of niche activism and the structural relationship between organizational diversity and movement identity.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on data from thirty-one in-depth interviews conducted in 2000 with the founders and past or present leaders from fifteen GLBT organizations in Chicago. An initial list of Chicago GLBT organizations was constructed based on a review of website listings. I analyzed organization mission statements, brochures, newsletters, publications, and websites to classify each organization by their primary tactical niche. For organizations that pursued more than one tactical approach to reform, I selected the tactic that these organizational materials emphasized as their primary organizational expertise. Following Minkoff’s (1999) typology, I selected organizations for the study that specialized in four broad categories of

social movement activity: (1) *advocacy organizations* (that is, organizations that rely on lobbying and litigation to influence policy and public opinion in institutional settings); (2) *protest organizations* (that is, organizations that use outsider tactics or disruptive means such as demonstrations, sit-ins, and marches to influence policies, public officials and public opinion); (3) *service organizations* (that is, organizations that provide tangible goods or services, such as health care, counseling or individual legal representation, as well as intangible goods such as information about legal issues, hotlines for victims of gay bashing, and support or consciousness raising); and (4) *cultural organizations* (that is, organizations that emphasize cultural or ideological activities such as sponsoring film festivals, challenging homophobia in schools, and media monitoring and production). These organizations may be said to represent the movement's "repertoire of contention" (Tilly 1978), providing a range of perspectives on movement objectives and how best to achieve them.⁶

The representation of each tactic in the sample was *not* intended to be proportionate to their representation in the movement overall.⁷ My focus in selecting organizations was to find organizations that were well known in the GLBT community for pursuing a particular approach to GLBT reform, and then to analyze how activists from these organizations understood the relationship between their organizational identities and a broader movement identity. To get a sense of which of these organizations were well known in the GLBT community for specializing in particular tactical niches, I interviewed editors of *The Chicago Free Press*, a gay and lesbian newspaper, and Lambda Publications, which produces several newspapers and magazines for the Chicago GLBT community (in particular communities of color). These journalists were, in a sense, professional observers of movement activity and possessed a broad knowledge of dynamics among organizations in the movement. Table 1 lists the participating organizations,⁸ their organizational classification, and a short description of the focus of their activities.

At each organization, I contacted founders, past or present leaders, and in the case of the larger, professionalized organizations, key staff members. The interviews followed a loose structure, with roughly a third of the interview time spent discussing each of three topics: (1) organizational history, mission, and current structure, including membership size, governance, fundraising, and tactical expertise; (2) the respondents' perspectives on movement tactics and

Table 1. Summary of Participating Organizations

<i>Name</i>	<i>Organization Type</i>	<i>Focus of Organizational Activity</i>
ACLU of Illinois – Lesbian and Gay Rights Project	Advocacy	Test case litigation
Adodi	Service	Support for African American gay men
Affinity	Service	Support for African American lesbians
AIDS Legal Council	Advocacy	Legal advocacy for people with HIV/AIDS
Amigas Latinas	Service	Support for Latina lesbians and bisexuals
Chicago Anti-Bashing Network (CABN)	Protest	Gay bashing and other hate crimes
Chicago Black Lesbians and Gays (CBLG)	Service	Support for African American GLBTs
Chicago Free Press	Cultural	Press coverage of GLBT issues
Equality Illinois	Advocacy	Statewide lobbying on GLBT issues
Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network of Chicago (GLSEN)	Cultural	Homophobia in schools
It's Time, Illinois	Advocacy	Legislative advocacy on transgender issues
Khuli Zaban	Service	Support for Asian and Middle Eastern GLBTs
Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund	Advocacy	Test case litigation
Lambda Publications	Cultural	Press coverage of GLBT issues
Queer to the Left	Protest	Agitprop and redefining gay issues

strategies, and the organizations which deploy them; and (3) their perceptions of interorganizational relations in the Chicago GLBT movement. Respondents were asked to name the organizations with which his or her organization had collaborated on an event, issue, or organizational action in the past year. For additional evidence of interorganizational ties, I also analyzed organizational newsletters, websites, brochures, and local press accounts for events in which two or more sample organizations were involved.

THE POLITICS OF NICHE ACTIVISM

Where previous theories have tended to reduce organizational specialization either to a competition over resources and adherents or to differences among participants over beliefs, preferences, and self-definitions, evidence from the Chicago GLBT movement suggests that activists in fact view specialization as part of both a *collaborative* and *strategic* effort to achieve social reform. Activists interviewed for this study understood organizational specialization to be a pragmatic response to the complexity of pursuing GLBT reform. By conceptualizing GLBT reform as a multiorganizational effort in which each organization plays an important role, activists constructed a sense of *shared fate*, a perception of themselves as “a movement” in pursuit of social change.

While activists in this study held widely varying opinions regarding the specific priorities and goals for the Chicago GLBT movement, they shared a view of GLBT reform as a complex objective—requiring not only legal and legislative challenges to win rights, benefits and legal protections, but also cultural challenges to dominant constructions of the nuclear family and gender roles, and to homophobia more generally (cf., Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 2002; Gamson 1989). Jeff Edwards⁹ of Queer to the Left, a protest organization, was typical in this regard: “I do think that the nature of . . . queer oppression is such that it’s not just about if the law said something different we’d all be fine. The law is part of the picture, but I do think that there needs to be . . . a broader transformation of our culture.”

Rather than spread organizational resources thin by trying to engage in multiple venues or strategies, activists felt that organizations should develop expertise in just one aspect of social reform. Thus, movement preparedness was associated with organizations that were clearly focused, quick, proficient. “You need to find something that you’re good at organizationally and prove to be very effective at it,” said Ellen Meyers of Equality Illinois, a statewide lobbying organization. Rick Garcia, Executive Director of Equality Illinois and active in the movement in the 1970s when gay organizations were each expected to do a variety of movement tasks, pointed out the strategic benefits to the movement from this shift toward organizational specialization:

Thank God today we have a wide range of organizations. We have the Victory Fund—let’s elect our own. . . . You have GLAAD, that says we’re going to look at the area of defamation. . . . You have Lambda that says, fuck with us, we’ll take you to court. . . . And from my perspective . . . for us to be effective . . . all of us [must] find our niche, do it well, and stand shoulder to shoulder with those other organizations.

The importance of standing “shoulder to shoulder” with other organizations was a critical aspect of activists’ understanding of specialization, as they saw the movement as benefiting from organizational proficiencies only through collaboration among differently specialized organizations. Juanita Crespo of Amigas Latinas, a service organization for Latina lesbians and bisexuals, relied on the metaphor of the body in making this point:

It’s good when this piece connects to the other piece to the other piece to the other piece, like the body itself. . . . Because when you do something specific, you do it well. . . . But they need to be attached to each other. You know, it’s not about just doing it for these groups and

forget about the rest. No. . . we need to have all these pieces together . . . each one doing what they need to do like a body.

This conception of organizational specialization, widely shared among activists in this study, suggests a multipronged organizational effort. Activists viewed the goals of “the movement” not through the narrow lens of their own organizational missions, but with a sense of their connectedness to a broader movement-wide effort.

By emphasizing the *connectedness* of organizational activities, activists were not suggesting that the Chicago GLBT movement lacked conflict. On the contrary, virtually all of the activists in the sample made references to the problem of movement in-fighting, and almost all respondents had strong opinions—many of them negative—about the strategies and priorities of particular activists or organizations in the movement. Yet, despite these criticisms, activists retained an understanding of individual approaches to reform as *one tool of many* available to the movement, and it is this conceptual linkage that I argue maintained a sense of movement identity in spite of particular discontents. Justin Hayward, for example, of AIDS Legal Council of Chicago, openly disparaged a more cultural approach to social reform: “It’s not about let’s feel good about people with HIV. Let’s feel good about gay people. Let’s understand them. If we all just come out. It’s like, horseshit! It’s about power.” And yet, Hayward observed, the legal strategies of his organization were just “one tool you use” among many in the fight against power inequality. Similarly, Rick Garcia of Equality Illinois ridiculed the more process-oriented organizations who advocated what he called the “thousand-year plan for peace and harmony on earth,” and yet he insisted that all of these organizations played a role in movement success:

We have community centers all over the country, and many of them provide counseling to people who have been beaten, battered by society, been rejected by their parents, who desperately need some kind of help. One could say, by helping this small number of gays and lesbians using resources just to make people feel good about themselves, does this change public attitudes? No. Does it protect their civil rights? No. Is it not a good thing to do? No, it’s a very good thing to do.

Jeff Edwards of Queer to the Left, a protest organization, was one of many activists in this study who criticized the tendency of the movement’s mainstream advocacy organizations to make important strategic decisions—particularly around “hot-button” issues like same-sex marriage—without consulting the broader GLBT community. Yet he too saw these organizations as important to the movement: “I’m a big proponent of direct action politics. I’m supportive of a lot of the work that more established groups do, but have never been excited about it. But . . . I do think there does need to be work done in the courts, there does need to be lobbying in Congress and state legislatures. There needs to be campaign contributions to candidates.”

That activists from such different organizational and ideological backgrounds shared a vision of movement diversity as *enhancing rather than detracting* from movement goals differs from the competition-based models of interorganizational relations: most activists viewed organizational specialization primarily from the perspective of movement readiness, not as a means of organizational maintenance and survival. This understanding of organizational diversity differs, too, from identity-centered accounts which view organizational diversity as a reflection of, for example, “the many ways to be gay” (Armstrong 2002). Chicago GLBT activists on the contrary saw organizational diversity as being *instrumental* for movement success. Their sense of movement identity was derived from an understanding of the movement not as a loosely articulated federation of organizations linked by sexual orientation, but as a movement-wide division of labor.

This construction of movement identity could be observed in the way respondents relied on the first person plural (“we,” “us”) in talking about their relationships to differently

specialized organizations in the field. The following observation by Evette Cardona of Amigas Latinas, a service organization for Latina lesbians and bisexuals, illustrates this well:

The fact that we have Khuli Zaban for Southeast Asian and Arab American lesbians is unbelievable. That we have a group like Amigas Latinas. That we have several African American groups. We've got transgendered groups that are doing incredible things at a legislative level . . . I just think that's unbelievable.

The invocation of “we” in these contexts reflected a sense that activists with divergent approaches to social reform shared a common fate, that the successes and failures of any given organization inevitably affected the constituents of other organizations in the movement. Rick Garcia of Equality Illinois illustrated this sense of linked fortunes in his observations about a now-defunct GLBT political action committee that had tried to openly distance itself from protest organizations by referring to them as a “fringe element”: “[O]h no honey, oh no honey, you got to go in and say *those are us*. That's us. That's me. . . . The difference is we're just doing different things, and they have a different approach. It's not my approach, but that's me.” Diana Williamson, of It's Time, Illinois, an advocacy organization for transsexuals, described a similar affinity with the radical protest organization, Lesbian Avengers, despite the enormous differences in the ideologies, strategies, and tactical styles of the two organizations. “We are, in many ways very conservative,” Williamson said of It's Time, Illinois. “The most radical type of thing that we do is to picket [the Human Rights Campaign].¹⁰ And we didn't even call it picketing until last year. Before that, we called it leafleting, which is much more gentle.” But when the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival refused to amend its policy of admitting only “women who are born women,” the Lesbian Avengers protested on behalf of the transgender community. Williamson described how the Avengers wore black “Transsexual Menace” t-shirts, and entered the festival with fake dripping blood, protesting in a way the more conservative It's Time, Illinois never could. The lesson in solidarity was not lost on Williamson or other members of the transgender community: “I thought . . . God, how can you not respect that? . . . You're going to do that to some of my people? *Well you'll do it to me too.*”

This sense of shared fate among activists with strikingly different approaches to social reform, was based in part on a sophisticated conceptual understanding of how social reform can realistically be achieved. But as the following section elaborates, it was also grounded in, and reinforced by, the structural interdependencies among organizations in the movement.

INTERORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONS: THE TIES THAT BIND

Conventional wisdom holds that internal conflict over movement goals, tactics, or ideology, *diminishes* solidarity and a sense of collective identity among activists in the movement. Armstrong (2002) goes some distance to show how this has *not* been the case in the GLBT movement, that activists deliberately forged a “unity in diversity” collective identity as a strategy for containing disparate perceptions of social reform under the banner of a single movement. But evidence from this case also suggests that there is a *structural* component to this construction of identity: proficiencies derived from organizational specialization forged ties between activists with radically different identifications to the movement.

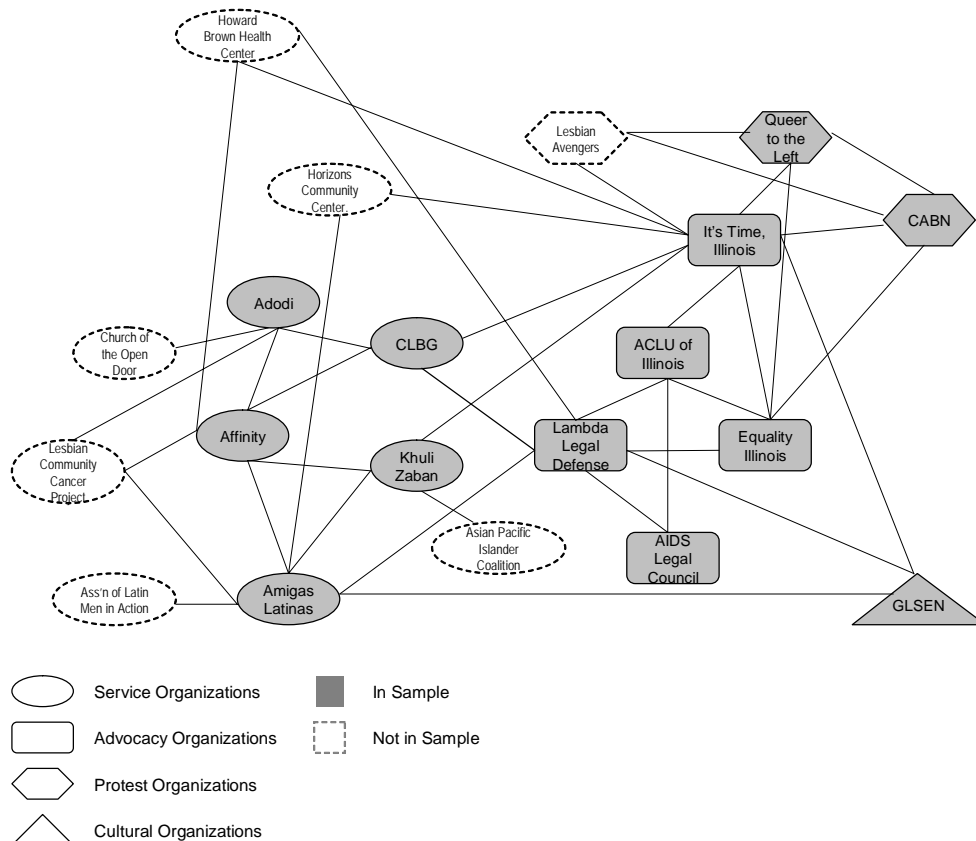
As organizations narrow their focus to specific niches, they develop proficiencies that are not shared by differently specialized organizations (cf., Hannan and Freeman 1989). Such proficiencies are not limited to conventional tactics, such as litigation or protest, but include providing material and informational services to marginalized constituencies, fostering a sense of political consciousness, and representing or communicating the views of minority communities to the rest of the movement. Activists viewed these proficiencies as resources to be shared with other movement organizations. These resource exchanges among specialized

organizations, or cooperative interorganizational ties, need not rise to the level of *coalitions* (Staggenborg 1986), but could be forged, for example, by sharing advice, information, and specialized knowledge or by mobilizing memberships and other resources to support the activities of other organizations.

To unpack more precisely *how* organizational interdependencies provide a structural basis to movement identity, I analyzed the broader network of cooperative ties, illustrated below in figure 1, that linked organizations in the sample. Ties were constructed between two organizations if they collaborated on an event, issue, or specific organizational action in the year leading up to the interviews. To provide a full picture of the organizational field, I also include a number of organizations mentioned in interviews and other data, but which were not a part of the study's sample.

Two observations are particularly pertinent. First, where the competition-based model of interorganizational relations predicts that organizations with similar constituencies or tactics are most likely to compete rather than cooperate in social reform efforts (Hannan and Freeman 1989), here we see that the highest levels of cooperation could be found *within* clusters of the same organizational type. Protest organizations, for example, routinely mobilized their memberships to attend events sponsored by other protest organizations. These organizations specialized around very different facets of GLBT protest activity—gay bashing, antiestablishment agit/prop, radical lesbian politics—but participants shared a strong belief in street protest as a preferred means of movement participation, and they routinely supported each other in their actions. Similarly, activists from service organizations regularly cosponsored events and

Figure 1. Interorganizational Ties in the Chicago GLBT Movement



mobilized memberships to attend one another's fundraisers. These activists acknowledged that because their organizations were dedicated to providing support to minority GLBT constituencies (e.g., Asian and Middle Eastern lesbians and bisexuals), their memberships and budgets were relatively small, and thus it made sense to work with like-minded organizations as a formal part of their organizational strategy. "You see, the main thing that we offer the community is manpower," said Alden Bell, founder of Adodi, an organization for African American gay men. "So a lot of grassroots organizations are looking for people to do certain things. And here we have the brothers. We on a consistent basis have twenty to thirty brothers that come to our meetings on a regular basis. . . . So those brothers are available to work on different projects in the community."

Perhaps the most striking degree of cooperation occurred between organizations specializing in legal advocacy. The ACLU of Illinois's Lesbian and Gay Rights Project, Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, and AIDS Legal Council all specialize in litigation and legal advocacy—and arguably compete for very similar resources and adherents. Yet the relationships between activists in these organizations were among the most cooperative in the sample. Staff attorneys routinely consulted with each other on cases and legal briefs and occasionally cosponsored cases together. They sat together on the board of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, and twice a year they met with attorneys from other legal advocacy organizations at a national lawyers roundtable to coordinate legal strategy at the national level. Roger Leishman, former legal director of the ACLU of Illinois's Gay and Lesbian Project, argued that cooperative ties among the attorneys made the legal advocacy organizations a more efficient—and effective—component of the GLBT movement: "One of the reasons that within the lesbian/gay community the litigation efforts have been relatively successful and relatively cohesive is because we meet regularly, we know each other very well, we're colleagues, we do cases together."

A second observation about interorganizational relations challenges the position of identity theorists who conceptualize divergent organizational identities as *coexisting* in a loose articulation within a multiorganizational movement sector: here we see that organizations routinely *integrated* their expertise across organizational clusters to advance their own interests. The most well-known case of this form of organizational cooperation is the "radical flank effect" (Haines 1984), where more moderate advocacy organizations benefit from the radical politics of protest organizations. Rick Garcia of Equality Illinois, for example, described what happened when Equality Illinois (then-called the Illinois Federation) learned that the county board was expressing its "deep commitment" to the GLBT community regarding proposals for a county antidiscrimination ordinance while at the same time expressing contradictory positions to more conservative constituents:

We just let Queer Nation know that. And then I sit there, very nice... in my suit and my briefcase and Queer Nation comes in and they throw waffles and disrupt the Board meeting. And the President is freaked out and some of the Commissioners are freaked out. "Why are you waffling on the issue, Mr. President?" . . . And I sit there, and what do they do? What do they do? They look at me. All I do is [shrug]. You lied to us. I can't control these people... And the next thing you know, you have the County Board President calling me in and saying "How can we move forward?"

But interactions among organizations often occurred well beyond the radical flank effect: moderate organizations not only benefited from, but also *contributed to* the work of protest organizations. While Queer Nation and ACT UP are now defunct in Chicago, activists from Equality Illinois make an effort to support the work of lesser-known protest organizations such as the Chicago Anti-Bashing Network and Queer to the Left, lending their statewide name recognition and considerable organizational resources to help mobilize protest activity.

Other examples of cooperative ties could be found between all organizational clusters. For example, Lambda Legal Defense, an advocacy organization, advised the Gay, Lesbian,

Straight Educational Network of Chicago (GLSEN/Chicago), a cultural organization, on school nondiscrimination policies. GLSEN likewise helped to educate school officials about the legal ramifications of Lambda's successful lawsuit involving same-sex harassment in schools, a publicity effort that Lambda considered key to its test-case litigation strategy. It's Time, Illinois, a transgender advocacy organization, participated in a panel discussion for GLSEN on transgender issues in schools, and Amigas Latinas, a service organization for Latina lesbians and bisexuals funded the Aixa Dias Latina Youth Leadership Scholarship, which GLSEN awarded at its annual youth scholarship night. It's Time, Illinois regularly encouraged its members to volunteer at Horizons Community Center, a service organization. Horizons, in turn, provided data for It's Time's annual report on transgender discrimination and violence, which it used to make a case for legislative changes at the local and state levels.

Again, these cooperative ties were often too sporadic or short term to rise to the level of *coalition* activity, but they nevertheless contributed to a sense among activists that their organizations offered a particular form of expertise to the rest of the movement. It is this structural relationship between organizations—the perception that each organization was contributing to a movement-wide division of labor—that helps to explain how activists with strikingly divergent organizational identities could nevertheless envision a movement identity that included even those organizations with whom they had specific discontents. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by analyzing relationships between organizations with longstanding and significant disagreements.

The Chicago GLBT movement, like virtually all identity movements in the United States (Ryan 1992; Seidman 1993; Travis 1986), has long been plagued by accusations that the movement's largest organizations ignore the interests of minority or less-dominant groups (Cohen 1996; Hemphill 1991; Phelan 1993). Virtually all of the activists of color in this study spoke of feeling removed from the agendas and policies that had been articulated by the movement's mainstream advocacy organizations—Equality Illinois, Lambda Legal Defense, and the ACLU's Gay and Lesbian Rights Project. Leaders from organizations for GLBT people of color noted that their constituents were just as likely to be concerned about affirmative action, racial discrimination, and matters of family and the community as they were about the issues favored by the advocacy organizations: gay boy scouts, gay marriage, gays in the military, or outlawing antigay discrimination (Gamson 1995). The sense of marginalization among GLBT constituents of color was reflected not only in their separate organizations, but also their separate newspapers, pride marches, and the striking fact that virtually all of their organizational activities were attended exclusively by people of color.

And yet, the wide-ranging criticism from activists of color about the movement's advocacy organizations did *not* appear to diminish their support for the advocacy organizations' tactical role within the movement. Describing the work of advocacy organizations as "necessary," "very key," "essential," "amazing," and "fabulous" for the movement, activists of color repeatedly acknowledged the ways in which their constituents had benefited from the work of GLBT lawyers and lobbyists. Chris Smith, founder of Affinity, an organization for African American lesbians, was typical in her concern that her constituents' interests were not well represented by the movement's advocacy organizations, but she argues, "We have to have people who have expertise at the table. . . . I think that if you've got people there who are foot soldiers who can bring justice to or voice to an issue, just because . . . they don't look like the constituents they serve, that doesn't make it all bad." Evette Cardona of Amigas Latinas noted that the clients in Lambda's second-parent adoption success were two Latina lesbians, and she described how attorneys from Lambda provided information on custody and other family law issues for her organization's enormously popular legal workshops. Renee Olgetree of Chicago Black Lesbians and Gays, described being "forever indebted" to Lambda for its assistance in suing on behalf of local gay and lesbian African Americans to march in Chicago's Bud Billiken parade, one of the country's largest African American parades.

Divisions within the Chicago GLBT movement along racial and ethnic lines were among the most contentious in the movement. But despite their sharp criticism, activists of color were attuned to the ways in which their constituents' interests were tied to the successes and failures of litigation and lobbying organizations in the movement. In this sense, their perception of movement identity was *not* based on a peaceful coexistence of different organizational identities—but on a structural interdependence among organizations in the movement.

CONCLUSION

While social movement scholars working in the resource mobilization/organizations tradition have long considered the causes and consequences of organizational specialization for social movements, they have given less attention to the question of how organizational heterogeneity contributes to or detracts from a sense of collective identity. And while identity theorists have successfully highlighted the importance of “identity work” (see Boykin 2000) in social movements, they have devoted less empirical attention to the structural underpinnings of collective identity. The findings from this study suggest a model of interorganizational dynamics in which organizational structure is inextricably tied to the construction of movement identity.

Activists in this case maintained a sophisticated understanding of the goals of the GLBT movement as requiring movement competency in a wide range of cultural and political venues. Respondents viewed organizational specialization as a way for organizations to develop proficiencies in specific movement activities, or *niches*, that they could then share as part of a multipronged effort to achieve movement goals. This conception of organizational specialization as being linked to a division of labor is referred to here as *niche activism*. By relating the strengths of their particular organizational approaches to the overall movement effort, activists constructed a sense of “we,” a collective effort in which they played a necessary, but not sufficient part. The niche activism model suggests too that as organizations specialize, they develop structural interdependencies that sustain a sense of movement identity even in the face of widely diverging ideologies and interests.

This characterization of organizations as forming a cooperative, movement-wide division of labor to achieve movement goals differs from the competition-based models of organizations specializing largely to gain an edge in the competition for resources and adherents. Organizational specialization produces *both* competitive and cooperative interorganizational relations in any given organizational field (Aldrich 1999). Attention to the cooperative ties between heterogeneous organizations reveals specialization to play a key role in the construction of movement identity, shaping how activists view the organizational field and their relationship to organizations with different approaches to social reform. At the same time, this conceptualization of organizational specialization as a *strategic resource* for the movement moves beyond the work of those identity theorists who view diversity primarily as a reflection of differences in beliefs and self-definitions. Activists viewed their organizational proficiencies as a form of expertise to be shared among organizations, and while such cooperative exchanges neither rose to the level of coalition activity nor precluded movement infighting, they nevertheless provided an important structural basis to movement identity.

I conclude with some thoughts as to the generalizability of this case to other social movements, as well as opportunities for future research. There are at least two dimensions on which one might see variability in the degree to which organizational specialization sustains or impairs a collective movement identity. First, the capacity of activists to envision their organizational proficiencies as part of a larger collective effort may vary depending on *the degree to which identity itself forms the basis of movement grievances*. In movements that are based on status—such as sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, and gender—identity is often *externally* imposed and/or used as an official basis for categorization (Snow and McAdam 2000). In these instances, identity is itself a component of movement grievances, forming a

community boundary (if a contested one) that delineates a broader collectivity from which activists and movement organizations are drawn. While the nature and use of that identity may be disputed among movement activists, identification with a larger community independent of the movement may make it easier for some activists to conceptualize their efforts as part of a community-wide reform effort. By contrast, movements organized around non-status issues—such as the environmental or animal rights movements—still require a shared collective identity for mobilization, but they differ in the extent to which identities are externally imposed (see Bernstein 2005).¹¹ Without such a sharply defined community, activists may identify more strongly with *particular organizations* (or tactics and ideologies) than with a broader collectivity (see Bernstein 2005), and this may make it more difficult to link divergent organizational approaches to an overarching movement identity.

Second, I expect the relationship between organizational diversity and collective identity to change *over the life course of a movement*. Empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated that social movements typically emerge out of preexisting solidarities. From the French commune (Jasper 1997), Russian revolution (Gould 1995), and American civil rights movement (Bonnell 1983), to the Berkeley Free Speech Movement (McAdam 1982; Morris 1984), emergent movements tend to appropriate the collective identity of established groups or networks (Heirich 1968). In this sense, emergent movements rarely face the dilemmas posed by divergent organizational identities within the same movement sector. But as the organizational locus of the movement passes from these established groups or networks to formal social movement organizations, organizers face the conflicting pressures highlighted in this article—to differentiate organizational identities for the purpose of winning resources and adherents, while at the same time to link these divergent approaches to social reform into a coherent movement identity (see Friedman and McAdam 1992). As movements become increasingly institutionalized and diversified, organizational structure—rather than indigenous identity—takes on a greater role in sustaining movement identity. Finally, the life course of social movements can end successfully—with goal attainment or entry into the public domain—or gradually wane, as political opportunities or public support for movement goals diminish. In both cases, it becomes more difficult for organizations to define and pursue their missions, such that the number and forms of organizations in the movement sector decline over time. I expect that as the institutional structure of a movement dissolves, a collective identity forged by a shared division of labor will be much more difficult to sustain.

The contemporary Chicago GLBT movement is arguably on the cooperative side of both of these continuums: a vibrant and highly institutionalized status-based movement, it is a likely candidate for forging a movement identity out of organizational heterogeneity. As with all case studies, it is important to see whether these conditions hold in movements emphasizing a variety of issues and at different life stages. But current models for conducting these analyses are incomplete. The niche activism model proposed in this article suggests that organizational diversity can neither be reduced to a competition over resources and adherents nor to disparate beliefs and preferences of individual actors, but requires careful attention to the interrelationships between organizational structure and identity.

NOTES

¹ Exceptions to this generalization include McAdam's (1982) study of civil rights movement organizations. Recent examples of field- or industry-level analyses of movement organizations involve a more explicit incorporation of organizational theory. These include, among many others, Minkoff (1995b), Clemens (1997), and Armstrong (2002).

² While I will refer to this approach to studying organizational diversity as a *competition-based* approach, I do so with a specific understanding of the term *competition*, again drawing on the organizations literature: where many social scientists tend to equate competition with consciously recognized *conflict* or *rivalries* among organizations, organizational theorists understand organizations to be competing when they strive for the same limited resources, even though they may lack awareness of one another's existence (Hannan and Freeman 1989). My emphasis on cooperation among movement organizations, then, is not meant to suggest that cooperative relations *replace*

competitive dynamics in a given movement—to the contrary, competitive relations exist by definition in all movements confronting limited resources. Cooperative relations exist *alongside* competitive relations in a heterogeneous organizational field, and we need to understand their role in linking diverse organizations into a single movement.

³ The collective identity literature is too large to do justice here. For excellent review articles, see Polletta and Jasper (2001), Hunt and Bedford (2001), and Snow and McAdam (2000).

⁴ Theorists also have conceptualized collective identity as the social movement *community* from which activists and social movement organizations are drawn (Staggenborg 1998; Stoecker 1995). A movement community perceives itself as a distinct group and distinguishes itself from others with boundaries, symbols, and rituals, but it includes people who are *not* necessarily participants in a social movement (Jasper 1997). By contrast, a *movement identity* explicitly refers to those who identify as activists in reform efforts. Finally, identity theorists sometimes refer to the importance of *individual identities* in collective action—in particular, the biographical histories and preferences that shape choices about whether and how to participate in collective action (Stoecker 1995).

⁵ For excellent histories of the GLBT movement, see Duberman (1993), D’Emilio (1983), Chauncey (1994), and Adam (1987).

⁶ Researchers use the term *repertoires of contention* to describe the distinctive constellations of tactics and strategies used by protest groups in particular historical periods. Clemens (1993) builds on Tilly’s concept to argue that movements are also shaped by distinctive *organizational repertoires* or models of organization. Because I am less concerned here with the model of organization than the form of protest activity in which organizations specialize, I find Tilly’s term more appropriate in this case. For an explanation of why cultural organizations should be considered alongside political organizations in studying a movement’s organizational field, see Armstrong (2002).

⁷ It is likely that the sample under-represents the number of service organizations (of which there are many in Chicago) and over-represents the number of protest and advocacy organizations (of which there are only a handful) relative to the number of such organizations in the movement.

⁸ The Lesbian Avengers, a protest group, and the Association for Latino Men in Action, a service group—were selected for the sample but did not participate in the study, as no members could be reached for interviewing.

⁹ All of the respondents in this article gave permission to use their given names.

¹⁰ The Human Rights Campaign had refused for many years to include the transgendered community within the purview of its legislative efforts.

¹¹ How much identities are externally defined varies across movements, time, and place, and should be understood as a continuum more than a binary distinction between status movements and other kinds of movements (Bernstein 1997).

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