FROM ACCOMMODATION TO LIBERATION A Social Movement Analysis of Lesbians in the Homophile Movement

KRISTIN G. ESTERBERG
University of Missouri—Kansas City

The gay and lesbian liberation movement and its predecessor, the homophile movement that originated in the 1950s, have been relatively little studied by sociologists; yet theories of ethnic mobilization, especially competition theory, help us to understand the mobilization of lesbians and gay men. At the same time, lesbian/gay social movement activity provides an important critique of social movement theories. This article focuses on the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), a homophile organization for women founded in 1956. Competition theory furnishes a useful framework for understanding the transformation and decline of the DOB and its publication, the Ladder, *at the end of the 1960s, but it cannot fully explain lesbian social and political organization. By viewing group identities as multiple and overlapping, new social movement theory contributes a more complete understanding of the Daughters of Bilitis and its relationship to other social movement groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s.*

INTRODUCTION

Of all the major U.S. social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the gay and lesbian liberation movement has perhaps been least studied by sociologists;[1] yet the lesbian and gay liberation movement and its predecessor, the homophile movement of the 1950s and 1960s, are of special interest to scholars of social movements.[2] In several respects, lesbian and gay experience is different from that of other minority groups. Unlike ethnic groups, for example, lesbian and gay identity is typically not passed on to children

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I am grateful to a number of friends and scholars for their comments on various drafts of this article. Sue Bergmeier, Phyllis Moen, and Lynn Smith-Lovin critiqued very early drafts. The comments of Margaret Andersen, Beth Schneider, Nancy Stoller, and Becky Thompson were enormously helpful in revising the final version.*

REPRINT REQUESTS: *Kristin G. Esterberg, Department of Sociology, University of Missouri—Kansas City, MO 64110.*

GENDER & SOCIETY, Vol. 8 No. 3, September 1994 424-443

by their parents, and knowledge of lesbian/gay identity comes somewhat later in life (Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith 1981). Lesbians and gay men typically do not learn strategies for resisting heterosexism from parents and other family members at an early age, as members of racial and ethnic minorities learn strategies for resisting racism. In addition, lesbians and gay men are distributed across ethnic, racial, and class lines; yet lesbians and gay men clearly have organized on the basis of their sexual identity and in a repressive period—the 1950s—during which organized political and social activity by homosexuals seems very unlikely indeed.

This article uses competition theories of collective action (Hannan 1979; Olzak and Nagel 1986) to explore the social movement activity of lesbians within the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), a homophile organization for women founded in 1956. Competition theory can explain lesbians' activity within the homophile movement and the decline of that movement at the end of the 1960s, but it cannot fully account for the diversity of lesbian social organization and experience. New social movement theory (see Calhoun 1993 for a summary and critique) helps elucidate the variety of lesbians' experiences in the 1960s.

COMPETITION THEORIES OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Competition theory arose to explain the persistence of ethnic boundaries in modern states (Hannan 1979; Olzak and Nagel 1986). Based on the premise that groups mobilize on the basis of ethnic or other ascribed identities to compete for resources, competition theorists seek to define the conditions under which one identity, typically ethnic identity, becomes more salient than other identities, such as class, in determining mobilization.

Based on ecological approaches to social organization, competition theories of collective action focus on the boundaries between social groups (Hannan 1979). Social groups are more likely to mobilize when the boundaries between them are heightened and when individuals are clearly identified as belonging to one group rather than another; yet mere identification with a social group is not sufficient to predict the conditions under which groups will mobilize and act collectively on their own behalf. Access to at least minimal resources—members, money, and so forth—is necessary for a group to engage in collective action or social movement activity.[3] In addition, unequal distribution of resources based on group membership—or at least the *perception* of such—and some form of communication networks are also necessary for social movement activity to occur.

In addition to predicting when social movement activity is likely to occur, competition theorists seek to explain the relationships among social movement organizations. According to competition theorists, organizations compete with each other to gain resources (especially members) needed for survival. When two or more organizations have similar potential memberships, competition arises. Competition may have a negative effect on organizations; organizations with very similar goals and memberships may "present a greater threat to organizational survival than those where the goals do not overlap" (Langton 1987, 58). On the other hand, when a number of organizations share the same organizational form, the legitimacy of that form may be increased, thereby increasing the organization's chances for survival (Hannan and Freeman 1989, 136-8). In this way, some have argued that the U.S. civil rights movement and the student antiwar movement of the 1960s served as an important stimulus to the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s (Rosenfeld and Ward 1991; Langton 1987).

In this article, I argue that competition theory is useful for understanding the decline and transformation of the homophile movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In the following sections, I argue that lesbian and gay identity is in some respects similar to ethnic identity and can be understood in terms of the social boundaries between heterosexuals and homosexuals. I then briefly outline the homophile movement of the 1950s and 1960s and provide a more in-depth analysis of the Daughters of Bilitis as it was presented in their publication, the *Ladder*. In its early years, the Daughters of Bilitis pursued an integrationist strategy that minimized the boundaries between lesbians and heterosexual women—at a time when the differences between lesbians and heterosexual women may have seemed quite large. In the middle of the 1960s, the DOB began to accentuate the boundaries as it moved toward an alliance with the militant segment of the homophile movement. At the end of the 1960s, as the women's liberation movement flourished, the Daughters of Bilitis and the *Ladder* shifted toward an alliance with the women's movement and pursued a strategy that stressed the commonality of lesbians and heterosexual women. In doing so, I argue, the DOB and the *Ladder* competed—unsuccessfully—with a variety of other women's groups for resources, especially active membership.

CREATING LESBIAN/GAY IDENTITIES AND COMMUNITIES

Lesbians and gay men have to identify as such in order to mobilize on their own behalf. Recent work on sexual identity has set out to demonstrate its socially constructed character (for examples, see Foucault 1978; Weeks

1987; Esterberg 1994; see also E. Stein 1990 for an overview of the constructionist-essentialist debate). While homosexual *behavior* can be found in almost all historical times and places, homosexual *identity*, and the notion of homosexual *people*, is essentially a late nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomenon. As Foucault argues, "The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology" (1980, 43).

Despite its socially constructed nature, homosexual identity has taken on an ascribed or imperative character over the course of the twentieth century. Like racial or ethnic identities, homosexual identities are seen as relatively enduring, stable characteristics of individuals. The growth of contemporary gay and lesbian communities with a variety of social institutions, including political organizations, stores, communication networks, and even financial institutions, have led some to suggest the similarity between gay communities and ethnic enclaves (Murray 1992; Epstein 1990).

There are, of course, clear differences between lesbian/gay identity and racial/ethnic identity. Unlike the undeniable characteristics of many racial and ethnic minorities (African Americans and Asian Americans, for example), a majority of lesbians and gay men can "pass" for heterosexual. But racial and ethnic identity may not always be apparent. Some African Americans, at great personal cost, can also pass for white (see Larsen 1986 for fictional accounts), and many European Americans may not have features that clearly distinguish them as, say, Norwegian or Italian or Irish. For some members of ethnic groups—especially European Americans—ethnic identity may be in part chosen (Waters 1990), although clearly not without constraint. Differences between lesbians/gays and racial/ethnic groups may be more of degree rather than type. In addition, many members of ethnic groups, like lesbians and gays, do not live in geographically bounded places, or ethnic enclaves. As di Leonardo notes in her study of Californian Italian Americans, we often refer to community metaphorically. In speaking of community, we mean "that *someone* perceives 'togetherness' in a social network or a group of networks or even a social category, and thus labels the individuals in that network or category as a community" (1984, 133). Even the notion that race/ethnicity is somehow more enduring may not distinguish racial/ethnic identity from sexual identity. Epstein, for example, argues that racial and ethnic categories change over time, and may even change over an individual's life course; thus he concludes, "If ethnicity does not necessarily begin at birth, and if ethnicity involves some combination of external ascription and chosen affiliation, then a gay identity . . . seems not wholly unlike an ethnic identity" (1990, 276).

At the same time, relatively clear boundaries between lesbians and gays and heterosexuals have formed over the twentieth century. Particularly since World War II, distinct lesbian and gay urban subcultures have begun to flourish in the United States (Bérubé 1983, 1990). Since the early 1970s, an active gay and lesbian press has connected isolated lesbians and gay men to the urban subcultures. Political organizations, both national (such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force) and local (including the myriad chapters of ACT-UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) are making political claims on behalf of lesbians and gays, and hundreds of thousands of lesbians and gay men marched on Washington, DC, to claim civil rights in 1987 and 1993. Some would even argue for the existence of distinctively lesbian and gay forms of communication (see Chesebro 1981); thus, although lesbians and gay men do not form an ethnic enclave economy in the sense that some ethnic immigrant groups do (Portes and Manning 1986), they do form a distinct subculture.

While arguably becoming more distinct throughout the twentieth century, boundaries between homosexuals and heterosexuals are clearly permeable: homosexuals and heterosexuals interact at work, in families, and in many other social settings. Boundaries *within* lesbian and gay communities are also apparent; perhaps the most striking is the separation by gender, but even within lesbian communities differences of race, class, age, and style create social distance among and between various groups (see A. Stein 1993; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981). Nonetheless, compared with earlier historical periods during which lesbian/gay identity did not exist (see D'Emilio and Freedman 1988), as lesbian/gay identity became institutionalized over the twentieth century, the notion that lesbians are somehow different from heterosexual women also became prevalent.[4]

Clearly, the fit between lesbian/gay identity and community and ethnic identity and community is not a perfect one. The fit may be better for European-American ethnicity than for other racial/ethnic groups; nonetheless, the distinction may be a useful one, and theories of ethnic mobilization may provide insight into the mobilization of lesbians and gay men. At the same time, lesbian/gay social movement activity provides an important critique of social movement theories based on race/ethnicity.

THE DAUGHTERS OF BILITIS AND THE HOMOPHILE MOVEMENT OF THE 1950s AND 1960s

In the context of the McCarthy era and widespread persecution of lesbians and gay men, the 1950s seem an unlikely time for a movement of lesbians

and gay men to develop; nevertheless, the homophile movement began in the United States with the foundation of the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles in 1951 (see D'Emilio 1983 for an excellent history). Mattachine was joined shortly thereafter by One, Inc., which began publishing a magazine for homosexuals in 1953, and three years later by the Daughters of Bilitis, which served both as a social and political organization for lesbians and published the *Ladder*. With the exception of the DOB, which was exclusively for women, the first homophile organizations were small-scale groups composed predominantly of men. The organizations provided opportunities for social activities, such as bowling nights, parties, and discussions of public events, as well as more political activities, such as publishing magazines and newsletters, providing speakers for radio and television shows, and working with professionals—psychiatrists, medical doctors, clergy, and academics—to improve society's attitudes toward homosexuals.

During their early years, the organizations often had difficulty persuading people to join. Recruitment was impeded by the stigma attached to homosexuality and by the harsh penalties exacted for homosexual behavior. Despite these barriers to organization, the DOB and the homophile movement expanded, at least modestly, during the 1950s and 1960s. The DOB added branches on the East and West coasts, and the circulation of the *Ladder* increased substantially. Begun as a small, mimeographed monthly newsletter, the *Ladder* advertised local DOB events and published short fiction, poetry, book reviews, essays, news clippings of interest to "female homophiles," and letters to readers. With 17 paid subscribers and a mailing list of 200 professionals, the *Ladder*'s beginnings were modest (Damon 1970). By the time of its last issue in 1972, the *Ladder* was no longer a small chapter newsletter but a slick 44-page publication, no longer affiliated with the DOB, and sent to approximately 3,800 people in seven countries.

In the following sections, I use a textual analysis of the *Ladder* to investigate the relationship of lesbians in the Daughters of Bilitis to other groups in the homophile movement, to the feminist movement that flourished toward the end of the 1960s, and to the larger heterosexual society. Analysis of the *Ladder* reveals much about the political strategies used by lesbians in the early homophile movement and how these strategies changed throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Competition theory sheds light on these shifting alliances and on the decline of the DOB in the late 1960s.

In its earliest years (from its inception until the early 1960s), the *Ladder* documented a strong integrationist stance. This period of assimilationist politics was followed by a brief alliance with the militant sector of the male homophile movement, an alliance that lasted until about 1966, after which

the periodical increasingly reflected a growing affiliation with the women's liberation movement. This final stage was solidified in 1970, when the *Ladder* became an independent women's liberation movement publication.

The Beginnings: An Integrationist Stance

During their early years the *Ladder* and the DOB took a firmly integrationist stance. The explicit aim of the organization, printed each month in the statement of purpose on the inside front cover, was to promote "the integration of the homosexual into society" by "education of the variant . . . to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society." This was to be accomplished, at least in part, "by advocating a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society." Other goals included public education, participation in research projects by "duly authorized and responsible" experts (such as psychiatrists and sociologists), and investigation of the penal code.

The integrationist stance entailed the notion that lesbians are "just like" everyone else—that is, just like middle-class, heterosexual, white American women—with the simple exception of choice of partner. By minimizing the differences between lesbians and heterosexual women, this strategy attempted to reduce the social boundaries between the lesbian and heterosexual worlds. At the same time that the mostly white and middle-class lesbians of the DOB attempted to ally themselves with researchers and other professionals, however, they also worked to harden the boundaries between themselves and the butches and fems of the predominantly working-class bar culture (see Kennedy and Davis 1993; Nestle 1987). For example, in response to a *Ladder* reader claiming that "the kids in fly-front pants and with the butch haircuts and mannish manner are the worst publicity we can get," DOB President D. Griffin agreed: "Very true. Our organization has already touched on that matter and converted a few to remembering that they are women first and a butch or fem secondly, so their attire should be that which society will accept. Contrary to belief, we have shown them that there is a place for them in society, but only if they wish to make it so" (1956, 3).

At the same time, as DOB members attempted to distance themselves from their working-class lesbian sisters and downplay any differences from heterosexual married women, the secretive nature of lesbian life in the 1950s and the sheer existence of homophile organizations such as the DOB and publications such as the *Ladder* heightened the salience of lesbian identity and accentuated lesbians' and heterosexual women's differences. In the face of the family-oriented 1950s and an ideology that cherished women's family roles of childbearing and rearing and denigrated women's work and non-

family roles, to choose not to marry—let alone to choose a woman partner—was clearly different.

The McCarthy era saw increased harassment of lesbians and gay men. Homosexuals were prime targets of the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Cold War anticommunist purges of employees from government and military jobs; those who socialized in lesbian and gay bars faced harassment and arrest (D'Emilio 1983, 43-5; Bérubé 1990). Harassment of lesbians and gay men had a contradictory effect. On the one hand, public condemnation and harassment increased the dangers associated with homosexual activity. At the same time, even negative publicity increased "the resources available to lesbians and homosexuals for attaching a meaning to otherwise dimly understood feelings" (D'Emilio 1983, 52). If more men and women began to see themselves as gay or lesbian, then there were more potential members of homophile groups.

Because of the powerful sanctions against homosexuality in the 1950s, the issue of safety was an important theme in early issues of the *Ladder*. One strategy to allay potential members' fears was to encourage both heterosexual women and lesbians to join DOB. In the first issue, DOB founder Del Martin asked,

> And why not "belong"? Many heterosexuals do. Membership is open to anyone who is interested in the minority problems of the sexual variant and does not necessarily indicate one's own sex preference. (1956, 7)

In the second issue, D. Griffin reiterated:

> Let me again state that this is a homosexual *and* heterosexual organization that wishes to enlighten the public about the Lesbian, and to teach them that we aren't the monsters that they depict us to be. (1956, 2)

The DOB encouraged women to give subscriptions to their families, ministers, health-care providers, and others. Some families did receive and read the *Ladder*. One mother, for example, wrote a short essay titled "My Daughter Is a Lesbian" (Lyle 1958). In it, she described her support for her daughter and her "congenial, intelligent, loving and kind 'mate,' " whom she compared favorably to her own less-than-congenial husband.

A second strategy was to reassure lesbians that the mailing and membership lists were secure and could not be turned over to the police or anyone else.[5] As far as other legal matters were concerned, "If you mind your own business and use 'good manners' you will not get into any trouble at all," counseled an attorney ("Attorney Stresses Nothing to Fear" 1957, 15).

The magazine's emphasis on "good manners" and accommodation to the mores of white, middle-class, heterosexual America served as a political

strategy and as an individual strategy for managing personal relationships. Readers were counseled on appropriate dress and behaviors as a way to maintain psychological health and break down negative stereotypes of lesbians, but the stress on individual conformity veered dangerously close to blaming lesbians for their own oppression. In an unsigned essay, a San Francisco chapter member chastised homosexuals: "Many of the injustices suffered by the homosexual have been self-provoked. . . . For it is not always society which isolates the homosexual; it can also be the homosexual's view of himself which may isolate him [*sic*]" ("The Philosophy of DOB" 1962, 7).

Del Martin, who edited the *Ladder* from 1960-1963, sharply reprimanded other organizations in the homophile movement in her 1963 editorial titled "It's Time for a Change":

> The tendency for the other organizations in the homophile movement is to lay the onus of the problem at the door of a hostile heterosexual society. "They" are the ones who must change, who must learn to understand, because it is "They" who persecute and prosecute. And above all, it is "They" who fail to view homosexuals as persons—human beings.
>
> Think about this indictment for a moment. You've heard it many times. Do you know what it *really* means? It is the voice of the homosexual indicting himself, convicting himself and demanding his [*sic*] own doom. (1963, 22)

For Martin and others in the early years of the DOB, the more militant strategies of some sectors of the male homophile movement asked too much in their demand that society change to accept homosexuals as they were.[6] They wished to lower, not build, boundaries between themselves and the larger heterosexual world.

A Growing Gap Within the Homophile Movement

Martin's editorial indicates not only the victim-blaming possible with the integrationist stance, but also a growing gap between the strategy of the DOB and the other Bay Area homophile organizations—One, Inc., and the Mattachine Society. By the early 1960s, the other homophile organizations began to espouse a strategy that attempted to change society to accommodate the individual who was different; the Daughters of Bilitis endorsed an attempt to change the individual to suit society. The tensions between these two strategies took a prominent place in the *Ladder* beginning in 1961, when One, Inc., attempted to bring Mattachine and DOB representatives together to create a "homosexual bill of rights." The DOB was convinced that the bill was not only a poor political tactic but that the language of rights was not appropriate for the "problem" of homosexuality.

The split over tactics and strategies reflected the different priorities of male and female homosexuals in the early 1960s. Women were far less likely to be arrested, for example, because they rarely participated in public sex and because there were fewer bars in which women could congregate. Some women in the homophile movement wanted to accentuate the differences between women and men. In 1961, for example, the *Ladder* noted the sharp differences in rates of "venereal diseases" between lesbians and gay men. And the November 1961 issue compared the female pelvis ("a remarkable thing where dynamic activities such as menstruation and ovulation are constantly occurring") to the male pelvis ("insignificant"). "Not enough emphasis," the article declared, "has been placed on this fundamental difference" ("Current Research Trends" 1961).

For their part, some of the men in the militant faction of the homophile movement had little understanding of the women's position. Dorr Legg, director of ONE Institute, insinuated that the DOB, with its membership consisting entirely of women, was a narrow "in-group" that could not be expected to understand the more *general* problem of homosexuality. Worse, he suggested that lesbians, "by virtue of their own infrequent contact with the brutal realities" of gay male life, "were but a step ahead of heterosexuals in their comprehension of what the problems are." He asked, "was it, even, that Lesbians have been so brain-washed by their own favored social and legal status that they would resist to the hilt their brother-homosexuals' efforts for betterment?" (Legg 1961, 26). Given the very real differences in men's and women's economic and political situations, it is not surprising that the Daughters of Bilitis ultimately chose an alliance with the women's movement.

A Shift to a More Militant Homophile Position

Disagreements over tactics within the homophile movement were not simply a reflection of differences in the men's and women's organizations. Arguments about strategy, which were to become very important throughout the next few years, were also surfacing within the DOB.[7] With a change in editorship in 1963, the *Ladder* shifted to a more militant homophile position. The word "lesbian" appeared on the cover for the first time, and a column titled "Living Propaganda" encouraged women to come out and publicly identify themselves as lesbian. The *Ladder* also began to publish news of the East Coast Homophile Organization (ECHO), a militant homophile group, which embraced such then radical tactics as picketing.

One of the first mentions of homophiles' picketing in support of their own cause appeared in the February/March 1965 issue of the *Ladder*. One woman

and three men picketed a talk called "Homosexuality, a Disease" given at Cooper Union in New York City. The picketers demanded—and received—a 10-minute rebuttal time, after which the audience reportedly applauded more loudly than it had for the speaker. Later that year the cover of the October issue showed four well-dressed picketers—a minister, two men, and a woman—protesting federal employment policies in Washington, D.C. Although some DOB members in the San Francisco chapter and elsewhere began to get involved in local politics during this period, the increased militancy of the *Ladder* during the mid-1960s was a source of considerable tension between the national headquarters in San Francisco and the East Coast chapter (D'Emilio 1983).

The tensions did not take a prominent place in the *Ladder*. Not unexpectedly, almost all of the letters printed in the "Readers Respond" column heartily praised the new emphasis on militant homophile action and the improved quality of the *Ladder* under Gittings's editorship; however, the divisions between more- and less-militant segments of the DOB were manifest in a debate between Franklin Kameny, of the more militant Mattachine-Washington, and Florence Conrad, research director of the DOB (see Esterberg 1990 for a discussion of the debate). The exchange centered around the radical notion, put forward by the more militant faction, that homosexuality was not an illness but an orientation or preference equivalent to heterosexuality. Homosexuals themselves—not researchers—were experts on their own lives. Conrad argued vigorously that homosexuals needed to work with researchers and professionals and that only those with a "solid background in the literature" should discuss the question of illness.

Although Kameny had the last word in this particular debate, the alliance of the *Ladder* with the militant arm of the homophile movement did not last long. In summer 1966 the board removed Barbara Gittings from her position as editor.

An Alliance with the Women's Movement

The late 1960s marked a decisive shift for the *Ladder* away from an alliance with the male homophile movement—which was embracing increasingly public tactics and issues (such as police harassment and arrests for public sex) that seemed less relevant to the predominantly white and middle-class lesbians of the DOB—toward the nascent women's liberation movement.

The break with the militant homophile position was abrupt. As an editorial introducing the change noted,

> To date [the *Ladder*'s] emphasis has been on the Lesbian's role in the homophile movement. Her identity as a woman in our society has not yet been explored in depth. It is often stated in explaining "Who is a Lesbian?" that she is a human being first, a woman secondly and a Lesbian only thirdly. The third aspect has been expounded at length. Now it is time to step up THE LADDER to the second rung. ("Another rung" 1966, 24)

Although news of homophile activities continued to be reported, readers' letters and editorials were now more critical of the homophile movement. For example, one reader (J. C. 1966) asked, in reference to the earlier coverage of the homophile movement, "If your little periodical is supposed to be the mouthpiece of the Lesbian world, why don't you, then, make it more of a forum of what WE think and have to say?" DOB President Shirley Willer, in an address titled "What Concrete Steps Can Be Taken to Further the Homophile Movement?" sharply criticized the homophile movement for its neglect of issues important to lesbians, and argued that the homophile movement "needed to be as concerned about women's civil rights as male homosexuals' civil liberties" (Willer 1966, 20).

Despite early tensions between lesbians and heterosexual women in the feminist movement (see, for example, Abbott and Love 1972, 1971), lesbians were among the first organizers of both the radical and liberal branches of the women's movement (Wolf 1979; Echols 1989). The *Ladder* had always included material sympathetic to what would later be called a feminist point of view. As early as 1959, for example, Del Martin addressed a convention of the Mattachine Society in Denver. Speaking of Mattachine and *ONE* magazine, she argued, "it would appear to me that quite obviously neither organization has recognized the fact that lesbians are *women* and that this twentieth century is the era of emancipation of women. Lesbians are not satisfied to be auxiliary members or second-class homosexuals" (Katz 1992, 431).

During the late 1960s, however, a feminist perspective became even more prominent. Shirley Willer argued in a 1966 essay that "there has been little evidence . . . that the male homosexual has any intention of making common cause with us" and that male homosexuals might become "more adamant foes of women's rights" once they had achieved their goals for homophile rights. The cover of the January 1967 issue provocatively asked, "Are Lesbians so different? Are women superior? Are the laws truly discriminatory?" The implication, of course, was that lesbians were not that different from heterosexual women, that women might be superior to men, and that the laws discriminated against women. Articles in the months following outlined what Dorothy Lyle called "The Basic Bias"—that is, the bias against women. Lyle argued:

> An enormous prejudice seriously affects the Lesbian today which has nothing to do with her sexual preference. This is the automatic prejudice she faces each day because, first and foremost, she is a woman. It is a much more basic discrimination than any sexual bias is likely to be, and it radically reduces her status in economic and career opportunities. (1967, 2)

Numerous other articles criticized the tactics of the male homophile movement—and even homosexual men themselves—and urged lesbians to join with heterosexual women and the newly formed National Organization for Women (see, for example, Martin 1970/1971, 4-6). By the end of this period, as the Daughters of Bilitis attempted to reduce the boundaries between themselves and heterosexual women, the *Ladder* was less distinctly a lesbian publication and aimed more at the growing feminist movement.

Growing Strains Within the Organization

By the late 1960s, the differences among DOB chapter members, *Ladder* staff, and the national leadership were growing; ultimately, they proved too difficult for the organization to bear. Differences in age and politics split the DOB's unity. First, younger lesbians had many more options available to them, not only because of the DOB and the homophile movement but also because of the civil rights, student, antiwar, and women's movements. Set against the backdrop of the turbulent sixties, the DOB's goals and tactics seemed to some quaint and old-fashioned. Fen Gregory, a San Francisco chapter member, wrote about this developing schism in 1970: "A few years ago the term 'straight Lesbian' would have been self-contradictory. Not so today! The generation gap (or the establishment barricade, as some prefer) has struck the homophile world" (1970, 27).

Young lesbians not only had the option of joining with women's liberation groups, they could also join the new gay liberation groups that emerged and spread rapidly in major cities following the Stonewall Rebellion, in which gay men and lesbians fought back for three days during a police raid of the Stonewall Inn in New York City in June 1969 (see Marotta 1981). By 1970, lesbian feminist groups such as Radicalesbians in New York City and a number of small groups in the San Francisco Bay area were forming (Wolf 1979).

At the same time, many older DOB members had acquired the habits of discretion, and the more "out" and open style of the younger generation made many uncomfortable. One Philadelphia DOB member wrote about the difficulty she encountered as a professional woman in getting her lesbian friends interested in their own cause. Some of her friends were afraid even to have the magazine around the house. By the late 1960s the San Francisco DOB was less politically oriented, focusing more on education and providing

an organization for women who were just coming into a lesbian identity. Many of the "older" lesbians (over 30) in the Bay Area had formed two social groups, Slightly Older Lesbians and Single Women Over Forty (Wolf 1979, 57).

On a national level, older members were split about the need to decentralize the DOB. With the growing number of political positions possible, not all DOB chapters were moving in the same direction. A number of articles published in the late 1960s referred both to the generation gap and to the schism that was developing in the DOB. Although the *Ladder* referred to the debates in veiled terms, discord within the group was clearly increasing. On the East Coast, DOB chapters had allied themselves more firmly with the militant segment of the homophile movement during the mid to late 1960s. At the same time, *Ladder* editor Gene Damon and DOB President Rita Laporte were moving the *Ladder* in a more radical women's liberationist direction that the rest of the organization apparently did not care to follow. The majority of DOB members and *Ladder* readers were probably somewhere in between. As Martin and Lyon tactfully phrased it, "As the 1970 National Convention approached it became obvious that there was disaffection between, on the one hand, the national president and the *Ladder* editor, and on the other, the rest of the organization" (1972, 276). When the production and mailing of the magazine was moved to Reno without the DOB's authorization, the national organization decided to let the magazine go. Shortly thereafter, the national organization disbanded itself and returned all authority to DOB chapters.

The August/September 1970 issue marked the *Ladder*'s first edition independent from the Daughters of Bilitis. The changes were radical. It was now a women's liberation movement paper. The new editorial statement replacing DOB's statement of purpose on the inside front cover of each subsequent issue read, in part, as follows:

> THE LADDER, published by Lesbians and directed to ALL women seeking full human dignity, had its beginning in 1956. It was then the only Lesbian publication in the U.S. It is now the only women's magazine openly supporting Lesbians, a forceful minority within the women's liberation movement.
>
> Initially THE LADDER's goal was limited to achieving the rights accorded heterosexual women, that is, full second-class citizenship. . . . THE LADDER's purpose today is to raise all women to full human status, with all the rights and responsibilities this entails; to include ALL women, whether Lesbian or heterosexual.

The *Ladder* continued as an independent women's liberation movement publication for two more years. Its last issue was August/September 1972.

FROM ACCOMMODATION TO LIBERATION

In its sixteen years of continuous publication, the *Ladder* marked enormous changes in lesbian life. From its early years, when lesbians were counseled to conform to heterosexual mores by dressing in feminine clothing and using "good manners," to its last issues, in which lesbians were encouraged to join with the women's liberation movement to end women's oppression, the *Ladder* documents important changes in the larger society in which lesbians lived and worked—and struggled to find a place for themselves.

Competition theory offers a plausible explanation for the demise of the Daughters of Bilitis and the *Ladder*. First, the integrationist strategy espoused by the DOB in the early years was fundamentally contradictory. Efforts to reduce the social boundaries between lesbians and heterosexuals by joining together with other lesbians, by publishing a magazine, and by asking, however timidly, for a place in society served to heighten the boundaries by calling attention in a conformist era to the differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals. As Epstein notes, "This is a familiar dilemma, and one that is by no means peculiar to the gay movement: How do you protest a socially imposed categorization, except by organizing around the category?" (1990, 254). Although the boundaries between lesbians and heterosexual women became less rigid as the women's movement progressed, they did not disappear. The success of the more militant homophile groups in the late 1960s and the radical gay activist groups in the 1970s was partly the result of their willingness to emphasize the differences between lesbians and gay men and heterosexuals. For lesbians and gay men, the rallying cry "gay is good" may have been a more compelling cry to action.

Second, in their early years the DOB and the *Ladder* faced little competition from other groups and publications. The other homophile organizations were composed primarily or exclusively of men, and as the women of the DOB argued early on, the day-to-day lives and concerns of homosexual men and women differed considerably. Although a vigorous butch-fem bar life flourished, and working class butches aggressively defended a public lesbian space, bar life was not formally organized or explicitly political. Other social change movements did compete for the time and attention of lesbians of color. But there were no women's movement groups in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and relatively few opportunities for openly lesbian women to make connections *as lesbians* with heterosexual women.

By the early 1970s, greater public acceptance of lesbians increased competitive pressures on the Daughters of Bilitis. The women's liberation movement increased contact between lesbians and heterosexual women, giving

many formerly heterosexual women the opportunity to reevaluate relationships with men and explore lesbian sexuality. Because their goals were increasingly similar, however, the DOB and the new women's movement groups competed for members and other organizational resources. The proliferation of gay activist groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s also placed competitive pressures on the DOB. Many of those who had been attracted by the DOB's alliance with the militant arm of the homophile movement in the mid-1960s may have been attracted by these groups (Marotta 1981). As Faderman notes, "Despite their relatively militant rhetoric of the late 1960s, DOB and the *Ladder* could not recover from their conservative image, and they were seen as too poky for the new activists" (1991, 197).

Through the 1970s, lesbian-feminist arguments about the "woman identified woman" advanced by Radicalesbians (1970) and the notion of the lesbian continuum advanced by Rich (1983) downplayed the importance of sexuality to lesbian identity and highlighted the commonalities between lesbians and heterosexual women. Lesbian-feminist ideology "unsexed" lesbianism (Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson 1983). This blurring of the boundaries may have made organizing *as lesbians* increasingly difficult.

Finally, the establishment of the *Ladder* as an independent women's liberation movement periodical and the reorganization of the DOB in 1970 may have eliminated any of the organizational gains that accompany longevity. Reorganizations are risky because they make organizations unstable and highly vulnerable to environmental shocks (Hannan and Freeman 1989, 83). In addition, the expansion of women's liberation groups may have facilitated ties to women outside the organization, but as members gain weak network ties to nonmembers, they are more likely to leave the group (McPherson, Popielarz, and Drobnic 1992). The greater the number of network ties, the greater the rate of joining new groups. Thus, the increased contact with heterosexual feminists may well have sparked an outflow of members from the group. Finally, an explosion of women's liberation movement periodicals occurred in the early 1970s. By moving away from a focus on lesbians and toward a more inclusive women's liberation movement audience, the *Ladder* may have lost its distinctiveness as the first—and for many years only—national periodical for lesbians and with it, its ability to compete.

Although competition theory is at least partially useful in understanding the decline of the DOB and the *Ladder* in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it is unable to account for other aspects of lesbian social and political organization. In emphasizing a hierarchical notion of identity, competition theory does not illuminate the circumstances of those with multiple identities. The experiences of lesbians of color during the 1960s accentuates the shortcom-

ings of competition theory in this regard. Lesbians of color in antiracist and anti-imperialist groups in the 1960s did not find their lesbian identity affirmed in those groups; yet lesbians of color within lesbian and feminist groups struggled with white women around issues of race and class. As Ramos recounts in her oral history, "The more I identified as a radical, the more I felt alienated from myself as a lesbian" (1987, 94).

> After many years of searching for "a" movement where all parts of me would be accepted, I finally realized that each of these movements could not *by themselves* bring out the kind of society which would insure the eventual elimination of all forms of oppression. . . . [E]ach of them tries to force us to . . . highlight some parts of our identity at the expense of others. (1987, 96)

In using competition theory to explain the strategies of the predominantly white and middle-class members of the DOB, some shortcomings are apparent. For example, it is not possible to distinguish whether the women in the DOB were organizing *as women* or *as lesbians*. Competition theory asks us to distinguish between the two identities; in fact, the women of the DOB were organizing as both.[8] Even in the period of alliance with the militant sector of the homophile movement, the DOB saw itself as a homophile *women's* organization. Competition theory has difficulty accounting for the "simultaneity of oppression."

Insights drawn from new social movement theory illuminate those aspects of lesbian social movement activity that competition theory has difficulty explaining. New social movement theory sees identities, and groups organized around them, not as hierarchical, but as multiple and overlapping. New social movement groups do not claim to be overarching—able to take care of all the needs and issues of participants—but are, instead, "affinity groups knit together not by superordinate logic but by a web of overlapping memberships" (Calhoun 1993, 407-8).

Social movement theory thus adds to our understanding of the shifting alliances of lesbian activists. Competition theory highlights the boundaries between groups and helps us to understand the growth and decline of the Daughters of Bilitis vis-à-vis the other, male-oriented homophile groups of the 1950s and 1960s and the feminist movement that blossomed in the late 1960s and 1970s. But the diversity of lesbians' experiences and their activism in a wide variety of social movements, both now and in the 1960s, makes clear the need to expand competition theory. As lesbians continue to organize —in AIDS and healthcare activism, in the struggles of people of color, and in feminist and labor organizations, among others—theories of social movements will need to account for the complex relationships between identities and social action.

NOTES

1. By and large, the social organization of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men has been little studied by sociologists from a nondeviance perspective. Over the last two decades, a few studies of lesbian communities have appeared, most recently Newton (1993) and Kennedy and Davis (1993). See Krieger (1982) for a review of earlier studies. Gay men's communities have received more attention; for a recent title, see Herdt (1992).

2. Organizers of the homophile movement chose the term "homophile" to stress that homosexuality was as much an emotional as a sexual attraction to others of the same gender. In keeping with the language used by the women of the DOB, I use the terms "homosexual," "female homophile," and occasionally "gay woman" when referring to historical materials, switching to "lesbian" for contemporary accounts.

3. In this respect, competition theory and resource mobilization theory, which focuses on groups' abilities to accumulate resources—members, jobs, political patronage—are very much alike (see, for example, McCarthy and Zald 1977).

4. As I discuss later in this article, lesbian feminism attempted to erase this distinction (see Radicalesbians 1970, reprinted 1988; Rich 1983).

5. Despite these cautions, the DOB was infiltrated by the FBI, whose informants reported on meetings and provided organizational documents and names of members (D'Emilio 1983, 124).

6. Martin clearly did not hold this position for long but went on to become a major figure in both the lesbian/gay and feminist movements.

7. A similar split over tactics and strategies is clearly present in gay and lesbian activism in the 1980s and 1990s. On the one hand, more liberal groups such as the Human Rights Campaign Fund are committed to working within the system and focus, for instance, on legislation. On the other hand, groups that are committed to radical change, such as ACT-UP and Queer Nation, focus on direct action. These two groups may come into direct conflict with each other.

8. I am grateful to Becky Thompson for pointing this out.

REFERENCES

Abbott, S., and B. Love. 1971. Is women's liberation a lesbian plot? In *Woman in sexist society*, edited by V. Gornick and B. Moran. New York: Basic Books.

———. 1972. *Sappho was a right-on woman: A liberated view of lesbianism.* New York: Stein & Day.

Attorney stresses nothing to fear in joining Daughters of Bilitis. 1957. *Ladder* 1(7):15-6.

Another Rung . . . 1966. *Ladder* 11(1):24.

Bell, A., M. Weinberg, and S. Hammersmith. 1981. *Sexual preference: Its development in men and women.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bérubé, A. 1983. Marching to a different drummer: Lesbian and gay GIs in World War II. In *Powers of desire: The politics of sexuality*, edited by A. Snitow, C. Stansell, and S. Thompson. New York: Monthly Review Press.

———. 1990. *Coming out under fire: The history of gay men and women in World War Two.* New York: Free Press.

Calhoun, C. 1993. "New social movements" of the early nineteenth century. *Social Science History* 17:385-427.

Chesebro, J. 1981. *Gayspeak: Gay male and lesbian communication.* New York: Pilgrim.
Current research trends. 1961. *Ladder* 6(2):6-9.
Damon, G. 1970. The least of these: The minority whose screams haven't yet been heard. In *Sisterhood is powerful*, edited by Robin Morgan. New York: Vintage.
D'Emilio, J. 1983. *Sexual politics, sexual communities.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
D'Emilio, J., and E. Freedman. 1988. *Intimate matters: A history of sexuality in America.* New York: Harper & Row.
di Leonardo, M. 1984. *The varieties of ethnic experience: Kinship, class, and gender among California Italian Americans.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Echols, A. 1989. *Daring to be bad: Radical feminism in America, 1967-1975.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Epstein, S. 1990. Gay politics, ethnic identity: The limits of social constructionism. In *Forms of desire: Sexual orientation and the social constructionist controversy*, edited by E. Stein. New York: Garland.
Esterberg, K. 1990. From illness to action: Conceptions of homosexuality in *The Ladder*, 1956-1965. *Journal of Sex Research* 27:65-80.
———. 1994. Being a lesbian and being in love: Constructing identity through relationships. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 1:57-82.
Faderman, L. 1991. *Odd girls and twilight lovers: A history of lesbian life in twentieth-century America.* New York: Columbia University Press.
Foucault, M. 1980. *The history of sexuality. Vol. I, an introduction.* Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon.
Gregory, F. 1970. Before the gap becomes a chism [*sic*]. *Ladder* 14(7/8):27-8.
Griffin, D. 1956. President's message. *Ladder* 1:3.
Hannan, M. 1979. The dynamics of ethnic boundaries in modern states. In *National development and the world system: Educational, economic, and political change, 1950-1970*, edited by J. Meyer and M. Hannan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Hannan, M., and J. Freeman. 1989. *Organizational ecology.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
J.C. 1966. Untitled letter to the editor. *Ladder* 11(3):26-7.
Katz, J. N. 1992. *Gay American history: Lesbians and gay men in the U.S.A.* (rev. ed.). New York: Meridian.
Kennedy, E. L., and M. D. Davis. 1993. *Boots of leather, slippers of gold: The history of a lesbian community.* New York: Routledge.
Krieger, S. 1982. Lesbian identity and community: Recent social science literature. *Signs* 8:91-108.
Langton, N. 1987. Niche theory and social movements: A population ecology approach. *Sociological Quarterly* 281:51-70.
Larsen, N. 1986. *Quicksand and passing.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
Legg, W. D. 1961. Masculine viewpoint. *Ladder* 5(8):25-6.
Lyle, D. 1958. My daughter is a lesbian. *Ladder* 2(10):4-5.
———. 1967. The basic bias. *Ladder* 11(5):2-5.
Marotta, T. 1981. *The politics of homosexuality.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
Martin, D. 1956. President's message. *Ladder* 1(1):6-7.
———. 1963. It's time for a change. *Ladder* 74:4-5, 22-24.
———. 1970/1971. If that's all there is. *Ladder* 15(3/4):4-6.
Martin, D., and P. Lyon. 1972. *Lesbian/woman.* New York: Bantam.

McCarthy, J., and M. Zald. 1977. Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory. *American Journal of Sociology* 82:1212-41.

McPherson, J. M., P. Popielarz, and S. Drobnic. 1992. Social networks and organizational dynamics. *American Sociological Review* 57:153-70.

Moraga, C., and G. Anzaldúa. 1981. *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*. Watertown, MA: Persephone.

Murray, S. O. 1992. Components of gay community in San Francisco. In *Gay culture in America*, edited by G. Herdt. Boston: Beacon.

Nestle, J. 1987. *A restricted country*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand.

Newton, E. 1993. *Cherry Grove, Fire Island*. Boston: Beacon.

Olzak, S., and J. Nagel. 1986. Introduction, competitive ethnic relations: An overview. In *Competitive ethnic relations*, edited by S. Olzak and J. Nagel. Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

Philosophy of DOB: The evolution of an idea. 1962. *Ladder* 69:4-8.

Portes, A., and R. Manning. 1986. The immigrant enclave: Theory and empirical examples. In *Competitive ethnic relations*, edited by S. Olzak and J. Nagel. Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

Radicalesbians. 1970, reprinted 1988. The woman identified woman. In *For lesbians only*, edited by S. L. Hoagland and J. Penelope. London: Onlywomen.

Ramos, J. 1987. *Compañeras: Latina lesbians*. New York: Latina Lesbian History Project.

Rich, A. 1983. Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. In *Powers of desire*, edited by A. Snitow, C. Stansell, and S. Thompson. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Rosenfeld, R., and K. Ward. 1991. The contemporary U.S. women's movement: An empirical example of competition theory. *Sociological Forum* 6:471-500.

Snitow, A., C. Stansell, and S. Thompson. 1983. Introduction. *Powers of desire: The politics of sexuality*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Stein, A. 1993. *Sisters, sexperts, queers: Beyond the lesbian nation*. New York: Penguin.

Stein, E. 1990. *Forms of desire: Sexual orientation and the social constructionist controversy*. New York: Garland.

Waters, M. C. 1990. *Ethnic options: Choosing identities in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weeks, J. 1987. Questions of identity. In *The cultural construction of sexuality*, edited by P. Caplan. London: Tavistock.

Wolf, D. 1979. *The lesbian community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Willer, S. 1966. What concrete steps can be taken to further the homophile movement? *Ladder* 11(2):17-20.

Kristin G. Esterberg is Assistant Professor of Sociology and director of Women's Studies at the University of Missouri—Kansas City. Her current research focuses on the construction of lesbian and bisexual identities within the context of lesbian, gay, and feminist social movements and communities.