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THE POLITICS OF MASCULINITY AND THE EX-GAY MOVEMENT

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The purpose of this research is to investigate the masculinity politics of the ex-gay movement, a loose-knit network of religious, scientific, and political organizations that advocates change for homosexuals. Guided by Risman’s gender structure theory, the authors analyze the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of gender in ex-gay discourses. The authors employ critical discourse analysis of representative ex-gay texts to deconstruct the movement’s gender ideology and to discuss the social implications of its masculinity politics. They argue that gender is one of the ex-gay movement’s most potent social movement resources, enabling it to consolidate power by enlisting new populations and to globalize by adapting to cultural contexts beyond the United States. The authors conclude that the ex-gay movement is an antigay countermovement and an antifeminist Christian Right men’s movement.

Keywords: masculinity; gender; sexuality; social movements; religion

During the past 30 years, the Christian Right1 has simultaneously assailed both feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) liberation movements in the United States (Diamond 1998). These countermovements have slowed social progress for women and LGBT Americans. During this same period, the ex-gay movement, a lesser-known social phenomenon, has grown steadily from a handful of evangelical Christian ministries in the early 1970s into a global movement in the twenty-first century and seeks to advance an ambitious antigay social agenda that includes undermining legal family recognition of same-sex relationships, adoption by LGBT people, and protections from distribution.

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discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The expansion of the ex-gay movement and its alliance with the Christian Right during the past decade are perhaps the leading social factors that explain why the United States offers fewer legal protections than more socially progressive nations for LGBT people. Scholars who seriously endeavor to explain and disrupt not only the continuing stigmatization of homosexuality in the United States but also persistent gender inequality should pay closer attention to the growing prominence of the ex-gay movement and its global proliferation (Robinson 2007).

Using Risman’s (2004) theory of gender as a social structure, we examine the ex-gay movement’s gendered scaffold to reveal and contest its “masculinity politics” (Messner 1997) at all levels of society. While the movement primarily aims to purge society of homosexuality, we show that its ideological and organizational edifice is fundamentally built on and sustained by gender and that its social agenda is as virulently antifeminist as it is antigay. Analyzing representative texts, we show how the ex-gay movement uses religious and scientific discourses of gender to justify and enforce male power and privilege in everyday life, to buttress profamily public policy, and to affect global culture. We argue that the movement’s gender ideology is one of its most potent social movement resources, enabling it to consolidate power by enlisting new populations and to adapt to cultural contexts beyond the United States.

THE EX-GAY MOVEMENT: BACKGROUND AND PRIOR RESEARCH

In the wake of the 1973 declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder, ex-gay ministries were founded to “heal” homosexuals, primarily through religious conversion programs. Today, the movement has grown into an international network of religious, scientific, and political organizations. It is fundamentally a countermovement, a “conscious, collective, organized attempt to resist or to reverse social change” (Mottl 1980, 620). Increasingly influential in the “culture wars” and public policy debates over homosexuality, ex-gay organizations joined forces with the Christian Right in the past decade (Erzen 2006; Herman 1997). Today, nearly every major Christian Right organization uses the existence of ex-gays to argue that homosexuals can change. This notion is fundamental to their argument that unlike legal protections based on immutable traits such as race or sex, those based on sexual orientation are unnecessary.

The study of organized attempts by conservative Christian activists to oppose social acceptance of homosexuality and the extension of civil
rights to LGBT people is a burgeoning field. Sociologists and political scientists have documented the antigay impact of the Christian Right (Barker 1989; Buss and Herman 2003; Ellingson et al. 2001; Fulton, Gorsuch, and Maynard 1999; Green 2000; Herman 1997; Reimer and Park 2001; Wilcox 2000; Wolfe 1998; Wood 2000); however, few have examined the ex-gay phenomenon as a social movement in its own right. Psychologists have examined ex-gay interventions aimed at changing sexual orientation. This research (Beckstead 2001; Drescher 2001; Haldeman 2002; Shidlo, Schroeder, and Drescher 2001; Spitzer 2003; Throckmorton 2002) has generally sought to assess the efficacy and harm of reparative therapies. To date, all major mental health and medical professional associations have issued public statements discouraging their practice. However, in 1992, ex-gay therapists founded their own professional association, the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH). NARTH was monumental in the resurgence of the ex-gay movement, providing it a semblance of scientific legitimacy (Besen 2003). Increasingly, psychologists have documented the antigay political activities of reparative therapists (Drescher 1998; Zucker 2003) and challenged their scientific claims (Ford 2002). Herek (1998) evaluated studies commonly used to argue that gays are mentally ill, including the discredited research of Paul Cameron, who was expelled from the American Psychological Association in the 1980s for misrepresenting research on homosexuality and rebuked by the American Sociological Association for portraying himself as a sociologist. A recent edited volume on the religious, political, and cultural aspects of “ex-gay research” (Drescher and Zucker 2006) is an encouraging sign that social scientists are recognizing and researching the social movement aspects of the ex-gay phenomenon.

Sociologists (Ponticelli 1999; Wolkomir 2001a, 2001b, 2006) have focused almost exclusively on the development of ex-gay identity. Two studies (Erzen 2006; Fetner 2005), however, stand as scholarly works contextualized within the broader movement. The focus of Erzen’s (2006) ethnography is an ex-gay residential treatment program for homosexual men. Fetner (2005) analyzed the political rhetoric and antigay impact of a 1998 ex-gay advertising campaign sponsored by a coalition of Christian Right organizations. Other analyses are authored by gay rights activists or commissioned by gay rights organizations and focus mostly on the overtly antigay public policy objectives of the movement (Besen 2003; Burack and Josephson 2005; Cianciotto and Cahill 2006; Khan 1998; Political Research Associates 1998). In 30 years, the ex-gay movement has erected an enormous institutional scaffold and seeks to advance an ambitious antigay social agenda.
Evidence suggests that antigay Christian social movements may also be antifeminist. In the United States, the best predictor of antigay bias is professing a conservative Christian ideology (Plugge-Foust and Strickland 2000). Antigay bias is also highly correlated with a belief in sharply differentiated gender roles and the subordination of women to men (Louderback and Whitley 1997). Messner (1997) historically links fundamentalist Christian movements to antifeminist campaigns that sought to disenfranchise women from the vote and to eliminate job competition. Although the Christian Right no longer overtly opposes, in principle, the equality of women (Diamond 1998), Ferree and Merrill argue, “American anti-feminist activists have successfully reframed issues of gender politics from ‘patriarchy’ to ‘traditional values’” (2000, 461). While others have noted the sexism in ex-gay ideology and its focus on men (Besen 2003; Burack and Josephson 2005; Cianciotto and Cahill 2006; Erzen 2006; Wolkomir 2004), the social implications of the ex-gay movement’s masculinity politics have not been a central concern of scholarly inquiry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Feminist scholarship has shown that gender is both socially constructed and a principal organizing feature of social life at the individual, symbolic, and structural levels (Harding 1986). Barbara Risman (2004) argues that to understand gender inequality, we must conceptualize gender itself as a social structure and analyze it comprehensively, attending to the mechanisms at work in all dimensions of society. Following Risman’s theoretical framework, we analyze ex-gay texts to show how the movement aims to gender the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of society. Risman’s scheme enables us to identify the social processes the movement uses to gender all aspects of social life, revealing its masculinity politics (Messner 1997) and furthering our understanding of social movements that abet male power and privilege.

The individual dimension addresses how gender structures the self, including the socialization processes that shape personality and identity. Risman (2004) argues that an analysis exclusively oriented at this level partly helps us understand why we do gender but limits gender to an identity absent other social influences. The interactional component includes norms of masculinity and femininity and gendered social roles, such as mother, father, husband, and wife, and their accompanying scripts. Gender norms aim to script social interaction, reproducing gendered relations. Finally, the institutional dimension of the gender structure includes laws,
religious authority, and other formal means of social control that reinforce male power and privilege through the distribution of society’s resources. Because, as Risman contends, “no one dimension determines the other” (2004, 435), we must isolate the social processes in each dimension of the gender structure simultaneously. We use Risman’s theory to tease out how the ex-gay movement uses gender to structure selves, social relationships and interactions, and the social order. Ferree and Merrill (2000, 455) argue that uncovering the gender dimension in social movement discourses is an important feminist endeavor since adherents of an ideology “act, feel, and think as a result of the values they link to those understandings.” Our analysis shows how social psychology, culture, and politics work together in the production of gender.

METHOD AND DATA

Our methodological approach is informed by the field of critical discourse analysis, which uses more sociological than linguistic approaches to texts because it situates them within systems of discursive production and their wider social contexts. We use Fairclough’s (1992) approach to discourse analysis, which brings together three analytic strategies that enable us to examine not only the ideology of the ex-gay movement but the movement’s development and deployment of religious and scientific discourses of gender to evangelize its message and to change the culture and structure of society: first, the (gendered) features of specific texts (discourse as text); second, the production, circulation, and reception of gendered discourses to targeted populations (discourse as discursive practice); and third, how gendered discourses and practices reflect, reproduce, and/or change wider social arrangements (discourse as practice). We implemented this approach by analyzing the gender content of ex-gay movement texts, by charting the movement’s means of discursive production and circulation to specific audiences, and finally, by evaluating the social implications of its masculinity politics.

The data for this study encompass texts authored by movement spokespersons and promoted by ex-gay organizations. Although a plethora of organizations make up the movement, it is substantially controlled by Exodus International (hereafter EI), the largest network of Christian ex-gay ministries; Focus on the Family (hereafter FOTF), arguably the most powerful Christian Right organization; and NARTH, a professional association that advocates prevention and treatment of homosexuality. These organizations frequently reference the same core “experts”
as authoritative and representative of the movement’s beliefs and practices. This study is part of a larger project to document the social structure of the ex-gay movement to analyze its social impact. Each coauthor has invested more than three years reading the vast literature published, referenced, and/or promoted by the movement. The extensive materials we have reviewed include printed and online publications such as books, pamphlets, newsletters, newspapers, organizational Web pages, ex-gay testimonials, and audio and video recordings of conferences available from ex-gay organizations, collectively referred to as “texts.” The first author has also attended numerous events sponsored by regional and national ex-gay organizations, including two EI conferences. We analyzed the gendered content of texts, the distinct types of gendered ex-gay discourses (religious and scientific), and the movement’s discursive practice (Fairclough 1992), how it circulates gendered discourses and targets different consumer audiences. We illustrate how ex-gay discourses not only reflect and reproduce but seek to change gendered social arrangements through public policy and altering the global landscape.

From the extensive and varied kinds of texts we analyzed, we illustrate our points by citing works that meet one of two criteria: (1) the authors are the main sources of the movement’s or organizations’ views about gender or (2) the authors elaborate on or advance innovations and are affiliated with or promoted by movement organizations. The documents we cite are included as an appendix. We coded movement texts for references to gender and recoded these into subthemes as they applied to each dimension of the gender structure. For two reasons, we limit our analysis to texts that focus primarily on male homosexuality. First, the movement itself is mostly made up of and focuses primarily on men (and boys), and second, the movement’s treatment of lesbianism and transgender identity is qualitatively different. We are currently undertaking this analysis in other manuscripts.

SANCTIFIED SCIENCE: GENDERING IN THE EX-GAY MOVEMENT

Connell (1987) has argued that homosexuality is a form of subordinated masculinity and that hegemonic masculinity is ideologically constituted by religion and “an unrelenting psychological focus” (Connell 1992, 735). Ex-gay narratives today invoke both religious and scientific discourses of gender, combining them to create a “sanctified science” that both condemns homosexuality as a sin and frames it as a gender identity
disorder. Movement narratives aim to socialize members to internalize gender polarity as natural and divinely sanctioned and assume masculine and feminine identities at the individual level; to enforce gender polarity, hegemonic masculinity, and compulsory heterosexuality in social interaction as a “treatment” and preventive for homosexuality; and to institutionalize male power and privilege through social policy and global expansion of Christian organizations.

The Individual Level: Framing Mothers, Gender Deficits, and the Root Cause of Homosexuality

During the first decade of its existence, the ex-gay movement’s focus had been to heal adults, mostly men, of their homosexuality through Christian ministry. In the 1980s, however, the movement began to amalgamate religion and science, reframing homosexuality not only as a sin for which one could seek redemption but as a treatable gender condition. Prominent movement figures today frame the root cause of male homosexuality as a problem of gender identity that develops in early childhood, specifically from a boy’s lack of gender identification with his father. This results in a deficit of masculinity for boys. A close reading of these texts reveals gender to be the essential issue in the alleged malformed gender identity of the homosexual, allegedly caused by the aberrant gendered conduct of the homosexual’s parents. Ex-gay etiology largely indicts the mother’s gender deviance, abetted by the father’s. Deconstructing these theories reveals a gender ideology that naturalizes and justifies male dominance.

Christian psychologist Elizabeth Moberly (1983a, 1983b) resurrected and elaborated earlier gender theories of male homosexuality by psychiatrists Irving Bieber and Charles Socarides, integrating their ideas into ex-gay religious conversion programs. Bieber and Socarides built careers on pathologizing homosexuality as a gender disorder in the 1960s and were two of the most vocal opponents of the 1973 American Psychological Association decision to remove homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Their work is extensively referenced in ex-gay movement texts today. Bieber et al. (1962) argue, based on clinical observations of 106 male homosexuals, that heterosexuality is a “biologic norm” (p. 319), that “every homosexual is a latent heterosexual” (p. 220), and that there is a “causal relationship between parental influence and sexual choice” (p. 368). In their analysis, gender determines sexuality, and homosexual males tend to have dominant, “overclose” mothers and passive or “underprotective” fathers:
The “classical” homosexual triangular pattern is one where the mother is [close-binding-intimate] with the son and is dominant and minimizing toward a husband who is a detached father. . . . The chances appear to be high that any son exposed to this parental combination will become homosexual (172). . . . She attempts to demasculinize her son and will even encourage effeminate attitudes (315). Where a father has been devaluated by a wife’s contempt while the son has been elevated . . . and where the father’s . . . role is undermined . . . deprives the child of having the paternal leadership he craves. . . . and. . . . requires. (Bieber et al. 1962, 316)

While most are familiar with the dominant mother, weak father trope, this account impugns gender-deviant mother-wives, who strip sons of their (otherwise innate) masculinity, and who minimize, undermine, or express contempt for husbands. Father-husbands are partly implicated when they fail to “lead” (a euphemism for exercising authority over wives and children) or protect their children, particularly from the dangers of domineering mothers and wives.

Bieber’s contemporary and NARTH cofounder, Charles Socarides (1968, 38), echoes this view: “The family of the homosexual is usually a female-dominated environment wherein the father was absent, weak, detached. . . . This furthers feminine identification. The father’s inaccessibility to the boy contributed to the difficulty in making a masculine identification.” Again, the main culprit is the maternal influence on the boy, a mother-dominated environment. The father contributes to what the mother sets in motion by not asserting his masculine authority. Socarides believed homosexuality threatened society’s gender order until his death: “Homosexuality . . . is threatening the proper design of gender distinctions in society” (Weiss 1997). These once-popular gender theories had been abandoned in psychology until Elizabeth Moberly revived them in the 1980s. The ex-gay movement embraced Moberly’s ideas as the scientific complement to its religious programs, and she became a celebrity at ex-gay conferences. She (Moberly 1983a, 36) asserts that male homosexuality is caused by a gender deficit, specifically, “the ability to relate to the parent of the same sex.” In addition, it is a “reparative drive” (Moberly 1983a, 37) that sexualizes the need for same-sex intimacy. Moberly’s gender deficit model became the prototype for the ex-gay movement’s scientific discourse of gender.

Another prominent movement figure whose books are widely used by EI ministries is pastoral counselor Leanne Payne, who explains homosexuality this way: “A mother, overly protective and peculiarly or injuriously intimate with her son—unless a strong and affirming father figure is close at hand—can render a son unable to separate his sexual identity from hers, and she
thereby becomes part of any propensity toward homosexual behavior that might crop up in him” ([1985] 1995, 39). Moberly and Payne were once considered the ex-gay movement’s main experts on masculinity and male homosexuality. Ex-gay leaders today most commonly cite the expertise of Joseph Nicolosi, cofounder and president of NARTH and frequent speaker at EI and FOTF ex-gay conferences. FOTF founder James Dobson (2001, 118) calls him “the foremost authority on the prevention and treatment of homosexuality.” Nicolosi ([1991] 1997) argues male homosexuality is both a “deficit in masculine identity” (p. 70) and a “deficit in assertion and sense of personal power” (p. 98), inhibiting a man’s “innate” heterosexuality, which can be recovered by expressing aggression in therapy. Consistently, ex-gay etiologies of male homosexuality implicate the mother’s gender deviance and present masculine authority personified in strong father figures as the antidote. Ex-gay scientific discourse on gender complements a Christian worldview in which Eve, the archetypical female, is responsible for our sins, and Jesus, as God the Father, our salvation.

The movement’s gender deficit frame reveals its politics of masculinity at the individual level. While many social theorists problematize the links between sex, gender, and sexuality (Butler 1990; Fuss 1989), ex-gay discourses use essentialist and constructionist arguments to explain both “deviant” and “normal” gender and sexual identities. Ex-gay etiologies of homosexuality presume a natural link between sex (male), normative gender identity (masculine), and its progeny, heterosexual desire. Ex-gay discourses identify sex differences as the most basic, defining feature of humanity and conflate biological sex with gender identity, which scripts one’s relationships and designates one’s place in society. Ex-gay theology asserts that sex differences are divinely created and ordained, justifying distinct social and sexual scripts in the family and society. For Payne ([1985] 1995, 72), masculinity defines God, the archetypical Father: “He is the One so masculine that we all, men and women alike, are feminine in relation to Him.” Here Payne emphasizes masculinity as a status distinction. In ex-gay religious discourse, even our souls are gendered (Comiskey 1999; Dalbey 1988; Medinger 2000; Payne [1985] 1995). Thus, God intends and equips males to be husbands, fathers, protectors, leaders, and authorities, whereas women, as wives and mothers, are divinely and naturally designed to obey their husbands’ authority and nurture children. This divine blueprint legitimates the gender–sexual order, obfuscating the social processes of continually recreating gender. Normative gender becomes a “natural” characteristic that establishes different outcomes for women and men (West and Zimmerman 1987). Deviations from this pattern are cast as unnatural and ungodly.
Social Interaction: Healing and Preventing Homosexuality

Ex-gay etiologies of homosexuality at the individual level socialize men to venerate gender polarity as God’s will and as natural and to identify with and enact masculine authority. Ex-gay therapies and preventives in the dimension of social interaction reveal the “performative” (Butler 1990) character of gender and the uncontested assumption that homosexuality is inherently unmasculine (Connell 1992), further exposing the movement’s gender discourses as ideology. Teaching homosexual men how to do masculinity is touted as the primary means to restore their gender identity and thus recover their inherent heterosexual desires. Ex-gay strategies to prevent homosexuality in children emphasize the gendered behavior of parents as well as children, admonishing fathers to model masculine leadership and mothers to model feminine submissiveness and to enforce gender polarity in children. Masculine performativity, in the form of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1987, 2005), is the central feature of ex-gay therapies and preventives, scripting gendered interaction and reproducing male power and privilege.

Healing by Doing Masculinity: Mannerisms, Mentoring, and Marriage

In ex-gay therapies, the logic of sexual difference is realized in social interaction, and gender polarity is enacted through boundary maintenance. Prominent movement figures advocate healing homosexual males by reinforcing appropriately masculine conduct. Therapies reinforce the boundaries between masculinity and femininity as ex-gay men learn to do masculinity. Creating and maintaining opposing, mutually exclusive gender scripts is a collective process in which individuals identify their own and others’ boundaries (Cooley 1998). Publicly practicing masculinity and femininity is necessary for boundary maintenance and for authenticating allegedly natural sex differences (West and Fenstermaker 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987). Doing masculinity is accomplished in three main ways: by mimicking stereotypical masculine behaviors and shunning feminine ones, through homosocial interactions, and through marriage and fatherhood, all of which correspond to the elements of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987).

Ex-gay therapies commonly encourage ex-gay men to simulate masculine mannerisms and engage in masculine-defined activities. Payne recommended the following to a client: “After this prayer I directed him to consciously and deliberately change his mannerisms, and suggested that he select the most masculine man he could think of to model after—one
he admired as a Christian, a leader, a husband, and a father—and this he promised to do. . . . When he arrived, I was more than a little amazed at the improvement in his mannerisms . . . his acting ability undoubtedly helped him achieve such a change in so short a time” ([1985] 1995, 68).

Payne reveals that the kind of masculine qualities ex-gay men should strive to emulate include a commitment to Christianity; the ability to “lead;” which is typically code in ex-gay literature for having authority over women and children; a sexually monogamous, religiously and legally sanctioned relationship with a woman; and children. That Payne notes the acting ability of her client is either ironic or unwitting. Connell explains that hegemonic masculinity involves creating masculine models such as film characters or real models that “have the effect of an unattainable ideal” (Connell 1987, 184-85). Payne also encouraged a client to “partake of Jesus’ masculinity” ([1985] 1995, 37).

Similarly, psychologist Gerard van den Aardweg (1997, 138-39), who serves on NARTH’s Scientific Advisory Board, advises, “Homosexual men must unlearn their avoidance of getting their hands dirty doing manual work—chopping wood, painting the house, using a shovel, a hammer. They must fight a resistance to physical effort. As to sports, let the homosexual man . . . participate in a competitive game like soccer or baseball . . . [that] can make one feel deeply that one is ‘a man.’” Movement therapists and leaders recommend that a man participate as a fan or player in sports, particularly football and softball (Comiskey 1999; Haley 2004; Medinger 2000; Payne [1985] 1995; Worthen 1991). New Hope Ministry for men in California requires residents to take part in weekly hiking and camping trips (Erzen 2006), and Love in Action in Tennessee teaches men to sit without crossing their legs and to change oil in a car (Fish can’t fly 2005).

In addition to gender resocialization techniques, ex-gay therapies commonly emphasize the importance of homosocial interactions to recover masculinity. Men are encouraged to participate in nonsexual male-bonding activities in groups or to develop mentoring relationships with heterosexual masculine men to prevent potential homosexual activity. West and Zimmerman (1987) have argued that homosocial interactions supply the most powerful grounds to illustrate gender achievement, that individuals learn how to coordinate, transmit, and evaluate different gender displays. Schwalbe and colleagues (2000, 424) term these displays “identity codes,” which they define as “rules of performance and interpretation whereby members of a group know what kind of self is signified by certain words, deeds, and dress.” The therapist–client relationship is one recommended form of homosocial mentoring. NARTH therapist Joseph Nicolosi ([1991]
1997, 179-80) argued that only male therapists can fully treat men: “Homosexual men . . . anticipate non-acceptance from [heterosexual] men and . . . feel more . . . comfortable with women. Many choose a female therapist . . . However, the healing of homosexuality . . . comes out of work with men. A female therapist may help in general ways, but only . . . through men can masculine identity be found . . . The female therapist[’s] . . . role will be to act as a bridge to surrender the client to a male therapist.” Although Nicolosi (1995) once abandoned this stance, the 1997 republication of Reparative Therapy advocates his original position and, in 2001, Nicolosi writes, “The therapist takes on a mentor role, while providing the masculine perspective. The therapist is the ‘father,’ the masculine frame of reference from which the client learns how to be a man” (2001, 96). In keeping with hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987), the masculinity of ex-gay men can only be subordinate to a superior form of masculinity; no form of masculinity may be inferior to femininity. Furthermore, Kimmel’s (1994) research on how men construct masculinity through homophobia illustrates that men enact masculinity with and for other men to evaluate. He asserts that masculinity is fundamentally organized by men’s fear that other men will evaluate them as inadequate, as feminine and homosexual. Masculinity is a continual performance that must be evaluated by other men for its own maintenance (Butler 1990; Connell 1987; Kimmel 1994).

After ex-gay men learn how to simulate appropriate masculinity, they are encouraged to enter into a heterosexual marriage and preferably to have children. For Connell, “the most important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual, being closely connected to the institution of marriage” (1987, 186). In a newsletter column for an EI ministry titled “WHEN You Get Married,” Alan Medinger (1995), a married ex-gay man, writes,

I asked several leaders in ex-gay ministry to name . . . homosexual overcomers who were in their view . . . “most healed.” . . . Almost every person named was a married man. . . . These men are not married because they are more healed, but . . . because they got married. Marriage is part of the healing process. First, to a great extent our manhood develops as we live out our lives as men; we do the things that men do. . . . Living as a married man; loving a woman . . . and protecting her—even opening the stuck pickle jar and putting out the trash—nurture a sense of manhood in us. Fathering a child . . . enhances one’s identity as a man. I do believe that almost every one of you should get married. . . . Christians today look on marriage as an option. I don’t believe that this is God’s clear message. He said that, “It is not good that man be alone.” (Gen. 2:18).
Medinger invokes biblical authority to persuade ex-gay men to marry and father children, thus justifying “compulsory heterosexuality,” which, according to Rich (1980), is the principal mechanism underlying and perpetuating male dominance of women.

Ehrenreich (1984) has shown that men are not exempt from the marital imperative or antifeminist backlash that was leveled against men who “fled” marital commitment, including stigmatizing them as effeminate and homosexual and branding them as immature. van den Aardweg claims that marriage is the necessary final phase in the “change” process, insinuating that marriage engenders maturation:

> The last step is the change from feeling and behaving like the “unmanly boy” . . . to feeling and behaving like a normal man. . . . The man must abolish his tendency to let himself be protected, pampered, or treated as a child by women (of his age) . . . of whom no manly dominance or manliness is required. . . . Becoming a man means being able to take responsibility for and “lead” a woman. It means not letting oneself be dominated or led by a mother-woman, but . . . leading and making decisions for a woman himself. . . . The ideology that obliterates sex roles is so unnatural that future generations will undoubtedly see it as a perversion of a decadent culture. Male-female role differences are inborn, and persons who fight their homosexual tendencies have to return to them. (1997, 147, emphasis added).

In Rich’s (1980) conceptualization of compulsory heterosexuality, the presumption and repetitive assertion that heterosexuality is natural limits the erotic choices and the gender identities of both men and women; it also legitimizes a sexual division of labor that results in women’s economic dependence on men (Ferguson, Zita, and Addelson 1981). In these therapies, heterosexuality is compulsory and male authority inherent in the marital covenant. Ex-gay preventives mirror these gendered prescriptions for children and their parents.

**Preventing Homosexuality: Engendering Children and Parents**

Ex-gay etiologies of homosexuality have given way to the movement’s newest strategy for enforcing gender: preventing homosexuality by regulating the gender of children and parents. Ex-gay organizations promote books on preventing homosexuality to new and prospective parents. In a popular prevention tome, Nicolosi ([1991] 1997) describes a scenario that might indicate to parents the potential sexuality of a son: “The boy who is developing homosexualy tends to favor the company of little girls. However, the preheterosexual boy is likely to express contempt for little girls . . . in
order to solidify his male image. . . . Rejecting little girls is . . . a reaction . . . against the unacceptable desire to regress to a feminine identification” (61-62). Nicolosi describes “prehomosexuality” as psychopathology, and the femininity that it represents as regressive, while constructing “preheterosexual” boys’ masculine contempt for little girls as normal and healthy. Similarly, Sue Bohlin (2002), director of an EI ministry and a prominent speaker on preventing homosexuality, advocates that parents model and reinforce gender differences to produce emotionally healthy children and rationalizes boys’ violence as natural and normal:

Where boys are primarily action-oriented, girls are primarily verbal. . . . These differences really show up when kids get hostile. Boys will often get physical when they’re mad or frustrated. The testosterone that flows through boys’ bodies is part of their physical hostility, and it needs to be respected. This very same tendency to hit or kick when angered is usually channeled into the glory of adult masculinity where a man will fight to protect his family or his country. When girls get hostile, they use their tongues. . . . Unfortunately, more long-term damage can be inflicted with hurtful words. . . . That’s why it’s so important to teach girls what Proverbs teaches about the destructive power of the tongue.

For Bohlin, anger is a masculine domain: Boys who hit, kick, or “get physical” should be “respected” whereas girls who inflict damage with their destructive tongues should be rebuked.

While ex-gay theories largely blame the mother for her son’s homosexuality, prevention is mostly the father’s achievement, accomplished by asserting masculine dominance over his wife and modeling masculinity for his son. Ex-gay prevents focus on the father, advising him to intervene between the mother and son, overpowering his wife and protecting his son from her emasculating influence. This was first recommended by Bieber et al. (1962, 316): “A . . . father precludes the possibility of a homosexual son; he acts as a neutralizing protective agent should the mother make seductive or close-binding attempts (311). . . . The father should be a male model with whom the son can identify in forming masculine patterns. . . . The father . . . will ordinarily intercede between his son and a wife . . . thus protecting the boy from demasculinization.” Parenting “experts,” such as psychologist/Christian Right activist James Dobson (2001), have appropriated this ex-gay “intervention” frame in their tomes. Dobson quotes Nicolosi on how to ensure a son’s heterosexual development: “If a father wants his son to grow up straight, he has to break the mother-son connection. . . . In this way, the father has to be a model . . . a healthy buffer between mom and son. . . . A boy needs to
see his father as confident, self-assured and decisive. ... Mom needs to back off a bit. ... Don’t try to be both Mom and Dad for him. If he has questions, tell him to ask Dad. She should defer to her husband” (Nicolosi, cited in Dobson 2001, 121). In all these narratives, the message is the same: Mothers who want to prevent their sons from becoming homosexual must succumb to the father-husband as the family authority; the mother-wife is obliged to accept her submissive femininity and to defer to her husband. Constructing masculinity as active and femininity as passive and receptive facilitates male dominance and female deference (West and Zimmerman 1987). Interestingly, all three branches of the movement cite the “expertise” of Christian sexologist George Rekers (1977), who stated that “intervention ... in childhood may be the only effective manner” of preventing homosexuality. Rekers and other gender sexologists believed that homosexuality could be prevented but that gender identity developed in childhood and, once established, was “impossible to change” (cited in Irvine 2005, 219). If change is “impossible,” it is ironic that EI (and Dobson and Nicolosi), whose motto is “change is possible,” would tout Rekers as an expert.

In the interactional dimension, doing masculinity is advocated as the main treatment for adult men and is recommended to fathers as a preventive for their sons. Encouraging masculine performances suggests that some movement experts may believe gender is not innate. Practicing differences creates differences and the achievement of difference (West and Zimmerman 1987). Ex-gay therapies and preventives expose the constructed nature of gender, which is created and maintained through social interaction. As West and Zimmerman argue, “a person’s gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others” (1987, 4). For Connell, hegemonic masculinity “implies a large measure of consent. ... Many [men] collaborate in sustaining [masculine] images” (1987, 184-85). The politics of masculinity in treatment narratives at the level of social interaction are clear: Normalcy is restored for homosexual men when they willingly subject themselves to others’ masculine ascendancy and learn how to assert masculine authority over women and children. Preventives instruct parents to model and enforce these gender scripts for children. Doing masculinity becomes an ongoing production, a repeated demonstration (Butler 1990) that scripts social interaction in ways that reproduce male domination of women and other men (Connell 1987). This appeals to those who seek out ex-gay organizations; the institutional dimension of the gender structure addresses the movement’s public policy agenda for the rest of society and its attempt to affect the global culture.
Institutionalizing Masculinity

In Risman’s (2004) scheme, the institutional dimension of the gender structure includes laws, religious authority, and other formal means of social control that reinforce male power and privilege through the distribution of society’s resources, whether material or cultural. In this section, we show how the ex-gay movement aspires to structure the social order. We argue that the movement utilizes its scientific and religious gender discourses in an effort to change wider social arrangements by implementing profamily public policy in the United States and influencing the global culture by proliferating Christian organizations around the world. Analyzing how the movement makes use of its gender discourses to influence the institutional dimension of society exposes the masculinity politics of its public policy and globalization strategies. Ex-gay discourses contend that social changes brought about by gay liberation and feminism have contributed to gender confusion and the demasculinization of men. This is considered to be the source of most social problems today, including family breakdown, poverty, welfare dependency, and crime. Ex-gay movement organizations and representatives perceive this as an imminent crisis and one that is rampantly propagating on a global scale. The movement has increasingly invested its resources in the political sphere and in global expansion. Although these efforts are comparatively underdeveloped, we offer a sketch of them here and suggest that the movement’s potential to affect the social order through public policy and influencing the global culture should not be underestimated.

Profamily Politics

The ex-gay movement has become part of the Christian Right; its ideology mirrors antifeminist men’s movements. Scholars (Messner 1997, 2001; Stoltenberg 1999) have identified men’s movements as significant sources of backlash against feminism as well as formidable countermovements effecting societal-level change. Messner (2001, 391) shows that Christian Right men’s movements such as the Promise Keepers emphasize “the restoration of earlier versions of masculinity, the extension and protection of men’s rights, or the maintenance of the status quo via resistance to change.” Promise Keepers, which is also closely allied with FOTF, asserts that feminism and gay liberation have feminized men, which has led to the collapse of the traditional family. Its solution is for men to reconnect with their manhood, reassert the natural order of the family by establishing themselves as family heads, and affirm each other for doing so. Ex-gay movement
ideology is analogous to this, and ex-gay speakers regularly give testimonials of healing at Promise Keepers rallies (Garber 1999). Ex-gay movement actors assert that society’s problems are the result of “the combined effects of the sexual revolution and the ‘rights’ movements—civil rights, minority rights, feminist rights” (Nicolosi [1991] 1997, 9).

Whereas Promise Keepers explicitly self-identifies as a men’s movement, the ex-gay movement is typically understood by feminist and queer scholars and activists as an antigay countermovement rather than an antifeminist Christian Right men’s movement. However, the ex-gay movement is fundamentally organized around “making men”; reasserting masculine authority over subordinated men, women, and children in the private sphere and as a matter of public policy and national security. Ex-gay narratives construct masculinity as a vital social good that, when imperiled, has enormous social consequences: “When enough individuals are out of touch with the masculine, a whole society is weakened on every level of existence. . . . A crisis in masculinity is always a crisis in truth. . . . A culture will never become decadent in the face of a healthy, balanced masculinity. When a nation or an entire Western culture backslides, it is the masculine which is first to decline” (Payne [1985] 1995, 83). Furthermore, the ex-gay movement also explicitly works to oppose feminist concerns, illustrated in an EI fund-raising letter from Bob Davies: “There are two distinct spiritual battlegrounds in North America today: abortion and homosexuality. . . . Perhaps you’re wondering what abortion and homosexuality have to do with each other. . . . They both have to do with Satan’s attempt to destroy and prevent human life” (1996, 2).

The ex-gay movement is increasingly aligning itself with antifeminist organizations such as Concerned Women for America, the Christian Coalition, and Campus Crusade for Christ, some of which, like FOTF, have become deeply invested in the ex-gay movement, politically and financially. Recently, ex-gay organizations have aggressively pursued litigation to influence public education, having successfully sued a Maryland school district to further limit sex education and contraceptive information. It is pursuing a similar tack to force public schools to distribute ex-gay literature.

Finally, ex-gay movement representatives consider feminism as much a threat to society as gay liberation. In an article on the NARTH Web site titled “Militant Homosexuality and Feminism,” psychotherapist Gerald Schoenewolf (2004), a member of NARTH’s Scientific Advisory Committee, argues that a vocal minority of feminists and gays are misrepresenting research to argue that sexism and homophobia are the cause of most of the society’s problems:
The gist of militant homosexual and militant feminist activists seems . . . to make heterosexual males the scapegoat for society’s problems. . . . I speculated as to the psychodynamic link between [them]. . . . I found that in both cases there was a rage toward fathers . . . [that] was politicized into a generalized rage against men and masculinity. . . . How does this rage against fathers develop? [Through an] identification with the mother’s gender-narcissistic rage at men. . . . Militants do not stay long in therapy; they are unwilling to have a real discourse with a therapist or with anybody else regarding their own or society’s problems . . . militant gays and militant feminists . . . have joined forces to energize a social movement which is built on a false foundation.

In keeping with NARTH’s usual psychological reductionism, the bad family values of militant feminists are to blame. Movement spokespeople clearly identify feminism as a fundamental danger to society’s well-being and explicitly advocate an antigay and antifeminist public policy agenda. Constructing masculinity not only as an individual identity but as the vital social good that feminism undermines is an important part of the movement’s masculinity politics, which is also central to its globalization strategy.

Engendering a Global Movement

Not only do ex-gay gender discourses reflect and reproduce male power and privilege in everyday life; they are being used to change gendered social arrangements in the United States and on a global scale by establishing a worldwide network of Christian institutions to influence the global culture. Currently, the ex-gay movement abroad exists primarily as a network of Christian ministries affiliated with EI, although FOTF has an enormous global presence and “broadcasts programs on more than 4,000 facilities in more than 150 different countries worldwide” (www.family.org/welcome/intl). EI has ministries in more than 20 countries and regional associations to coordinate and provide oversight for ministry networks. Through missionary work, EI has worked in concert with churches in other countries to create new ministries. EI originally sought to globalize to “counteract the emergence of gay movements” (Erzen 2002, 61); we show how its gender ideology is one of the movement’s main evangelizing mechanisms and its gender discourse one of its most potent countermovement resources.

The Exodus Global Alliance Web site shows that ex-gay gender frames are being creatively modified to fit the particular cultural contexts of several
ministries abroad (Robinson 2007). We provide one example of this gendered globalization strategy, which comes from a regional EI conference the first author attended in 2006. Oscar Galindo, director of Exodus Latin America, presented a session titled “Latin American Culture and Sexual Brokenness.” The handout he provided explains how homosexuality can be caused by “matriarchy,” defined as a “system wherein the mother is the dominant figure or leader . . . and is . . . related to the popular religion—Catholicism where Maria [Mary] has more influence” (Galindo 2006). Here, the gender deficit frame blames gender-deviant mothers for the problem of homosexuality in a different cultural context. Conspicuously, Catholicism’s veneration of Mary is constructed as significantly culpable for homosexuality. The implication is that conversion to true Christianity—the evangelical Protestant brand that EI favors—redemption through God, the masculine Father, is still the solution to the “problem” of homosexuality.

In the institutional dimension, ex-gay discourses of gender reconstitute masculinity as a vital social good that both gay rights and feminism undermine, rationalizing political and cultural interventions aimed at institutionalizing it. In the United States, this masculine incarnation takes the form of profamily public policy, implanting gender in the law. The global expansion of Christian organizations is a cultural intervention aimed at solving a host of social problems caused by a deficit in masculinity not only in the United States but throughout the world. Connell identifies several major forms of globalizing masculinities and concludes, “To the extent that particular institutions become dominant in the world society, the patterns of masculinity embedded in them may become global standards” (Connell 1998, 6), thus significantly affecting the social order. Buss and Herman (2003) identify the Vatican as one of the most prominent international political actors promoting a “gender agenda,” deploying an antifeminist and antigay “natural family” counterdiscourse to affect the global culture. It has forged alliances with U.S. Christian Right organizations, such as Concerned Women for America and FOTF, which also increasingly appeal in policy advocacy to the authority of social scientists, many of whom are “ex-feminists” (Buss and Herman 2003). It will be interesting to observe how these interreligious alliances shape the discursive terrain of the ex-gay movement. Will they strengthen the discursive authority of religion or dilute it in favor of science? Will fundamentalist Protestantism and Catholicism coexist; if not, which form of antifeminist Christianity will prevail?
CONCLUSION

The ex-gay movement is not only an antigay countermovement but an antifeminist Christian Right men’s movement. Although its most obvious objective is to purge society of homosexuality, a close analysis of the movement’s gender discourse and discursive practices reveals its masculinity politics at every level of society’s gender structure. At the individual level, the movement’s sanctified science justifies male dominance and socializes men and women into polarized, hierarchical gender identities. In interaction, scripting gendered homosocial and heterosexual relations reinforces hegemonic masculinity, compulsory heterosexuality, and gender polarity. When masculine dominance, feminine submission, and heterosexuality are internalized as God’s will and natural, individuals police their own and each other’s conduct accordingly. Defining deviations as sinful and sick is a powerful form of social control, as is having an economically dependent (and emotionally invested) wife and children.

The ex-gay movement’s turn to gender in the early 1980s enabled it to expand its reach into the personal lives of male homosexuals to more effectively control them and to consolidate power by enlisting new populations—their wives and parents, friends of ex-gays, and parents in general. Further research is needed to examine the movement’s deployment of gender to control these populations, as well as minors, lesbians, and transgender people. Because masculinities and femininities “are produced together in the process that constitutes the gender order” (Connell 1998, 3), further research analyzing the construction of femininity in ex-gay discourses is needed. The ex-gay movement’s incorporation of a gendered developmental psychology has profoundly altered its ideological and political trajectory. By deploying a scientific discourse of gender to explain and “treat” male homosexuality, the movement has accentuated gender conformity as much or more than compulsory heterosexuality. The movement’s turn to gender has also rendered a makeover for the Christian Right. Religious condemnation of homosexuality has been used by gay activists to portray antigay Christian activists as hateful. However, Christian Right organizations that embrace ex-gay gender discourse can disavow this charge and claim instead a compassionate and loving visage, much as they have reframed the debate from patriarchy to traditional values.

In the institutional dimension, the masculinity politics of the ex-gay movement has profound implications for public policy in the United States and increasingly for the global culture, even as the movement is least developed at this level. President George W. Bush’s current nominee for U.S. Surgeon General is Dr. James W. Holsinger, who founded a church in...
Lexington, Kentucky, that has an ex-gay ministry. We anticipate that the ex-gay movement will become a significant political and cultural force, and there is much potential for research examining the movement’s public policy and religious influence. The Christian Right itself has been transformed and emboldened by ex-gay discourses. The mutually beneficial alliance between the ex-gay movement and the Christian Right during the past decade has resulted in a more formidable antifeminist countermovement. Under the family values banner and the influence of its Christian Right financiers, the ex-gay movement advocates and encourages members to support both antigay and antifeminist social policy. Not only is gender the movement’s main political and global evangelizing mechanism; it is perhaps one of its most valuable social movement resources, providing an endless net-widening mechanism. Our research on the masculinity politics of ex-gay discourse suggests that confronting the ex-gay movement’s social impact demands analyzing and contesting its deployment of gender.

APPENDIX

PRIMARY SOURCE TEXTS


NOTES

1. We borrow Herman’s (2000, 140) definition: “a broad coalition of [religious] organizations that have come together to struggle for their socio-political vision in the public sphere. These organizations, and their activist leaders, are . . . committed to a conservative . . . Protestant Christianity.” Their main political goal is for the government to rule according to their interpretation of “Biblical values.”

2. Prominent movement representatives continue to cite Bieber et al. (1962) as one of the most important empirical studies validating the etiology of male homosexuality. However, Warren Throckmorton, a prominent movement figure and speaker at Exodus International and National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) conferences, said at the 31th annual Exodus Freedom Conference that “76 of the 106 men did not have the classic triad of a weak father and overbearing mother” (Throckmorton 2006, emphasis added). Irving Bieber, the first author of the study, was NARTH cofounder Joseph Nicolosi’s mentor. After Bieber died, NARTH dedicated its library to him, renaming it the Irving Bieber Memorial Library. The last author of this oft-cited study is his son, Toby, a regular presenter at NARTH meetings and member of its Scientific Advisory Committee.

3. Erzen (2006) learned from Exodus International cofounder Frank Worthen that Moberly left the movement believing that Joseph Nicolosi had plagiarized her ideas.

4. Ex-gay healers, beginning with Moberly, argue that the male “homo-emotional drive” is fundamentally a masculine deficit resulting from “the
love-need of the child” for his father (Moberly 1983a, 42). Fulfilling this need is a precondition for heterosexuality and can be accomplished only in nonsexual, homosocial relationships, which allegedly reduce homosexual desires. Residential ex-gay programs require rigid daily routines for residents, organizing group (as opposed to dyadic) interaction to prevent homosexual activity, which homosocial interactions may appear to encourage. Ex-gay ministries require all-pervading personal accountability of one’s feelings and behaviors. See Besen (2003) and Erzen (2006) for detail on the methods ex-gay ministries use to (apparently unsuccessfully) control homosexuality.

REFERENCES


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