

THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY: COMING OUT AND INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE

IDENTITY

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In the early 1970s, gay liberation activists began to “come out.” Gay men and lesbians publicly disclosed their sexual identities in order to celebrate their identity, display their rejection of conventional sexual and political strictures, and create social change by challenging invisibility, stigma, and assumptions about the nature of homosexuality. In the following decades, coming out became a common way for social movement participants – and those who saw themselves as allied with those movements and their constituencies – to conceptualize identity disclosures, the relation between individual and collective experience and identity, and strategies for social change. People “came out” as feminists, as conservatives, as people of color who could pass for white, as Christians, Jews, Muslims, and as survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Here, I use my research on activists against child sexual abuse to explore the relationship between identity strategies and social change.

Coming out is a movement strategy that includes public identity disclosure, internal group definitions of collective identity, and emotion-laden individual transformations of identity. I analyze coming out in order to theorize the relationship between collective and individual identities and movement strategy. I argue that identity transformations are not limited in their impact to individuals; instead, coming out, as an identity strategy, targets individuals’ identities, mainstream culture, institutions, and public policy. My point here rests on two main tenets: First, collective identity – the definition of a group that is constructed by that group – cannot be fully understood without understanding individual identity as well. Yet the links between the two are not straightforward and they can exist in tension or conflict with each other. Second, collective and individual identities are closely related to the state and to other social movements, as well as to larger cultural themes. When people disclose stigmatized identities publicly, their own identities shift at both emotional and cognitive levels, and so do onlookers’ identities and their beliefs about the group. Reciprocally, these new identities spur collective action. Identity strategies are not limited to targets of identity or emotion however; activists also use visibility as a strategy for influencing mainstream culture, institutions, and public policy.

Coming out emerged as a strategy and as a way of understanding identity display and change both because of internal movement reasons – ties to other movements, theoretical and tactical debates among participants – and in response to external contexts, particularly the use of identity and therapeutic discourses within the state and other institutions targeted for change. Coming out as a strategy for social change began in the gay and lesbian liberation movement, but it built on other social movements. The civil rights movement and subsequent Black Power, American Indian, and Chicano movements fostered the idea that pride in one's identity was a means of challenging a dominant culture that denigrated one's group. The women's movement popularized the idea that so-called "personal" experiences were connected to larger inequalities. The feminist movements for legalization of abortion and against rape developed the "speak out" in which women told about their stigmatized experiences in order to show that ordinary women had such experiences and to challenge their invisibility. In all of these cases, speaking about identity and experience acquired political meaning both because of its effects on individual emotion (reducing shame, promoting pride), and because the individual was aligned with a collectivity (Whittier 2001). By disclosing individual experiences and identities, participants declared their allegiance to a social movement that challenged dominant notions of their group's nature and position. In fairly short order, even people who did not directly participate in the social movement could adopt the identity strategy of coming out in order to make their own political statement, attempt to change attitudes in their own circle of influence, and declare allegiance to a social movement. Thus, coming out, like racial or ethnic pride, became a way that identity disclosure could be linked to social change outside of more conventionally defined collective action.

Like many other groups, survivors of child sexual abuse adopted coming out as a way of conceptualizing their own identity disclosures. Like other groups, they understood coming out on multiple levels. At the individual level, it referred first to acknowledging and understanding one's own experiences and coming to identify as a "survivor," and second to disclosing one's

identity both in daily life and in the course of movement activities. At the collective, movement level, it referred to public events at which individuals displayed their identity as a group, such as demonstrations or speak-outs. Participants understood both individual and collective coming out strategically, as a means of producing social change in the larger society and in individuals, changing the emotions associated with experiences of child sexual abuse. Because individuals' feelings about their own identities were one target for social change, activists understood individual transformations strategically, as a positive and political outcome of coming out strategies.

Identity strategies include individual or group disclosure of identity with the aim of producing change in how individuals understand and feel about their identity, in how the group is defined in the larger culture, or in the policies of the state and other institutions. Activists against child sexual abuse used identity strategies in a variety of ways. First, they sought transformations of individual feelings and identity as a form of social change, not only the well-being of the individual. Second, individuals and groups came out publicly. Individuals disclosed their identities strategically in the course of daily life in hopes of affecting the institutions with which they interacted. Group came out through public events and displayed movement identities through public cultural projects, displaying a strong collective identity as survivors that drew together otherwise ideologically diverse individuals and groups. Third, organizations extended the politics of visibility into public policy as they developed public health campaigns that sought to bring the issue of child sexual abuse into the public eye.

The ways that the movement against child sexual abuse used identity disclosure strategies are virtually identical to those of GLBT movements and other movements that employ discourses and strategies of coming out. Thus, this case sheds light on the broader question of the links between individual and collective identity in movement strategy.

## **THEORIES OF IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

Culture and identity have a central place in power and resistance. The beliefs of people on both sides of power inequalities in the legitimacy or inevitability of those inequalities are important for maintaining or overturning them. They are important both in terms of *individual identity*, or how individuals understand themselves, their experiences, and their social position, and *collective identity*, or how groups' shared characteristics are defined, both by the groups themselves and by others. One key dynamic of social movements is individuals' affiliation with groups, which entails changes in individual identity, as individuals rethink their selves in light of how social movements define the group. For example, as the gay and lesbian movement redefined sexual identity, individual lesbians and gay men affiliated with a collective identity that emphasized pride rather than shame; this also changed how those individuals thought about themselves.

Both scholars and activists have conceptualized the internalization of domination in terms of identity, or the definition of a group and its political place (Collins 1990). But what identity is and the relationship between domination and resistance in identity strategies is widely disputed. Theorists and activists have been critical of social movements that focus on identity strategies – including coming out – labeling these strategies “identity politics.” For queer theorists and postmodern theorists of gender, identity categories are a means of fixing behavior in definable, and subjugable units; normal and abnormal are established by means of dichotomies of categories (Seidman 1996; Valocchi 2005). The legitimacy of the superior group is maintained by making the boundaries of these categories seem fixed and natural (Butler, 1990, Berlant and Warner 1995). Queer and post-structuralist theories critique the idea that people can understand their selves through a straightforward narrative, arguing instead that personal history is continually reconstructed (Esterberg 1997). In addition, they criticize the idea that “experience” is straightforward, that its meaning is easily accessible and transparent to the individual, and that experience has particular epistemological authority (Scott 1991). All of these raise important

questions about how to understand activism oriented toward redefining a group's own experience and claiming and displaying a self-defined collective identity.

Most sociological theorists of gender and sexuality agree that the ways that groups are defined and differentiated from each other serve to naturalize their apparent differences and their hierarchical relationship, although they tend to give greater credence to structural and institutional factors and to the weight of history (Lorber 2005). In contrast to queer theory's contention that only the deconstruction of identity categories can be truly liberatory, however, they view challenges to the content and position of those categories as important. But both groups of scholars tend to be critical of collective action oriented toward identity, seeing it as either reinforcing domination by playing into authorities' use of identity categories as a means of oppression, or avoiding more substantive political challenge (Brown 1995). These critiques are linked to a larger critique of a putative therapeutic turn in feminism and other social movements (Brown 1995) and to the use of therapeutic means of social control by the state (Polsky 1991, Nolan 1998, Rose 1990). In this view, activists' focus on changing identity and emotion is not merely a distraction from political goals, but a capitulation to the expansion of state power into the self.

Collective and individual identity have also been the object of considerable work in social movements (Stryker, et al. 2000; Bernstein 1997; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Polletta and Jasper 2000; Melucci 1985). This work has shown the importance of collective identity for mobilization, its status as a goal in itself, and its strategic public deployment. A parallel smaller literature deals with individual identity in social movements, showing how participation affects individual identities (Stryker, et al. 2000) and how diverse individual identities interact with collective identity (Reger, et al. 2008; LeClere 2007). A third related literature on emotions in social movements examines the changes in feelings that result from movement participation and how movements attempt to change emotions of both participants and targets (Polletta, Jasper, and Goodwin 2000; Whittier 2000; Flam 2005; Taylor 1996).

The literatures on the therapeutic state and analyses of identity in feminist and queer theory have remained largely separate from social movement analyses of identity and the state (Whittier 2002). I attempt to draw on insights from each to examine identity strategies in relationship to the state, mainstream culture, and other institutions. Coming out is activists' attempt to regain the self, to politicize it, and to define it for themselves. When activists come out, they publicly display a politicized, redefined version of what it means to be part of their group, and they declare that their individual fates –both their position in hierarchies and their happiness – are bound up with the fate of the collectivity. They thus reject the notion that happiness can be achieved outside of social transformation, but they see the route to social transformation as involving both collective *and* individual identity strategies. To achieve it, they both appropriate and challenge therapeutic discourse and technique to define and control that collective identity. |

In contrast to the idea that identity strategies are at best a retreat from politics, I argue that activists develop and refine identity strategies with an eye toward achieving social change in individuals, culture, and institutions and the state. While changing how individuals think and feel about themselves is a social change goal in itself, these changes also facilitate collective action by group that are stigmatized or invisible. Reciprocally, when groups engage in collective coming out – what I call visibility politics – they open up space for individuals to redefine their own identities and to come out in their own spheres of influence. Thus, coming out as a strategy points to the political nature of “identity politics” as well as to the interplay between individual and collective identities. The external forces that critics of identity politics point to – the rise of therapeutic techniques for social control, the surveillance and policing of identity categories – are precisely the forces that activists seek to confront. These forces, along with the influence of earlier social movements, account for the rise of identity strategies and visibility politics (Whittier forthcoming). Identity strategies respond to the ways that the state and other institutions attempt

to construct and define identities, and they attempt to shape individuals' beliefs and feelings about themselves in different ways.

As activists develop identity strategies, they consider the existing views of their group within particular contexts and calibrate their identity disclosures to achieve maximum impact. This impact stems from the ways that identity disclosure can establish individual credibility (Coy and Woehrle 1996, Nepstad 2001), affect the emotional responses of viewers (Whittier 1992), and bring the issue into public view. Identity strategies are not always effective, of course, and it is difficult to measure their success, but in this regard they are no different from any other movement strategy (Giugni, et al. 1999) .

## **METHODS AND THE CASE**

This paper is drawn from a larger study of organizing against child sexual abuse in the U.S. over the past 30 years (Whittier forthcoming). The social movement against child sexual abuse initially emerged out of feminist anti-rape efforts. Over time, the movement has transformed and now is enormously diverse in perspective, with considerable variation in political affiliation, organizational structure, strategies, and tactics. Adult survivors of child sexual abuse have organized both in self-help groups and in activist groups oriented toward changing the perception and treatment of adult survivors of child sexual abuse, prosecuting offenders, and reducing the occurrence of child sexual abuse. Other groups for legal and treatment changes in child protective services, the prosecution of offenders, and training children in assault prevention. Here, I focus primarily on organizing by adult survivors using a variety of visibility tactics.<sup>1</sup> They have worked to change subjectivity and emotion through self-help organizations, public visibility projects, and groups focusing on public health.

Self-defined survivor activists range from those who see child sexual abuse as inextricably linked to feminism, anti-racism, and queer liberation, to conservative evangelical

Christians who see shoring up the traditional family as the best prevention for child sexual abuse; they vary between coalition and disagreement. Movement tactics are a complex mix of policy-oriented, cultural, and individual activism. They include service provision (treatment or support for adult survivors, child victims, or “recovering offenders”), direct action and demonstrations, legislative campaigns (e.g. around community notification laws (“Megan’s Law”) or extensions on statutes of limitations), self-help and support groups, public health campaigns, art, and theater. There are several visible national organizations and countless grassroots groups.

A countermovement, led by a national organization, the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (Davis 2005), politicized the survivors’ movement even as membership in organizations shrank from its heyday in the 1980s and early 1990s (Whittier forthcoming). From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, activists sought to provide emotional support to survivors and worked to end child sexual abuse by both engaging with policy issues and bearing witness to the pain it caused. It included organizations that worked with the state to take a public health approach to preventing child sexual abuse, essentially shifting the emphasis on visibility from individual coming out to community-wide publicity efforts.

Data include 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants, documents from numerous movement organizations, participant observation at movement events, and data on federal grant funding and mainstream media coverage.<sup>2</sup>

### **INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY CHANGE AS A MOVEMENT STRATEGY**

*For me, really, the point of excitement is to politicize the psychology and to psychologize the political.... Can we create a politics that is capable of spanning our lives from the most intimate details of how the stuff comes down on us, to the biggest macro organizational kind of global issues? Because I don't see anything else being effective enough. [Diana]<sup>3</sup>*

Activists sought to change how people who had been sexually abused understood and felt about the experience, so that they would feel unashamed and would blame the abuse on the abuser rather than on themselves (Whittier 2000). Many activists sought to promote political explanations for child sexual abuse, including male domination, children's disempowerment, and societal silence and discomfort; understanding child sexual abuse in these ways, they believed, would help those who had experienced it to recover from its aftereffects (Whittier forthcoming). The movement's major tactic for promoting individual identity change was self-help, in which peer-led groups discussed their experiences of child sexual abuse, attempted to help each other cope with and change their feelings about those experiences, and worked to reduce invisibility and stigma associated with child sexual abuse. These groups saw their work as political because of its effects on individuals, its challenge to the dominance and approaches of professional psychotherapy, and the impact of survivors' increased visibility on mainstream views of child sexual abuse (Whittier forthcoming). They engaged in both therapeutic efforts to change how individuals felt about and coped with their histories of abuse and attempts to change cultural and political responses to the problem. Most groups that promoted self-help also engaged directly with treatment facilities, professionals, the state, or religious institutions. They included large national organizations, local groups that met in churches or women's centers, and many newsletters and publications.

Self-help groups focused on changing individual identity both by transforming individuals' emotions and by constructing and displaying a different collective identity for survivors of child sexual abuse. Several national organizations and countless local groups promoted self-help for survivors of child sexual abuse, and resources were plentiful for people who wanted to start their own self-help groups. For example, at an annual conference of VOICES, a national organization promoting self-help, the National Black Women's Health Project sponsored a workshop on how to start and run a self-help group.<sup>4</sup> The NBWHP itself

facilitated self-help groups focused on emotional and physical health issues for African-American women in many cities and combined encouragement for individuals with advocacy for social change. Explaining the goals of self-help, the presenter noted that it “doesn’t stop with the self” but “expands to help the world.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Healing Woman Foundation aimed to “teach women that: They are not alone; Healing is Possible; [and] When they are ready, they can make a difference by taking their healing into the world. Our goal is to create a strong, organized, vocal community of women survivors of childhood sexual abuse and their supporters, who can speak out about violence against women and children.”<sup>6</sup>

Participants were diverse in class, age, religion, sexual orientation, and political ideology. Yet participants and publications talked about survivors as a unified group and emphasized commonalities over differences of status or of type of abuse. The common language of coming out facilitated the connection. The notion of coming out assumed not only a shared collective identity, but also a shared individual experience of overcoming shame and silence to speak out publicly about child sexual abuse.

The overall goal of self-help organizations at the individual level was emotional change (Whittier 2000). Organizers attempted to allow conference or group attendees space to express their painful feelings, but also to encourage them to move through them. The value placed on accepting and expressing one’s genuine feelings means that even non-normative or undesirable emotions were overtly welcomed. I heard attendees at one conference discuss their conflicted feelings of love and hate for an abusive father, for example, or their despair that they would ever “feel like a survivor instead of a victim.” At the same time, organizers wanted to promote feelings associated with resistance and consistent with the movements’ understanding of how the emotional trajectory from damage to healing occurs.<sup>7</sup> These changes in individual identity and emotion were linked to a collective identity and to coming out strategies that made individual and collective identities publicly visible.

Organizations encouraged individuals to “come out” publicly as an important strategy for changing both participants and targets. Most activists saw disclosure of identity or declarations of allegiance to the collective identity “survivor” as transformative for individuals’ own identities and for those who heard the disclosures. Many organizations hybridized individual healing and public coming out. For example, SESAME (Survivors of Educator Sexual Abuse and Misconduct Emerge) aimed to “increase the public’s awareness of Educator Sexual Abuse by breaking our silence in a strong, united voice,” “foster the recovery of victims and survivors through mutual support...,” “advocate for “Student Sexual Harassment policies, regulations, and laws,” and promote “proper boundaries between school staff and students” through codes of ethics.<sup>8</sup> Publications framed as “healing” oriented also regularly published updates and calls to action regarding policy issues. They melded therapeutic discourse with externally-oriented politics partly because the therapeutic focus appealed to a broader audience, what leaders termed “beginning survivors.” In this way, they drew on hegemonic frames that had greater emotional resonance in order to broaden their appeal (Maney, Woehrle, and Coy 2005). But they also used therapeutic discourse because they viewed changing the self as an important – and political – goal and saw therapeutic techniques as a strategy for achieving that change.

Conferences typically included a mixture of workshops on “healing” for individuals and collective issues, underscoring the links between individual identity and collective identity as well as the emotional dimensions of both. For example, at the 1998 VOICES conference, plenary talks were given by State of Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan and Courage to Heal author Ellen Bass, representing the dual foci of the group on policy and individual transformation. A workshop presentation at the same conference entitled, “Take Control and Stand Triumphant as a Conqueror,” exhorted survivors not only to “take control” of their own lives (a message consistent with a focus on individual identity) but also to take control of their communities by becoming involved in advocacy organizations. The premise of the talk, as well as the comments afterwards, was that survivors could not become involved in “advocacy” (including coming out)

without changing their individual identities, and that, conversely, involvement in political work would affect individual identities (furthering “healing”).<sup>9</sup>

For some activists, encouraging others’ recovery from sexual abuse was their own political contribution, one that they saw as inseparable from other kinds of social change. For example, an African-American woman who facilitated self-help groups for women through a multi-racial, mixed-class church, explained how her political view of incest had emerged:

The first part was helping women to see that they were not alone and that they no longer needed to be isolated or ashamed.... I didn't really think of what needed to happen in society. But then as I worked for the issue more and more I said, "Wait a minute. As we change, we need to help change the world."... So then I began to look at what supports our environment that incest can live in. And then it was like: the patriarchy. Uh-huh. It began to hook up with my feminism. So then, after that, it was like, "Ok, this is an oppression." I began to name it as oppression and injustice. And so at that moment, I looked around and said, "Oh, the same kind of changes that are necessary for me to be free as a Black woman are the same kind of changes it takes [to end] incest." |

A white woman in her 30s similarly described the connections between her own healing and politics:

I feel very fortunate about that [having feminist political frameworks to understand incest] because oftentimes I was able to have the power and the passion about healing myself that I did because I knew I was part of a bigger chain. Like a link in the chain that was trying to create freedom for people. And by me telling the truth about my life and by me healing, I was taking political action. Like, when I couldn't heal for me, I could heal for, you know, for justice.

Both of these respondents viewed multiple forms of oppression as interconnected, influenced by feminist intersectionality theories (Collins 1990). They used intersectional analyses to connect child sexual abuse to other forms of inequality, building a collective identity with deliberately permeable boundaries (Taylor and Whittier 1992). Respondents who did not share their feminist or progressive politics also prioritized shared experiences of child sexual abuse over differences of politics, religion, sexuality, or class (Whittier forthcoming).

In sum, because activists saw child sexual abuse as having political causes, they saw its effects on individuals as a form of political injustice, and changing how individuals felt and viewed themselves as political change. Activists understood individual identity, individual identity disclosure, collective identity disclosure, cultural transformation, and social policy change as connected to each other. Similarly, feminist theories of the political stress that we can't understand change in institutions without seeing it as linked to change in other areas, and that definitions of politics that exclude cultural or personal change are inadequate for capturing the scope of change in gender and sexuality (Collins 1990). Because the survivors' movement saw speaking out as political, it extended the notion of coming out into a politics of visibility that included public art and speak outs.

## **PUBLIC IDENTITY DISCLOSURES: INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN COLLECTIVE ACTION**

*As long as we're silent and just kind of in the corner just doing our therapy by ourselves and not saying that we exist, then people can say, "Oh, it's one or two women [who have been sexually abused]." No, it's not.... Excuse me, we're out there! [Amali]*

In addition to transforming the emotions of individuals, the groups engaged in a politics of visibility that sought to change attitudes and feelings of others. The survivors' movement used strategies that emphasized public identity disclosure in several ways. At the individual level, activists "came out" in daily life about their experiences of child sexual abuse. At the collective level, they organized demonstrations, "speak-outs," conferences under the theme "To Tell the Truth," and they made art – written word, performance, and visual– to express their identities and emotions publicly and in efforts to transform observers' beliefs and emotions. The public disclosures that constitute the politics of visibility are disclosures of both collective identity – the movements' definition of what it means to be a survivor – and individual identity – individuals' own experiences and meaning-making. Participants believed visibility could change targets, and they also experienced their own identity disclosures as self-changing. Here, they borrowed from the ideology of coming out in GLBT communities that viewed public disclosure as an antidote to shame and invisibility.

### Individual Coming Out Strategies in Institutions

Activists attempt to change the structure and practices of institutions from the outside, but they also change institutions by entering into them either as direct participants or as influential voices or perspectives (Katzenstein 19xx). In either case, to achieve their influence, activists must be open about their agenda. For participants in the survivors' movement (as for gay and lesbian activists and AIDS activists (Epstein 1996) , this entailed coming out. When they are open about having been sexually abused as children, employees, bureaucrats, clients, or students believed they could change their organizations and the individuals they come in contact with. They established credibility on the issue (Coy and Woehrl 1996; Nepstad 2001), although this was not assured, as some respondents worried about the influence of stereotypes of survivors as weak, victimized, and overly emotional. Nevertheless, they attempted to use the public collective identity of "survivor" to bolster their influence. As a respondent who worked in a state Attorney

General's office put it, "I think having sort of effectively-healed survivors sort of planted in different work spaces, neighborhoods.... I think that's how it will continue to happen, is women will continue to reach out to each other as resources." When these "resources" are available inside the institutions that control or manage child sexual abuse, those institutions can change. Respondents reported talking with coworkers and supervisors about how to make their organizations more responsive to survivors of child sexual abuse, if relevant to the organization; in other kinds of organizations, respondents simply attempted to change participants' beliefs about child sexual abuse by talking about their experiences.

In some instances, activists came out more officially, as speakers or trainers in community mental health centers, police departments, hospitals, or social services departments. Such programming provides a point of entry for grassroots activists into the state bureaucracies that manage and respond to child sexual abuse. When presenters included adults who were open about their own experiences of child sexual abuse, their presence was as important a message as any informational content. Such presentations allowed survivor-activists to define their own experiences and identities, and to declare these identities inside the very institutions that are charged with constructing and enforcing identities and beliefs about child sexual abuse.

Activists coming out within and in contact with institutions contributed to movement stabilization. This is partly apparent through funding opportunities. Several foundations, including the Women's Foundation in San Francisco and the Ms. Foundation for Women developed programs for funding work against child sexual abuse as a result of staff or donors who talked about their own experiences of child sexual abuse. Beyond this, the actual impact of individuals coming out in institutions is hard to gauge, as with many social movement outcomes. It was nevertheless an important movement strategy that activists promoted and discussed and engaged in deliberately. It is a reminder that movement strategies can be carried out by individuals, not just by collectivities, and that while some strategic activity is formal, other strategic activity is carried out by individuals within their daily lives without formal movement

coordination. Many other coming out strategies were collective, public, and coordinated by movement groups.

### Speakouts, Events, and Demonstrations

The feminist movements for legalization of abortion and against rape developed the “speak out” in which women told about their stigmatized experiences in order to show that ordinary women had such experiences and to challenge their invisibility. “Take Back the Night” marches and events against violence against women often included speak-outs, and some of my respondents reported participating in those. For example, Arthur first spoke publicly about his childhood abuse by a priest at a 1980s speak out organized by a rape crisis center.

Speak-outs specifically against child sexual abuse first became nationally visible in 1992, when an activist in Santa Fe, New Mexico, organized a local speak-out, attended by 500 people, under the name “To Tell the Truth.”<sup>10</sup> The concept spread rapidly, and a coordinated national effort organized To Tell the Truth events in many localities in 1993 and every year since then. Speak-outs were personally transformative for participants, who reported feeling less shame and stigma after speaking openly about their experiences. Their collective nature enhanced this effect; as the organizer of the first event said, “The more people speak out, the faster we heal.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to “speak-outs,” survivors came out at demonstrations and other events. One regular demonstration was a contingent in the San Francisco Gay Pride Parade organized by RunRiot, a local survivors’ activist group. Participants carried signs, chanted and sang, wore stickers proclaiming their identity and various slogans, and handed out fliers about child sexual abuse to observers. Smaller demonstrations and events were also common Amali’s support group at Glide Memorial Church “did a Mother’s Day performance... and we did a thing about being survivors. Poetry, a whole show.... And so there we were, and we were not anonymous.”

The experience of being open, publicly, about having been sexually abused as a child changed people’s sense of themselves. They felt that the simple act of openness enabled them to

feel a sense of self, of ownership of their own experiences. Here we see the reciprocal relationships between individual and collective identity and between public disclosure and individual identity and emotion. At the most basic level, as Amali put it, “being involved with [activist] projects has raised my consciousness and allowed me to be in the world.” Many, like Leslie, saw those changes in individuals as significant in themselves: “Even if we don’t stop child sexual abuse, I think that there are numbers of people having that experience of... ‘I’m public and I’m doing it.’ I think that’s just, in and of itself, a really profound thing. I mean, it *is* social change.” Coming out was an inevitable feature of any public demonstration, since participants felt that they were revealing their own identities as survivors.

#### Coming Out, Invisibility, and Mobilization

Without mass visibility, many respondents argued, it was impossible to mobilize survivors. At the most basic level, any form of collective action by survivors of child sexual abuse entails coming out. As Ella put it, “The invisibility of the survivor... plays against us.” Kimberly expanded on this dilemma, making an analogy, as many respondents did, to the lesbian and gay and black civil rights movements:

What really catapulted those other movements was when people, a massive group of people, came together and were visible. You know, whether it was ACT-UP with the gay movement... when they started marching in the street in numbers that people started saying, ‘Well, there’s a lot of gay folks out here!’ You know, or the Black movement, the civil rights movement, showing folks that we won’t sit at the back of the bus anymore.... The women’s movement, the same thing.

By countering the invisibility of child sexual abuse, Kimberly believed, mass collective action by survivors could change how people conceptualize the issue:

I believe we have to get there. We have to march on Washington by the millions. We have to come out of the closet, if you will.... There's nothing that identifies us as survivors in society if we don't say that we are.... Once we are visible, it exposes the insidious perpetration of violence that has persisted and continues to persist unchecked.

For Kimberly, as for other respondents, collective action entailed coming out. This was both its central problematic – how to mobilize a constituency to proclaim a stigmatized and personally painful experience publicly – and the source of its power. Activists believed coming out would raise awareness of child sexual abuse by making its prevalence visible. As one woman put it, “I think most people are shielded from it. So I try to unshield. I think people have to get unshielded if we're ever going to really stop it.” Strategically, their aim was to make the frequency of child sexual abuse apparent and to illustrate the broad reach of its effects.

### Protest Art

Art activism was a major component of the survivors' movement during this period and reflected the same kinds of visibility politics as other forms of coming out. Protest art is a common means by which movements communicate their new meanings publicly (Krouse 1993). Respondents who were artists or who promoted art activism hoped that the art would produce social change. For example, one organization brought an exhibit of three statues representing stages of response to and healing from child sexual abuse to conferences and workshops. The organization's founder contended that viewing the statues helped workshop participants to understand the issue in new ways and to transform their own emotions. She wrote, “Art becomes an organizing tool when it is put in service of a cause that needs to be publicized.... [Our] art bypasses...resistance because it's about “speaking up,” breaking silence, in a way that can be “heard” first at a level of image, emotion, and experience.<sup>12</sup>

Activist art appeared in many venues, from newsletters (which published poetry and drawings), to musical performances and talent shows at conferences, to independent theater performances and publications, to arts shows at conferences or public settings. Songs, poetry, and visual art depicted the experience of abuse, the emotions felt by children and adult survivors, the brutality of offenders, or the indifference or cruelty of other adults. In addition to individual performances, collective public art projects flourished. The largest of these, the Clothesline Project, holds T-shirts depicting experiences of abuse and violence painted by visitors to the exhibit.

Artistic quality varied considerably, but is not the central point. At core, the art aimed to break the artist's own silence, bring visibility to the issue, and transform how audience members think and feel about child sexual abuse. Visitors to one art exhibit, an organizational announcement wrote, were expected to experience a range of emotions: "sadness, fear, anger, repulsion, compassion, etc.," because "It is appropriate to feel angry about the rape and violation of innocent children." Such art was a route to social change precisely because it bore witness to atrocity, as the announcement went on:

It is our belief that we contribute to the healing of child sexual abuse by our willingness to bear witness to its reality, in spite of our discomfort in doing so.... [T]he Art of Healing is a forum for healing and empowerment, an opportunity for adult survivors to share with a strong, clear voice, to tell the truth, and to reclaim their power.<sup>13</sup>

"Telling the truth" through art is a coming out strategy in which individuals display their own identities and their allegiance to a collective identity in order to produce change in observers. Activist art did not aim primarily to produce moral shock (Jasper) but rather to lead viewers to a deeper emotional understanding of the nature and effects of child sexual abuse, to highlight similarities between child sexual abuse and other forms of oppression, to formulate an analysis of

child sexual abuse that blames perpetrators rather than victims, and to emphasize the strength of those who survive child sexual abuse. When activists talk about “bearing witness,” they emphasize the ways that silence and stigma make child sexual abuse possible and argue that child sexual abuse cannot continue when it is made visible.

The survivors movement is one among many that employ the politics of visibility. Identity disclosure, activist art, demonstrations that “bear witness” to violence, are common to women’s, lesbian/gay, transgender, and anti-racism movements, and vigils that bear witness to collective violence has been a major tactic of anti-war, human rights, and Holocaust remembrance groups. These strategies aim to change the individuals who participate and those who observe both cognitively and emotionally, bringing attention to issues that might otherwise go unspoken and dramatizing the problem in ways that bypass observers’ preconceptions and evoke an emotional response. On a very different level, public health-style campaigns sought to do the same thing.

### **COLLECTIVE VISIBILITY POLITICS AND THE STATE: PUBLIC HEALTH**

Public health initiatives attempt to improve the health of groups of people through education campaigns or public policy initiatives, rather than improving the health of individuals one at a time through medical intervention. Public health campaigns focus on “harm reduction,” that is, reducing the incidence and impact of a problematic behavior, rather than law enforcement or intervention by child welfare agencies. The idea is that when people are educated about the problems associated with a behavior, given resources to change it, and cultural acceptance of the behavior declines, the behavior itself will be less common.<sup>14</sup> When public health campaigns address hidden or stigmatized issues, they employ an institutional variety of coming out strategies.

The campaigns aimed at preventing child sexual abuse were in some ways a natural extension of the politics of visibility. Activists saw widespread publicity about how to prevent

child sexual abuse as another way of destroying the secrecy and stigma in which child sexual abuse flourishes. Following successful public health campaigns on issues such as smoking, drunk driving, gun use, domestic violence, and eating habits, government funders and agencies, especially the Centers for Disease Control, were enthusiastic about a similar approach to reducing child sexual abuse.

Activists against child sexual abuse found the public health approach appealing for several reasons. Many longtime activists were frustrated by the movement's lack of impact on the actual incidence of child sexual abuse. While resources and responses to abuse after the fact had improved, prevention efforts had stalled.<sup>15</sup> Several groups in different areas independently came to the conclusion that they needed to employ sophisticated marketing and community organizing techniques to attempt to reshape the public view of abuse and of how to intervene to prevent it. They were inspired by the ideas of visibility and coming out from their experience in the survivors' movement, by the success of other public health campaigns, and often by their own professional experience in marketing or business. Many organizations worked within the public health approach, sponsoring events such as a walk/run organized by Stop the Silence, and Mothers Against Sexual Abuse, which drew directly on Mothers Against Drunk Driving in its name, and distributed educational materials, referred victims and families to professionals for treatment, and worked on relevant legislation.<sup>16</sup>

Focused on the insight that it was adults, not children, who needed to be the center of prevention efforts, one such group, Stop It Now, coordinated several state-wide campaigns with advertising about child sexual abuse and toll-free helplines to receive calls from people seeking advice about how to deal with abuse situations and offenders seeking help. It produced and distributed publications on topics such as adolescent sex offenders and how to intervene with an adult who shows sexually inappropriate behavior with a child. Another group, Generation 5, similarly focused on getting adults involved with prevention and on disseminating information widely. Instead of public service announcements, however, Generation 5 emphasized community

organizing and capacity building, running training programs for community leaders who could weave prevention efforts into their other work (such as youth or domestic violence organizing), and focused on building a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural approach. Their focus emphasized visibility of individuals and the issue across racial and ethnic communities and organizations.

Such organizations built on the themes of visibility and survivor self-determination, but sought to establish child sexual abuse as an issue of health similar to smoking or drunk driving. For example, Stop it Now framed child sexual abuse as a “public health epidemic.”<sup>17</sup> Their view is that the public health approach addresses the “root causes” of child sexual abuse by:

Develop[ing] awareness in potential abusers and encourag[ing] them to seek help;  
Challeng[ing] abusers to stop the abuse immediately and seek treatment through a  
helpline or on the internet; Work[ing] with families, peers, and friends on how to  
confront abusers; [and] Join[ing] with others to build a social climate that says "We will  
no longer tolerate the sexual abuse of children."<sup>18</sup>

They thus see individual change (in abusers and bystanders) as linked to visibility and open discussion of the issue, which, in turn, leads to social change. Similarly, Generation Five drew on alliances with domestic violence opponents who emphasize how “communities can help families to prevent violence and seek effective support by creating public discussions that counter the assumption that ‘family business’ should remain ‘family business.’”<sup>19</sup>

These groups work to disseminate their view of child sexual abuse through polished and widely-disseminated advertising and community outreach campaigns. These campaigns were the offspring of both mass media advertising and the visibility strategies of social movements such as ACT UP, with its attention-getting poster campaigns. Stop It Now!’s print media campaigns focused on basic information, such as “Sex with Children is Wrong,” and encouraging people to speak up if they had suspicions about family members’ behavior with children.<sup>20</sup> Public service

announcements created by another group, Darkness to Light, appeared on several cable networks and publications.<sup>21</sup> Polished and compelling, they focused on the high rate of child abuse (1 in 6 boys, 1 in 4 girls), using images such as 6 boys in baseball uniforms or 4 girls jumping to the popular song “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun,” complete with a voice-over by the artist, Cyndi Lauper.<sup>22</sup> The commercials referred viewers to a national helpline that connected callers to local helplines.<sup>23</sup>

Through their media campaigns, the groups sought to enter mass culture on their own terms rather than accepting existing representations of child sexual abuse. Yet in order to make their own campaigns comprehensible, the groups could not avoid drawing on existing representations. D2L, for example, referred to abuse survivors as “walking wounded,” and liberally sprinkled images of attractive, innocent, and vulnerable looking children. Similarly, Stop It Now ads used images of children playing to suggest both their innocence (which should be protected) and their vulnerability. These efforts to catch attention and remain readable undeniably made the ads more effective, but they also limited their ability to discuss the more structural and political elements of the groups’ analysis, such as the overwhelming prevalence of familial abuse or the ways that institutions collude with concealing abuse. These are the dilemmas that face activist attempts to influence mainstream culture, including most forms of public coming out. Activists can only attain visibility within dominant culture if their messages are comprehensible within that culture, marginalizing those approaches that are the most challenging (Rochon 1998; Whittier forthcoming).

In addition to advertisement, organizations also used face-to-face campaigns, which allowed them to present more challenging elements of their approach and emphasized personal identity disclosure and transformations for all parties: survivors of child sexual abuse, offenders, and “bystanders.” For example, Darkness to Light designed a prevention training program aimed at adults called “Stewards of Children,” available to organizations or online, which trained parents and adults who worked with children to be aware of signs of potential abuse, discuss

issues of abuse, and exercise caution in allowing children to be alone with adults, using videos, discussion, and reading materials.<sup>24</sup> Mostly disseminated through organizations such as churches, YMCA/YWCAs, or Big Brother/Big Sister, the Stewards program relied on facilitators trained by D2L to conduct the trainings.

Stop It Now, in a quintessential visibility strategy, sponsored public dialogues between abuse survivors and offenders, in an attempt to diminish community denial about the existence and nature of child sexual abuse and to raise hope that effective treatment for offenders was available. Pairing a survivor and a “recovering offender” who had been convicted and served his sentence, the dialogues included each participant’s telling their own story and their questions and comments for each other. The dialogues neatly side-stepped skepticism about the legitimacy of claims of abuse by including a convicted sex offender who admitted his own actions and the strategies he had used to lure a victim and conceal the abuse, alongside a survivor who could describe the similar strategies used by the (different) person who had abused her. The offender’s testimony about his own treatment and recovery process also offered support for the group’s advocacy of effective treatment and, of course, represented his own public coming out. Like other forms of coming out, these visibility projects sought to change audience beliefs and emotions about child sexual abuse, not simply raising awareness but promoting the movement’s analyses of the issue.

The public health approach spread fairly rapidly among organizations, and they achieved a measure of visibility and political support. Whether the approach can reduce child sexual abuse remains unknown, but it allowed the organizations to achieve cultural visibility for their own messages at an unprecedented level. The approach was also compelling to government officials, particularly in the Centers for Disease Control. Stop It Now presented its work many times to the Centers for Disease Control and the U.S. Justice Department, and Generation Five also participated in meetings sponsored by the CDC. Their access to these agencies was unprecedented for child sexual abuse groups led by non-clinicians, but activist groups dealing

with other public health issues, such as drunk driving, breast cancer, and AIDS, had paved the way (Epstein 1996).

Public health groups, like participants in self-help or speakouts, drew on the politics of visibility, but they shifted the focus from individual visibility to visibility of the issue, and from relatively unpolished (if formulaic) narratives (Davis 2005) to highly polished and professionalized advertisements. In the focus on capacity-building, they formalized the process of individual transformation. They also relied on their personal experience of sexual abuse to help establish credibility and determine the organizations' direction. Virtually all such organizations were founded by survivors of child sexual abuse and incorporated the voices and ideas of survivors through focus groups and quotes and vignettes in publications and advertisements. They thus show the connections between different models of coming out (informal, within grassroots organizations, and through advertising campaigns) as well as between individual, collective, and social change.

## CONCLUSION

Coming out strategies in self-help groups, art, and public health made up a strong politics of visibility in which individuals defined their identities and worked to influence how others thought and felt about child sexual abuse. They saw themselves as asserting their right to define their own experiences and trying to convey those experiences to others. In contrast to the notion (including my own (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Whittier 1995)) of collective identity as emphasizing commonalities among group members, survivors' visibility politics emphasized self-expression and individuality, focusing on expressing multiple perspectives as a means of healing and bearing witness. It asserted collective identity less and emphasized variation in individual identity more. The public health organizations also built on visibility politics, but used different means, aiming to enter the mass media on their own terms through advertising and educational campaigns and focusing on visibility of the issue more than the individual. The politicized self help movement emphasized individual identity change; the visibility activists emphasized public

identity disclosure; and the public health activists emphasized the visibility of the issue as defined by the movement.

The goals of the movement against child sexual abuse were to prevent child sexual abuse, improve the treatment of people who had been sexually abused, and help those people to recover from the aftereffects of their childhood experiences. These goals required change in public policy, institutions such as law enforcement and medicine, mainstream culture, and individual beliefs and emotions. Correspondingly, their strategies for achieving these goals included individual and institutional change, advocacy and emotional transformation. Individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors were as important targets as cultural representations, policy, and legislation. Individual transformation was in a sense a precondition to mobilization, because mobilization required individuals who had been sexually abused as children to come out. Beyond this, in emphasizing the visibility of the issue and of individual survivors (and offenders, in the case of the public health wing), activists sought to change interiority by changing beliefs about child sexual abuse, emotional responses to it, and interaction in daily life. They wanted people – survivors, offenders, and bystanders – to recognize abuse when it was occurring, to feel both outrage and empowerment to act, and to intervene when it did occur. They believed that these changes required public disclosure of individual and collective identities and visibility of the issue.

Coming out is as a strategy has significant limitations, some of which are at the heart of the critique of “identity politics.” For one, identity strategies limit the role of people who do not share the identity category, in this case, people who have not experienced child sexual abuse. The survivors' movement, like others, created identity categories for non-survivors, terming them “allies” or “pro-survivors,” but these categories carry sometimes restrictive assumptions about the perspective and experiences of those within them. Another limitation, central to the critique of identity politics, has to do with the pervasive power of existing definitions of the group. Institutions are dominated by a discourse that casts victims of child sexual abuse as seriously and

permanently wounded and subject to interpretation and treatment by experts rather than themselves. Because credentials and authority in both the state and the mass media rest on standards of objectivity, the credibility of activists who speak based on their own experience is suspect. Activists have trouble disclosing identity on their own terms when they enter the mass media, and can easily be cast in terms of the dominant definitions of the category (Whittier forthcoming). Finally, visibility alone can affect only some kinds of social processes and structures. To the extent that a movement relies on it to the exclusion of other tactics, or assumes that coming out will work in all situations, it can limit movement effectiveness.

To stop at these critiques, however, leaves us without a nuanced understanding of identity strategies. As I have shown, transformations in individual identity can provide a base for collective action and collective identity disclosure. In turn, collective identity disclosure can affect the individual identities of potential recruits, as well as the cognitions and emotions of other observers. Activists deliberate about how to come out in order to persuade onlookers to think about an issue or group in a new way, and visibility strategies have clear social change goals. Further, identity strategies are used within institutions, both as individual participants disclose their identities and through advocacy or training. Finally, viewing public health campaigns as a form of visibility politics illustrates how identity strategies can be used at an institutional level. Like any other strategy, identity strategies are limited by cultural and political constraints, and the outcomes that result rarely entail complete achievement of movement goals.

My aim here has been to examine the theoretical dimensions of identity strategies in more depth. Doing so emphasizes the connections between individual identity (including its construction, disclosure, and transformation), collective identity (including its construction, disclosure, and transformation), and visibility strategies that emphasize identity disclosure, including both those that emphasize the personal expression of identity (such as speak-outs and protest art) and those that emphasize the disclosure of a more formalized and homogenized expression of collective identity, such as the public health projects. Changes in individual

participants affect the kinds of strategies that movements are able to, and choose, to undertake. Further, movement strategies not only affect outcomes, but also shape collective identity and the identities of individuals. Theorizing these connections and examining them in other movements, including those which do not articulate explicit identity strategies, will be a fruitful direction for further work.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> I'll refer to this movement interchangeably as "the movement against child sexual abuse" and "the survivors' movement" (its self-label).
- <sup>2</sup> Data on federal grants comes from the NCCAN Clearinghouse Compendium of Discretionary Grants, Fiscal Years 1975-1995 Published September, 1996, by National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. My discussion of popular culture is based on an analysis of all articles about child sexual abuse<sup>2</sup> indexed in the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature from 1960 to 2005.
- <sup>3</sup> All names are pseudonyms.
- <sup>4</sup> Toylee Green, "Self Help Groups: How to Develop and Conduct." At "Unlock the Voice...Free the Spirit," 16<sup>th</sup> VOICES in Action, Inc. Conference. Evanston, IL, July 24, 1998. (conference was 7/24-26).
- <sup>5</sup> Fieldnotes, VOICES in Action Inc., Conference, Evanston IL July 24-26, 1998. Quotes are close paraphrases based on my notes.
- <sup>6</sup> The Healing Woman Foundation flier, collected at VOICES in Action Inc., Conference, Evanston IL July 24-26, 1998. Personal collection of the author.
- <sup>7</sup> Fieldnotes, 16<sup>th</sup> VOICES in Action, Inc. Conference. Evanston, IL, July 24, 1998; Fieldnotes, Incest Awareness Foundation conference, New York City, January 30-31, 1999.
- <sup>8</sup> SESAME flier, collected at VOICES in Action Inc., Conference, Evanston IL July 24-26, 1998 and Incest Awareness Foundation conference, New York City, January 30-31, 1999. Personal collection of author.
- <sup>9</sup> Fieldnotes, 16<sup>th</sup> VOICES in Action, Inc. Conference. Evanston, IL, July 24-26, 1998. Workshop by Holly Broach-Sowells.
- <sup>10</sup> Leslie Miller, "Sexual Abuse Survivors Find Strength to Speak in Numbers." USA Today August 27, 1992.
- <sup>11</sup> Leslie Miller, op. cit. Quoting Mary Ann Benton.
- <sup>12</sup> People of Fire Grant Proposal, June, 1999; personal collection of author.
- <sup>13</sup> From Survivors Healing Center, Santa Cruz, <http://www.survivorshalingcenter.org/services.html>, 5/5/06
- <sup>14</sup> Harvard School of Public Health. <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/about.html>. 5/25/06.
- <sup>15</sup> The success of the countermovement also had rendered many of the movement's earlier strategies ineffective by impugning the credibility of adult survivors. A focus on prevention sidestepped the countermovement's critique of memory, by focusing on child sexual abuse itself.
- <sup>16</sup> Stop the Silence: Stop CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE annual race, (<http://www.stopcsa.org/sponsors.cfm>). Mothers Against Sexual Abuse, <http://www.againstsexualabuse.org/>. Both accessed 5/31/06
- <sup>17</sup> Stop It Now, "Child Abuse: A Public Health Epidemic." [http://www.stopitnow.org/asit\\_epidemic.html](http://www.stopitnow.org/asit_epidemic.html)
- <sup>18</sup> Stop It Now, "The Key Premises of Our Work." [http://www.stopitnow.org/asit\\_premises.html](http://www.stopitnow.org/asit_premises.html)
- <sup>19</sup> Generation Five, "Defining the Problem." <http://www.generationfive.org/defining.html>
- <sup>20</sup> Stop It Now, "How Our Programs Work." [http://www.stopitnow.org/asit\\_howwework.html](http://www.stopitnow.org/asit_howwework.html).
- <sup>21</sup> Annie Lee, "Letter from the President." April 2006, p. 2  
[http://www.darkness2light.org/docs/newsletter\\_2006\\_04.pdf](http://www.darkness2light.org/docs/newsletter_2006_04.pdf); "Stewards of Children Now in Full Release," Newsletter, vol. 10, April 2005, p. 1. [http://www.darkness2light.org/docs/newsletter\\_2005\\_04.pdf](http://www.darkness2light.org/docs/newsletter_2005_04.pdf)
- <sup>22</sup> "Media Campaigns." [http://www.darkness2light.org/AboutUs/media\\_campaign.asp](http://www.darkness2light.org/AboutUs/media_campaign.asp) .
- <sup>23</sup> "Media Campaigns." [http://www.darkness2light.org/AboutUs/media\\_campaign.asp](http://www.darkness2light.org/AboutUs/media_campaign.asp) .
- <sup>24</sup> The online prevention program was funded by a \$461,208 U.S. Department of Commerce Technologies Opportunity Program grant and a \$250,00 Department of Justice Grant. "Darkness To Light Awarded Federal TOP Grant;" "Office of Juvenile Justice Grant to Aid Stewards Program." Newsletter, April, 2005. [http://www.darkness2light.org/docs/newsletter\\_2005\\_04.pdf](http://www.darkness2light.org/docs/newsletter_2005_04.pdf), p. 3.