Individualism vs. Collectivism ~ Identity Politics in the LGBT Movement

By Vaidehi Pidaparti, Kristen Vitro, Heather Whippie, and Lyla Youssef

The classic debate between collectivism and individualism is apparent in practically every social movement, so it is not surprising to see this debate arise within the LGBT movement. Though all the members of the LGBT movement initially worked for the same set of general goals, two distinct groups formed as a result of conflicting ideals: queer theorists, whose "loud and proud" discourse emphasized the differences between the LGBT community and mainstream "heterosexual" society, and societal conformists, who focussed their efforts on the acceptance and equality of the LGBT community in respect to society at large. Over time, the dynamics of these two groups changed—lesbians fragmented into their own group, transsexuals were forced into their own communities, and radical activists left their more conservative counterparts behind. However, despite the formation of various agendas within the LGBT movement, there is still a cohesiveness that unites all of these various subgroups when common goals need to be achieved. Thus, there is ultimately a need for both collectivism and individualism within the LGBT movement; individuals get the support they need from their "sub-communities" and exclusive groups, while the LGBT community as a whole serves to advance the rights and acceptance of gay, lesbian and other "queer" groups in our hetero-normal world.


Though homophile groups such as the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society are often accredited with pushing homosexual rights out into the open, the role of college students in the expansion of the LGBT movement has long been overlooked. In his essay, Brett Beemyn profiles student activism for gay rights and traces the impact that such activism had on the future of the gay liberation movement as a whole. He begins by discussing the formation of student organizations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially Cornell University's Student Homophile League (SHL), that began to be open about homosexuality. Not only did the SHL promote being forthright about sexual orientation, but it encouraged its gay members to be proud of who they were. Occasionally, for instance, the SHL would host "zaps", or discussions in which homosexuals would share their own experiences and learn from one another so as to create an environment uninhibited by social norms, fears and prejudices.

Despite their emphasis on the concept of being gay, the SHL managed to attract a number of non-gay supporters. The SHL's participation in other on-campus activist movements caused many heterosexual activists to realize how important an issue gay rights was. Interestingly enough, the majority of the SHL, at its onset, was heterosexual. These straight members, who formed a substantial portion of the SHL, served a dual purpose; they provided some protection for the SHL's gay members, who were often persecuted, and attracted other non gay activists to the movement, thereby providing strength in numbers. In addition to the advantages given by heterosexual members, the SHL also made it a policy to not require members to identify themselves with their sexual orientations. Thus, the SHL quite successfully used the collectivist approach to spread the concept of homosexuality.

As time went on, however, the SHL began to depart from its more inclusive standpoint and encountered a split between radical activists and those who wished to downplay being gay in order to avoid a great deal of publicity. Despite these emerging differences and the subsequent division of objectives, it is important to remember that student activism's collective approach was, in the end, responsible for helping bring the issue of being gay out into the open.


In terms of identity politics, the gay and lesbian movement was quite divided. Some wanted to stress the similarities between homosexuals and heterosexuals, and thus attempt to assimilate into mainstream society. On the other hand, many activists were fed up with the heteronormal world and wished to break stiff social roles that had been forced upon them. They wished to redefine themselves as separate from the society that threatened to constrain them in every which way possible. Despite these opposing agendas, however, activists of both minds were able to achieve some key goals through the use of collectivism. In her essay, Mary Bernstein discusses this collectivist aspect of the gay and lesbian movement and addresses the gains begged by such an approach. She especially highlights the homophile movement and groups such as the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society as organizations that helped unify all of the divisions within the gay and lesbian movement so as to achieve a set of goals that would allow all divisions to pursue their respective agendas. Homophile groups mainly spearheaded efforts to educate health professionals, as well as other high-ranking officials, in order to reduce the stigma placed on being homosexual. As a result, these professionals would use their sway to change legislation, such as sodomy laws, to better benefit the gay community. Subsequently, a gradual social acceptance of homosexuality came into effect, and lesbians and gay men were more able to emerge from the closeted homophile movements and campaign more openly for their rights.

Even though gay activists had a number of varying, and often conflicting, agendas, collectivism nevertheless proved to be vital to the survival of each sub-movement, and the gay movement as a whole. Without the gains provided by the concentrated effort to educate others about homosexuality, society would not have been as receptive as they proved to be.


In his chapter entitled "The Gay Liberation Movement," John D'Emilio describes this movement as influencing both individuals and the political structure. D'Emilio begins his discussion of the gay movement by introducing the Stonewall Riot, remembered for being the first gay riot in history. Not only did it have an enormous impact at the time, but it motivated further radical activism. After the riot had ended, a new form of politics...
characterized the gay liberation movement—a confrontational politics that required its participants to openly express their dissatisfaction with the current government and its oppression of homosexuals. With this new form of social action numerous riots erupted, some of which drew blood. The violence of this radical method put a spotlight on the gay liberation movement and gave it nation-wide publicity. People all over the country were faced with the growing issue of homosexuality.

In addition to the attention that the movement received, the new movement also attracted many new members. These new members were drawn to the group not only because of common sexual identity, but also because they shared a common political perspective. A vast majority of the new members were young radicals that believed in bravely boasting their homosexuality for the world to see in order to force the issue of homosexuality on the American public. With this ideal “coming out” and stating one’s homosexuality became both personal and political because it helped to build a foundation for the gay liberation movement. Homosexuality was no longer something to be hidden from the world out of fear. Instead, with the title of being gay or lesbian the individuals knew that they were part of an organization that supported its members for who they were.

Due to the fact that the American public met homosexuality with strong opposition, gays and lesbians formed tightly knit organizations and circles for support. This created an undoubtedly strong sense of community and brotherhood among its members because they all shared common ideals and experienced the same resentment. Through all of this the gay liberation movement adopted a separatist ideology. Even though they were recruiting thousands of new members, the gay liberation community was solely comprised of homosexuals because they were the ones that shared the common desire for eliminating the oppression of gays and enlisting equal rights.


"The Gay and Lesbian Movement" briefly describes the evolution of the homosexual identity. Gays and lesbians have always had to fight against discrimination and prejudice. With the American society uniting against the gays and lesbians a strong sense of union developed among homosexuals. These homosexuals united around the idea that homosexuality was a large part of political and personal identity. During the twentieth century, society placed strict regulations that pressured people to stay within society’s norms. Homosexuality was met with resentment and was even labeled a mental illness because it deviated from the social norm of heterosexuality. The prejudices that lesbians and gays faced caused them to form groups that focused on political and social goals as an effort to gain equal stance in society.

As time passed, a new generation of homosexuals emerged. This generation held very radical views and possessed an open sense of pride about being homosexual. The new radical theme of the gay liberation movement forced people in American society to acknowledge homosexuality and the lack of equal rights for gays and lesbians as a prominent issue. As the quest for equal rights continued, a sense of identity began to develop among the gays and lesbians. This sense of identity based itself off of the desire for equal rights and a sense of commonality. In addition to this, the idea of a gay community emerged as a very important aspect in defining one’s identity because it served as a support group both emotionally and physically.

However, while the presence of a community emerged, the gay liberation transformed into a separatist movement. The gay community centered itself around issues involving the liberation of homosexuals, with their key focus being eliminating oppression and prejudice. The members of this group united to stand against society. By doing this they segregated themselves and their cause. This made it increasingly difficult to gain universal acceptance, which is something that they desperately needed. Nevertheless, the organization and its radical members continued to believe that they had to stand against all of society, rather than trying to incorporate themselves into it.


Identity politics surrounded the LGBT movement. The clashing outlooks on the Queer Theory and the role of transgender and bisexuals were prevalent and it was a constant battle. This, however, was perfectly understandable. While looking at the values of each of the two opposing groups within the LGBT movement, it is apparent that their principles and goals were not the same. This is a classic debate between assimilationists and separatists. Joshua Gamson highlights the differences between the two different groups and the arguments they shared through the use of San Francisco’s lesbian and gay newspapers. Whereas queer deconstructs collective categories, the collective group builds the categories up. It supports them and gives the LGBT movement a public collective identity. Collectivists assert that the gays and lesbians share a minority status: the shared oppression that is the denial of the freedom and opportunity to possess the natural same-sex desires. They believe that this clear identity enables them to successfully resist this oppression and make political gain.

Despite the large emphasis the article places on Queer Theory, Gamson includes a great deal of information concerning the older generation of gays and lesbians. The generational gap provides the main argument over the word “queer” and basically the distinction between the two groups pushing for equal rights in the LGBT movement; the older group generally making up the assimilationists (emphasizing sameness) and the younger generation emphasizing differences and separation. This ideology just does not mesh with the older generation. Primarily, they tend to believe that, to gain the rights they desire, they need to prove that they are just like everyone else. They are normal and they are everywhere and every type of person. These homosexuals are, in every way, similar to heterosexuals and, therefore, deserve the same rights. Secondly, most of the older generation cannot reclaim the word “queer” as the younger generation does. It is derogatory and is associated with very bad memories and crimes. These two disparities make up the major controversies between the groups. Whereas Queer Theory wants to be different and be proud of it, the collective group believes that to further their position in society, it is more effective to be the same and to not shout out the differences that not all gays and lesbians possess. This article is important in contrasting assimilation and separatist ideologies. Gamson expresses both sides very well and shows that both is a useful political tactic.


Queer Theory is a radical form of “deconstructionism.” In this journal, Green draws upon two different strains of Queer Theory to illustrate the shortcomings in the radical approach used by the modern queer theorists. Though queer has been praised for its innovative, in-your-face defiant attitude, according to Green, "... queer theory tends to lapse into a discursively burdened, textual idealism that glosses over the institutional
character of sexual identity and the shared roles that sexual actors occupy” (522). Green touches upon the inadequacies present in the theory by identifying two strains and applying them to specific historical cases of homosexuality. He identifies two different strains: “radical deconstructionism” and “radical subversion.” The former is said to gloss over the institutional organization of sexuality by rejecting the classifications gay and straight and thereby making the sexological classifications incomprehensible. Or, in slightly more explicable terms, Green points out that queer theorists tend to underestimate the differences between gay and straight. Yet, secondly, the queer theorists also neglect social roles that both straight and gays possess therefore overestimating straight and gay difference. Though this may sound contradictory, Green logically explains the two largest deficiencies in the Queer Theory through his use of historical context.

By analyzing the Queer Theory, Green assists in comparing and contrasting this group and the less modern use of sociology within the LGBT movement. The article can help dissect the Queer Theory's overeager outlook on the gay and lesbian movements and studies. Though eager to be seen as different but still good, they ignore similarities with heterosexuals that the collective group tried to emphasize. And conversely, though obsessed with being different, they are also trying to get exactly the same treatment as heterosexuals, thereby ignoring any of their differences which the original collective group recognizes: they are the same, except for their sexual orientation.


In this paper, Adam Isaiah Green relates Queer Theory, Foucauldian approaches, and sociology. Everything is related and tied together in very technical and well thought out terms. It shows, in logical procession, that both Queer Theory and sociology in gender issues were involved in the deconstruction of sexual orientation. Green discusses numerous ideas from the work of Foucault, an authority on the subject of sexuality and gender studies, and contrasts them with Queer Theory. Though Green notes that to some the old school sociology may seem hopelessly outdated, he points out that Queer Theory and the older ideas of sociology are like "siblings, with roots in a parallel deconstructionist conception of identity” (30).

Though there may be many small differences, looking at the big picture, one can see that Queer Theory and the older sociological ideas all stem from the same collective ideas and groups. The LGBT movement, as a whole, is a collective group with very similar ideas to deconstruct the hetero-normal sexual orientation. This article is important in showing that, though the Queer Theory and the more conventional sociology are very different, they encompass the same general ideas and goals.


Thus far, most documented use of collectivism in the LGBT movement has been prevalent during the beginnings of the movement. As a result of the varying notions of homosexual identity, however, the LGBT movement eventually fragmented into a number of subgroups, each with its own agenda and set of ideals. Despite such dominance of individualism within the gay movement, the LGBT movement has retained the ability to unite whenever the homosexual, bisexual and transgender community has faced threats as a whole. In her essay, Valerie Jenness discusses one such instance in the 1980s and 1990s, in which waves of hate crime-related violence affected many homosexuals. As a result, the various LGBT organizations pooled to form region-specific groups with the sole intent of reducing violence against their community. Though these groups later decided to find and fight against other definitions of “anti gay and lesbian violence”, such as domestic violence, the initial action of LGBT activists cannot be overlooked. Such a response to the violence that surrounded them is strongly indicative of the underlying collectivist sentiment that functions, in times of need, to achieve goals that would benefit the LGBT community as a whole. Thus, collectivism allows for a loose association, at least, of the LGBT movement’s subgroups.


Katherine Johnson's article provides a rather interesting look into the identities of transsexual individuals. Within the gay and lesbian movement, Johnson points out that tension and rejection exists between groups, specifically against transsexuals. Johnson carefully examines the hostility towards both male-to-female and female-to-male transsexuals, and analyzes the similarities and differences between the reactions of the lesbian and gay community at large to these two individual groups.

Johnson notes that male-to-female transsexuals often face harsh criticism from both feminists and lesbians. These transsexuals are often described as "deviant males", because as far as the lesbians are concerned, although these individuals associate themselves with the female gender and have undergone a sex change operation, they will never truly know what it's like to be a “woman”. Many male-to-female transsexuals often describe their orientation as being lesbian--originally attracted to women when they were "men", these women are still attracted to other women. One possible suggestion Johnson makes to account for this hostility is that feminists and lesbians may feel that because male-to-female transsexuals were raised as men in a patriarchal society, their behavior as women reflect a stereotype, which may not necessarily reflect the femininity of biological females.

Similarly, Johnson also points out that female-to-male transsexuals also face criticism from the gay and lesbian community. Many who argue against these individuals claim that they are simply "butch lesbians who change sex to justify same-sex relationships or to avoid harassment". Due to the fact that many female-to-male transsexuals categorized themselves as lesbians before their sex change, and are still attracted to women after they become men, feminist and lesbian opponents of this practice may refer to the female-to-male change as the "destruction of lesbians" because according to the definitions of gender, these transsexuals are now "straight". However, many of these men do not refer to themselves as straight. Rather, they refer to themselves as being "queer", with their masculinity taking on the characteristics of "a different kind of man".

Overall, Johnson points out that there is a very prevalent hostility towards transsexuals in the gay and lesbian movement and community. Although they all fall under the umbrella term "queer", transsexual groups often differentiate themselves from the "traditional" gender defined categories of gay and lesbian, having their own unique issues regarding their gender and subsequent sexual orientation.

The article "Urvashi Vaid Speaks on Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights" describes a speech that was given by Vaid, an author, lawyer, and former director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Vaid believed that homosexuality was not fully accepted by heterosexual society. This presented an obstacle that prevented the movement for gay and lesbian rights from moving forward. Vaid analyzed the gay liberation movement as being too separatist. She felt that in order for the movement to be successful it would eventually have to branch out with its ideals and include other movements seeking equality, such as gender or class. By doing this, Vaid believed that the gay liberation movement would increase its impact on the American political structure by encompassing a larger percentage of the American population.

In terms of having a large affect on the political and legislative aspects of society, Vaid felt that the gay and lesbian movement also needed the participation of gay and lesbian voters who were not voting and participating in changing the legislative structure. The addition of these voters would increase the power of the movement by increasing the number of participants. All in all, the overall theme that Vaid stressed was the importance of power by numbers. This is a very important aspect to take into consideration in order for a social movement to be successful. There must be a substantial amount of people that are demanding change in society's structure.

The outright radicalism of the liberation movement did more to separate the liberation movement than it did to assimilate it into American society at times. Exclusive communities formed among the gays and lesbians that built themselves off of sharing a common sexuality. By basing the group off of this theme it separated itself from the heterosexual society. This division created many problems for the gay and lesbian movement because as it fought to be considered equal, it also fought to be recognized as different.


Kenneth Plummer's paper focuses on a few topics, including the "nature of the 'homosexual' category" and deconstruction of identity within the gay and lesbian movement. Plummer states that there is an inherent problem in the labeling of homosexuals within the gay and lesbian movement, as well as in research studies. The terms and categories used to describe the group at large are ever changing and the definitions of categories may differ from group to group, location to location, generation to generation, etc.

Plummer argues that because the once accepted notion that homosexuality was a psychological condition was rejected, individuals were no longer placed in homosexual categories by medical "experts". Rather, the individual must place him or herself into a distinct category based on his or her perceived sexual orientation. Plummer suggests that this self-labeling of one's gay identity is "increasingly pivotal to their personal world...creating a proliferation of separatist groups, until both mentally and spatially 'the homosexual' exists as a highly restricted and confined species".

Other key points that Plummer brings to light are the ramifications of self categorization and the deconstruction of homosexual categories. Bec ause, as Plummer argues, "homosexuality is a complex, diffuse experience that anyone may have", any individual may place him/herself into a homosexual category. However, these very categories pose a problem because they can be de-constructed and can evolve over time. They are not static definitions, but rather part of the homosexual dynamic of identity. Plummer references the work of a researcher named Kinsley, who found that some men will have homosexual experiences of varying in degrees between the ages of 13 and 55, and some will actually change how they identify themselves over this time.

Plummer provides an explanation for this dynamic, once again returning to the concept of "medicalization". The once defined homosexual categories imposed by "experts" in the field placed individuals in specific groups according to a static rubric for diagnoses. However, as this practice of "medicalization" became less accepted by society and the homosexual community, the labeling of homosexuality of an individual became the decision of the individual. As Plummer argues, it is the deconstruction of homosexual categories through individual identity choices that leads to a more dynamic interpretation of sexual orientation.


In her paper, Barbara Ponse argues that lesbian identity and its separation from the other categories of identity in the gay and lesbian movement stem from its social construction within the gay subculture. Ponse begins by discussing how the terms "gay, female homosexual, lesbian, and bisexual" are used as labels for an individual's identity within the lesbian subculture, and may be used describe various characteristics of the individual, including her "chronological age, her age of entry into the community, the historical time in which she enters the lesbian life, the extent of integration into the community,...as well as the private sector of the community with which she is affiliated". These categories are also used to describe an individual's orientation after she has discovered it.

Ponse explains that each term used to describe lesbian identity is a description of a lifestyle as a whole. In the case of the term "lesbian", this word is used to describe a woman who is attracted to other women, and its usage came about as a political statement, used to separate females who were exclusively homosexual from the gay community at large. Ponse makes note of the fact that although the original definition of "lesbian" still applies, it has, in some communities and groups, been expanded as an umbrella category for homosexual feminists and women who are questioning their orientation as bisexuals. The term "lesbian" arguably has a political usage, involving the "destigmatization and demystification" of the lifestyle, and may be used to raise consciousness amongst those without much knowledge of the word's meaning.

The key argument made by Ponse is that the lesbian community separates itself from the general LGBT community because of the individual's need to identify herself. Lesbians are different from heterosexuals in that they are attracted to members of the same sex. They are also different from the gay community, which Ponse defines specifically in this case as the gay male community, because lesbians are women attracted to women. Ponse suggests that the need for an individual's own community and sense of belonging within a community contributed to the uprisings of individual groups, such as the lesbians, within the gay and lesbian movement. Ponse ultimately argues that the gay and lesbian movement as
a whole did not provide a sufficient support network for individuals who categorized themselves into specific sexual orientations, and that the separation of the lesbian movement was a result of the social construction of the general "gay" movement.

Home page | Lesbian Feminism | Homosexuality and the Medical Community | Lesbians and AIDS in the Southern Tier