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Emotion Language and Social Power: Homosexuality and Narratives of Pain in Church

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This paper examines the narratives of pain *in two religious groups to explore how the everyday concept of emotional pain can work to obscure differences between opposing sides. It shows how these narratives can effectively help to reproduce social hierarchies, even as actors seek to challenge them. Specifically, by examining church debates about homosexuality, it shows how putatively heterosexual actors on both sides use languages of pain to justify welcoming gays into the church, albeit on very different terms, while creating particular* feeling rules *for gay men and lesbians (Hochschild 1979, 1983). By comparing these two sides we see how narratives of pain (and the shared assumptions behind them) effectively help to reproduce the sexual hierarchy some members seek to subvert.*

KEY WORDS: emotions; pain; sexuality; Protestant; social movements.

Since Arlie Russell Hochschild's pioneering article on feeling rules and emotion work (1979), sociologists have been aware that people manage emotions in everyday life. More recently, Ann Swidler (2001) has examined how emotion language mediates between culture and the person to sustain social organization; she calls our attention to the sets of terms and categories available for turning disparate and ineffable sensations into socially recognized emotions (see also Lutz 1986; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Reddy 1997; Thoits 1989, 1990). Building on this literature, I show how the ways people talk about emotions with regard to difficult social issues help to shape feeling rules and direct how those issues my be resolved. Specifically, I show how *narratives of pain* shape the possible local-level outcomes of broad-scale church conflicts over homosexuality.

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Many sociologists are centrally concerned with social power, but they often neglect the productive social power that works through language, particularly languages of emotion. This productive power is at work as people develop and enforce what Hochschild (1979, 1983) calls "feeling rules"—spoken and unspoken rules about what a proper self *should feel* in a given situation. Focusing on the relationship between feeling rules and productive power, I use the term *emotion narratives* to refer to the stories that accompany and shape these feeling rules, the common sense accounts people have of how they or others *must* feel in a given situation, and what *must* therefore be done about it.[1] It is through these narratives that people develop feeling rules, thus shaping what kinds of feelings it is possible or necessary for specific people to express in specific situations.

The cases examined here involve different narratives of pain: various stories about what pain is, what causes it, and how best to alleviate it. These stories contain normative elements; at one level, speakers seek to alleviate pain and believe others should too; at another level, such narratives imply that others, particularly gay men and lesbians, "must" feel pain. Those who do not feel pain are effectively foreclosed from consideration. Ultimately, this paper illustrates how people in positions of relative power (i.e. heterosexuals) can create feeling rules for others, how power works through the creation of those feeling rules, and thus how emotion language can work to reproduce social hierarchies (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Jaggar 1989; Lutz 1986).

At one level, this paper is about how certain people can reproduce hierarchies by creating emotion rules for others. But the substance of the narrative also has a role to play. By looking closely at narratives of *pain* when people talk about others, we can see how power works through these narratives in ways speakers might not intend or even imagine. I argue that emotional pain serves as a metaphor, referencing the truth thought to inhabit the visceral nature of physical pain. In the cases examined here, shared emotion narratives about what pain is and what must be done about it help to obscure political differences and legitimate the existing hierarchy.

In what follows, I examine various church members' understandings of homosexuality and the feeling rules surrounding it, using field notes and interview material gathered during 21 months of ethnographic research in two United Methodist congregations.[2] After explaining the background of this study and my methods, I analyze everyday narratives of pain to show how both context (who uses them to refer to whom) and content (what they communicate) can work to sustain social hierarchies. I explore how pro-gay members of the theologically diverse congregation I call City Church used narratives of pain to define gay men and lesbians as

[1]While I am not referring to written narratives, I maintain that the accounts people speak of here are narratives in so far as they assume a coherent sequence of events (see Franzosi 1998).

[2]These debates tended to figure around the terms "homosexuals" or "gays and lesbians," those who might identify as other kinds of sexual outlaws, such as bisexuals and transgenderists, tended to be mentioned rarely and without thought to how their situations might differ from those of "homosexuals," so this paper does not refer to these categories.

belonging in church by framing anti-homosexual beliefs as wounding. I then look at how theologically conservative members of the congregation I call Missionary Church similarly used narratives of pain to welcome homosexuals, intending that their pain (and what they saw as its symptom, homosexuality) might be healed. In the end, I explore some political ramifications of this view of emotion narratives.

The relationships among one's physical/mental state, the terms available to make sense of that state, and the broader society are central problematics in the sociology of emotions. Emotions scholars often define feelings as visceral, bodily sensations (such as the elevation of heartbeat, flushing of the cheeks, "jittering" of the stomach) and emotions as the terms a society has for making sense of such prelinguistic sensations (Denzin 1985; Hochschild 1979; Katz 1999; Kemper 1990; Lutz 1986; Rosaldo 1983). While some go so far as to ask whether this distinction itself is not a product of a specific culture (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990), Reddy (1997) argues that language shapes the internal feelings we have, such that nothing we feel can really be called "prelinguistic" with any confidence (see also Gould 2001, 2002).

Hochschild's (1979, 1983) approach to these questions is still particularly illuminating. Seeing little value in distinguishing internal states from the terms we use to talk about them, Hochschild draws from Goffman (1959) to highlight the social component of emotion: the "feeling rules" that define what emotions are appropriate to a given situation, and the surface or deep acting people do to conform to these rules. Hochschild's interest is always in how social power works through these feeling rules—how these rules become conditions of paid and alienated labor, and how these rules differ within and work to define social hierarchies (see also Hochschild 1983, 1989, 1997). In her critique of Goffman she remarks:

> [I]f we are to understand the origin of causes and change in "feeling rules"—this underside of ideology—we are forced back out of a study of the immediate situations in which they show up, to a study of such things as changing relations between classes or the sexes (1979, p. 557).

For Hochschild, feeling rules connect social structure and personality; these rules anchor social hierarchies. Much of Hochschild's work has examined how people assert, internalize and comply with these feeling rules. This paper examines how people produce such structured feeling rules in everyday talk, particularly through narratives of pain.

While many scholars focus on the social construction of emotions such as shame, anger and joy, and how these vary or remain constant for people within a society or across societies (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Hochschild 1979, 1983; Katz 1999; Levy 1973; Lutz 1986; M. Rosaldo 1984; R. Rosaldo 1983; Scheff 1990), I focus on narratives of pain not to explore the construction of that feeling in individuals, nor to illuminate a particular emotion concept. Rather, echoing Swidler (2001), I explore how emotion language can help to change or maintain

elements of social structure (see also Clark 1990). Drawing on interviews with white, middle-class heterosexuals, Swidler focuses on what people say about their emotions, particularly love. She shows how, in American culture, the term can be defined in both romantic and pragmatic terms, as both pleasure and responsibility, such that social arrangements remain stable even as internal experiences fluctuate. The romantic and pragmatic terms Swidler identifies are akin to what I call narratives, culturally available stories that help people to make sense of emotions and social relationships.

Like Swidler, I examine the language and culture of emotions as opposed to individuals' internal experiences. I focus on the emotion narratives that ostensibly non-gay members use to talk about gay men and lesbians as they negotiate the terms of group membership. Unlike the people Swidler hears from, these speakers are not using emotion narratives to make cultural sense of their own internal dispositions. Rather, they refer to others' supposed internal dispositions in order to promote some changes in their social world, in this case in the church's traditional exclusion of lesbians, bisexuals, gay men and transgenderists, and to foreclose others. In this sense, the speakers we hear from come to resemble some of the social movements a number of scholars have examined as they consider how emotions have helped to challenge social order and the distribution of power (see Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Jasper 1998; McAdam and Aminzade 2002; Polletta 1998; Reger 2004; Stein 2001; Taylor 1996, 2000). But these social movements scholars tend to focus on how activists more or less consciously invoke emotions to mobilize people and sustain their activism. By looking closely at narratives of pain when people talk about *others,* we can see how power works through these narratives in ways speakers might not intend or even imagine. In doing so, we see how the *idea* that emotion language indexes a visceral, "true" feeling helps to make this language powerful and effective (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Berlant 1999; Lutz 1986).

The notion of "pain" differs from emotion terms such as shame and anger and bears some discussion. On first glance, it seems to refer to a prelinguistic feeling, an often unpleasant sensation indicating immediate danger, such as the feeling of one's hand touching a hot pan on the stove. The reflexive recoiling can be a result of the sensation itself (rather than of seeing one's hand on the stove and reasoning that it should move), and the term carries the "truth" of that prelinguistic sensation (see Scarry 1985). In the everyday talk we observe here, however, pain is a metaphor linking a range of somehow "unpleasant" feelings to a sense of danger to the self. As the notion of physical pain may reference the discomfort of a body not working correctly, emotional pain may be thought to result from the mind or feelings not working correctly. As physical pain may include a sense of the body's betrayal, as in the case of chronic ailments, emotional pain may be thought to follow from a betrayal of one's own mind or feelings. And as physical pain may reference the sense that one has been injured by another—intentionally, wrecklessly, or accidentally, so may emotional pain. The metaphor of physical pain, of the physical "truth" of prelinguistic injury, gives weight to

the concept of emotional pain. This concept functions as a dead metaphor, one where the dissimilarity between elements of a metaphor becomes invisible (Berlant 1997). Yet the seemingly visceral truth of the referent gives the term *pain* moral weight, implying that certain things *must* be done (Berlant 1999; Brown 1995; Samuels 1992).

Pain also has special salience in everyday Christian notions of what it means to be Christian. First, Christians, like many others, see their duty as to comfort the afflicted and to refrain from injuring or wronging others. Scripture includes numerous references to the punishment of those who have wronged others (for instance, Exodus 6:14–12:32 on the plagues of Egypt) and exhorts people to love and care for others and thus, many conclude, not hurt them (i.e., the Golden Rule, Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:36–40; and the story of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25–37). It also contains numerous themes of righteousness in suffering, such as in the notion of the suffering servant in the Hebrew bible (Isaiah 50:4–11) and in the accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus (i.e., Luke 23), the suffering of Paul (II Corinthians 11:16–29), and in the Beatitudes, such as "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled . . ." (Matthew 5:6, also 5:3–11 NRSV). In the discussions we observe here, these three notions of pain, as something which is bad to cause, good to alleviate, and righteous to experience, serve rhetorically to "redeem" gay men and lesbians so that they may be welcomed into local religious communities.

Mainline Protestants, including United Methodists, have been debating homosexuality contentiously for several decades, and these discussions have escalated in recent years.[3] If they are discussing the issue, members can hardly avoid directing their own comments about homosexuality to the imagined, read, or direct arguments of those with whom they disagree. By seeing how members who disagree with each other define feeling rules, we can see how power works most effectively through the shared assumptions that allow competing groups to enter into discussion at all. In this case, members of the same congregations disagreed with each other over the meaning and value of homosexuality and its relationship to pain, but they shared understandings that both church and pain have certain meanings and that these concepts demand certain response from Christians.

In each case here, members used pain as an umbrella category for a number of emotional states; this common language suggested a possible route to resolving their denomination's broader debates over homosexuality. In each case, members agreed that they as a church should alleviate pain and emotional injury, which they attributed to two general causes: (a) illness, dysfunction, or pathology, in contrast to the church ideal of healing and wholeness; and (b) social rejection in

[3]For more on the UMC's debates about homosexuality, see Ammerman (1997), Cadge (2002), Comstock (1996), and Moon (2004). For sociological perspectives on religious debates about homosexuality, see Becker (1997, 1999), Dillon (1999), Warner (1995), and Zuckerman (1999). For more on faith-based activism among Protestants, see Demerath and Williams (1992), Williams and Demerath (1991), Wuthnow and Evans (2002).

contrast to the church ideal of welcome. Both sides also shared a notion that pain was caused by an earthly spirit of competition within these debates themselves, making some members feel scorned or rejected as "losers" in contrast to the social esteem they saw going to "winners"; this notion of competition was widely agreed to be contrary to the church ideal of universal love.

Speakers may use the emotion languages to convey a truth thought to transcend squabbling among members, but it is precisely in the moment that feelings seem to transcend language and inquiry that they can make social hierarchies and authority *feel* natural and true. In these cases, members on both sides saw gay men's and lesbians' pain as the reason to welcome them into the church, because both saw it as the church's undisputed role to offer comfort. Under this formulation, lesbians and gay men might be called upon at any moment to demonstrate that they were, in fact, in pain. Pain effectively served as a moral entrance fee for gay men's and lesbians' admission to the church, with putative heterosexuals retaining the power to determine whether particular lesbians and gay men demonstrated the appropriate emotions. Retaining this power to determine who belonged and who did not, they maintained the heterosexual dominance of the church. In spite of the differences between these members, it was in their agreement that pain constituted the reason to admit gay men and lesbians to the church that members on both sides invisibly reproduced the hierarchies that structured their communities. We thus see how content and context allow defining feeling rules for others to serve as a form of social control, even as those doing the defining may seek to be more welcoming and egalitarian than their groups have in the past.

BACKGROUND AND METHODS

To appreciate how emotions work in social life, we need to examine how people conceptualize them in their everyday lives. I approach this question using data from my ethnographic observations of debates about homosexuality in two congregations within the United Methodist Church (known as the UMC). The UMC, whose 8.5 million members make it the largest mainline Protestant denomination in the United States (Wuthnow and Evans 2002), resembles many other major Protestant denominations split over issues related to homosexuality. Its official policy during my 1996–98 research (and as of this printing) states that "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching," but members across the country have struggled for decades over that policy. The policy comes up for debate every four years at the denomination's General Conference, where clergy and lay representatives modify the official church rules and principles to be published in *The Book of Discipline*.[4] Furthermore, like many religious groups in America,

[4]Because it was in effect and under debate during my research, I focus on the 1996 *Book of Discipline*, in spite of a more recent edition's existence at the time of publication. For analysis of the General Conference, see Wood and Bloch (1995).

the UMC hosts many more local level struggles, such as those in and around the two Midwestern congregations I examined. These struggles put people in a position to articulate their beliefs not just about sexuality, but about how to know God's intentions for people and how to live the best life possible.

While some consider the United Methodist Church to be liberal among American Protestant denominations, its members vary widely with regard to theology and politics; the two congregations I selected for this study reflect not the extremes of that variation, but two general sides of the divide. I spent fourteen months in my first congregation, which I call City Church, a theologically and politically mixed congregation whose membership leaned towards the liberal. The pastoral staff and many lay leaders were theologically liberal, believing that God's revelation did not stop with the first publication of the Bible, and that Christian duty compelled them to make the church and the world more reflective of what they called "God's all-inclusive love" by celebrating "the rainbow of God's creation" and working for social justice. City Church is a large urban congregation that is a little over half white, with roughly twenty percent of members being black and twenty percent Asian, and prides itself on its diversity. The congregation was dominated by urban professionals; it comprised a large enough population of lawyers for members to joke about it, and the non-lawyer members I met tended to be human resources consultants, executives, upper- and lower-level administrators, health and education professionals and the like. Many pro-gay members allied themselves with the national Reconciling Congregations Program (now called the Reconciling Ministries Network), a program organized to challenge the United Methodist Church's traditional exclusion of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgenderists.

I then spent seven months in the evangelical Missionary Church, located in a small city roughly seventy miles from City Church. Missionary Church was dominated by clergy and laity who believed that the world was essentially fallen and sinful, and that Christian duty meant saving individual souls through evangelical outreach rather than social-structural change. In their view, showing God's love meant showing individuals that they could overcome their own sin and be embraced by God. Many endorsed what they saw as a literal reading of Scripture around homosexuality, although they understood other portions (such as Ephesians 6:5: "Slaves, Obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling" [NRSV]) as needing to be understood in light of the historical context in which they were written. Missionary was largely white, being in a Midwestern city of about eighty-five thousand people, but its members and leadership tried to be open to people of all races and ethnicities, and they collaborated with a local African-American congregation on projects and worship exchanges. A number of member families comprised a professional (often an engineer, computer programmer, or medical professional) father, a stay-at-home mother and children living at home; women who worked outside their homes tended to be teachers, social service providers, and the like. Several members were involved with the state and national movements

to challenge theological liberalism within the denomination, including rejecting the liberal move to affirm homosexuality as part of "God's good creation."

For the purposes of this paper, I define as "liberal" or "pro-gay" those who understood Scriptural injunctions on homosexuality as historically contingent and thus believed that the Bible said nothing negative about the kinds of homosexuality largely experienced in the contemporary United States. I define as "conservative" those who believed that Biblical injunctions against homosexuality applied to contemporary same-sex sexual activity. I use these terms for brevity, in spite of the fact that members articulated more than two distinct viewpoints in these debates, and in spite of the fact that views on homosexuality do not necessarily correspond to liberal or conservative views on other topics. By these definitions, each congregation included members who were both liberal and conservative. My point is not to contrast these two congregations, however, but to look at the emotion languages used by members on two sides of the debates about homosexuality.

When I began this project, I wanted to hear from people who varied in their attitudes about homosexuality. I thus settled on my two congregations, which I located by interviewing clergy and others involved in Protestant debates about homosexuality in the region. After securing permission from the senior pastor of each congregation, I attended services, adult Sunday School classes, Bible studies, meetings, luncheons, retreats, and spent time informally with members, as well as conducting a total of roughly sixty taped interviews with members who were active in their congregations' discussions of homosexuality. I jotted notes during services and formal meetings and elaborated these notes at home soon after; conversations and observations made while I could not take notes I wrote key words down as soon as I could and elaborated on paper later.[5]

While I sought to learn about others and to keep my own influence to a minimum, I became aware early on that in order for members to trust me, I needed to be forthright and participate actively rather than lurk in the shadows. This meant conversing with them as a researcher with my own theoretical assumptions, and engaging their assumptions and understandings of the world as theories as well. When people asked about my perspective, I explained that I was a sociologist studying changing meanings of marriage, family and sexuality, and on the occasions when people asked whether I were Christian (or even more rarely, whether I were gay), I avoided making myself central to the discussion by giving as little information about myself as necessary not to appear to be hiding anything, explaining that my purpose in this research was to understand *their* experiences and worldviews. I thus departed from the typical grounded theory approach to participant-observation (Glaser and Strauss 1967), drawing from

[5]Quotes attributed to people during regular church activities or conversations, rather than tape-recorded interviews, were reconstructed from my notes and may not be the exact wording that was used. When I take a quote from a one-on-one conversation that was not tape-recorded, I note afterwards that it was reconstructed from my notes. Names and defining characteristics have been changed to protect individuals' identities.

some of Burawoy's (1991, 1998) methodological insights. This meant that rather than pretend to be an asocial observer, I participated fully in social interactions to the extent appropriate and on select occasions I challenged members or "messed up" in social interactions. As Burawoy points out, these sincere engagements are certainly no *less* instructive than pretended competence or neutrality, and may be more so. (See Moon 2004 for a deeper discussion of my methods and sites.)

The congregations differed theologically and politically, but similarities among members of the two congregations were striking. All believed in a loving God and in Christians' duty to show love and compassion. All defined sin, generally, as separation from God—a state of being that is intrinsic to being imperfect and human, but which people must constantly strive to overcome with God's guidance. Young and old, new Christians and people who had been Christian their whole lives, members of either congregation in either city might believe homosexuality to be sinful or might not. What determined whether members believed homosexuality to be sinful is a question beyond the scope of this paper, but what is clear is that some members felt very strongly on the question, one way or another, and that this question had demanded a great deal of members' attention in recent years. While the two sides differed a great deal about homosexuality, both posited *pain* as the key to resolving the church's conflict over homosexuality. In order to explore these pain narratives, we now turn to some expressions of that difference.

THE LIBERAL VIEW: HEALING THE WOUNDS FROM ANTI-GAY BELIEFS

City Church's liberals produced an overall narrative with their arguments, that society's rejection caused gay men's and lesbians' pain, and ultimately led to illness or dysfunction. Their implication was that this resulting illness proved that rejection was wrong in the first place.In addition, these members posited gay people's pain as the reason to welcome them into the church, because they saw pain as indicative of a sincere desire to belong. While City Church's conservatives, those who opposed changing church policy, expressed their own feelings of pain at feeling dismissed because of their views, many liberals saw gay pain as trumping that pain. Pro-gay members could link gay pain to physical pain and even death, while at the same time blaming this pain on the denomination's traditionally anti-gay stance. The denomination, in this narrative, had a choice between two extremes; it could be the source of comfort, or the wounding attacker.

I began to attend and observe City Church as it concluded a two-year hiatus on debating whether the congregation should officially join the nationwide, pro-gay Reconciling Congregations Program, or RCP. As the debates reopened, I found that many members were frustrated that debates over homosexuality divided the congregation into two camps, each feeling the need to win against the other, and "wounding" each other in the process. The Reverend Curtis Oakes, a pastor at City

Church, reflected on the debate two years prior, and in doing so, he distinguished "wounding" from proper Christian action by referring to a book of the Bible, one of Paul's letters to the Corinthian church, saying:

> That debate. It was painful. It was hurtful. The problem is that there always has to be a third option. When two sides are so divided, and everyone starts to get such a personal stake in being on either one pre-defined side or its opposite, they end up saying things they can't possibly support or maybe even believe. The positions get solidified, and the third option, not the middle, but outside that debate, is where the answer and resolution lie.
>
> The thing that was missing two years ago was love. In Corinthians, as you know, the Corinthians were all fighting with each other and Paul says to the Corinthian church that without love, you have nothing. Wisdom fades with age, and he goes through all the things people thought they had, and pointed out what's wrong with them. And the one thing that matters is love, but people were saying some really hateful things here. I think love is the most important thing.

In this image of pain, the need to defeat the other caused people to say hateful and hurtful things, and thus to disrupt or injure others' sense of self. For Reverend Oakes, the ideal of Christian love should replace the earthly desire to create winners and losers, since that earthly desire causes pain everywhere.

Pro-gay members often recognized that more "traditional" members felt pain, but in their narratives, the church's injurious anti-gay policies and beliefs caused gay men and lesbians to feel a pain far more severe and even life-threatening than the pain of their opponents. Rather than the more ephemeral emotional anguish of having one's worldview challenged, in this view, anti-gay policies wounded gay men and lesbians, leading to the clinically diagnosable pain of self-hating dysfunction and deathly illness. For instance, when City Church reopened its debates about homosexuality after the two-year hiatus, supporters organized a series of four "Reconciliation Meetings" as part of what they called their "healing process," (itself suggesting that people were pained or wounded). Members of City Church were invited to attend these meetings to express their concerns or ask questions about homosexuality or the Reconciling Congregation Program. About 12–20 people attended each meeting.

At one meeting, a number of members expressed concerns that advocates of pro-gay politics risked destroying the church by demanding change from people who were not ready for it. Alex Carter, a 30-year old ministry student, tried to disagree at the meeting, and a few days later, we spoke about that disagreement. After a lengthy discussion of pain and injustice in the church, he remarked:

> I wish some things would be said at those meetings. I wish someone would show up and give witness to what the church's stance on homosexuality can do. Stand up and say, "Because I thought I was so unworthy, I lived this life of many sexual partners, and not feeling like I was worth doing it safely, and now I have HIV or AIDS." [Reconstructed in notes.]

In Alex's narrative, the church's anti-gay stance injured some gay people's self-esteem, causing them to feel that their own lives were not worth protecting, which

in turn led them to put themselves at risk. Alex wished that gay people would give witness to their own pain, in this case, the incontrovertible physical pain of AIDS or HIV, believing that such a witness would change church members' minds by showing them the results of their actions or igniting their compassion. Alex rhetorically linked the degenerative physical illness to the denial of self-worth. He saw this life-threatening combination as trumping whatever discomfort might be felt by those who believed the church should not endorse homosexuality. In this narrative, the church caused both gay pain and the sickness that led to more pain, and needed to stop causing it.

In a different meeting, Nancy Cook testified to the legitimacy of gay pain as a basis for changing hearts and minds. Nancy was a fiftyish married woman whose community development work stemmed from the social justice theology she had learned during the Civil Rights movement. At this particular meeting, the discussion turned to the question of whether homosexuality was innate and therefore God-given, or whether it was Christians' duty to preserve social order by following religious codes against forbidden practices. Nancy interjected by sharing her own thought process, saying:

> I too was at a point of thinking about society collapsing, I had feared that we would be saying anything goes. [I was thinking] about God's intentions for us, and thinking, "If people choose to reject God's plan for us, to reject their creative ability God has given us, then they are rejecting God." But then I came to think about the *pain* that homosexuals must be feeling, all the rejection, that comes from the social structure. And, I just saw the movie *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert;* [it] is really shocking, to see the pain people are in that they feel they have to do such —*wild*—things, just to be able to say, "this is who I am."[6]

For Nancy, the pivotal question had been whether homosexuals rejected God, by rejecting their "creative" (reproductive) ability, or whether it was the case that homosexuals are actually constituted as gay by God (saying, "this is who I am"), and then rejected by society for being how God made them. Nancy developed a narrative wherein gay people felt rejected by society or the church, which led them to feel pain and thus do wild things. In this description, "pain" seems to refer to a sense of deep shame from being rejected by society. (See Goffman 1967; Katz 1999; and Scheff 1990 on shame.) Like Alex, she posited anti-gay beliefs as the cause of metaphorical injury to the gay self.

In an interview with me later, Nancy elaborated on her analysis of the film. She tried to work out the meanings and origins of the "shocking" things she saw gay people doing, framing shocking behavior and dress as the pain of difference and exclusion. She compared the outrageous performances in the movie and in the New York and San Francisco Pride parades to "Black is Beautiful," later positing gay outrageousness as a means for people to construct more positive self-images, combating the negative images that said to gay people, "You're a walking sin;

[6]*The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (directed by Stephen Elliott, 1994) is about three performers, two drag queens and a male-to-female transsexual, traveling in their bus (Priscilla) from Sydney into the Australian outback.

you're abomination." She reinterpreted such outrageousness as a way to help gay people to compensate for the negative things society says about them, to find "healing" and realize that "Christ's death was for *everyone*."

Nancy hesitated to articulate and then wrestled with her own shock at these displays. She struggled to be accepting, and indeed, she brought to our interview a copy of a sermon she felt captured the essence of Christianity, Paul Tillich's (1948) "You Are Accepted." In Nancy's understanding, shock was not an appropriate emotion for a Christian to feel. To be Christian, she needed to feel more empathetic and accepting. She adjusted her feelings (echoing research by Allahyari 2000, 2001), by calling into her awareness the context of a society that feeds some people—in these examples black people and gay men—negative self-images that make them feel bad about who or how they are. Here, gay pain inspired Nancy to change her mind about the sinfulness of homosexuality; in effect, pain legitimated otherwise "shocking" displays of homosexuality by fixing blame on a hostile society. She implied that if the church were more accepting of homosexuality, gay people would not need to go wild; they could act and dress more normally. Both she and Alex posited confessing their pain as gay people's price of admission, a fee which could help the church to realize its own ideal of being loving and accepting. Nancy's narrative implies another admission fee, that looking and acting less "wild" might be part of the bargain as well.[7]

If we draw from her earlier comment, we can see that her new narrative of pain moved her to understand gay people as rejected, painfully, by society, rather than themselves actively rejecting society, or God. Nancy supplemented what she had seen as the timeless truth that God created people to reproduce with another truth. If they're in that much pain, she seemed to say, it can't be their conscious choice. She characterized homosexuality as "the struggle that didn't go away. The guy . . . *had* had a wife," suggesting that a gay male character in the movie had tried to conform, but even with his struggle he couldn't help but be gay. Even publicly outrageous Gay Pride parade contingents did not defiantly reject social norms, in her view; they were painfully rejected. The anger and defiance of militant gay movements, including movements that actively rejected dominant norms, became a symptom of pain, and pain became truth. In her narrative, because society's rejection caused gay people pain, society (and Christianity) should accept gay people as they are.

There are a number of reasons that narratives of gay pain appealed to these members. First, many gay men and lesbians really did express pain, for instance, because of the way they felt the church treated them or because church conflicts

[7]It is striking in both of these accounts that gay men stand in as figures for a more gender-neutral conception of sexual non-normativity. While space does not permit me to theorize this gendering of homosexuality, I use the ambiguous phrase "gay people" to signal the intended neutrality but manifest androcentrism of members' narratives.

upset them. Furthermore, a pain narrative changed minds; Nancy Cook herself claimed to have changed her mind based on her reflections on gay people's pain. It fit into the narrative wherein church members, echoing scripture, are called to tend to those in need.[8] Finally, this notion of pain resonated with more conservative members as well. Given the widespread availability of pain narratives in contemporary American social movements (see Berlant 1997; Brown 1995), we can see this particular pain language as part of a common vernacular. Specifically, liberal members associated pain with losing a human (rather than godly) contest, with illness, and with rejection; we shall see how these themes appeared in conservative uses of pain language as well, thus forming the two sides' shared definition of the emotional situation.

Many liberal members did not believe that gay men and lesbians were always in pain. Yet faced with opposition within their congregation, liberal City Church members found themselves arguing that gay people should be welcome *because* they were in pain. This move was exemplified in pro-gay members' efforts to arrange for gay people to address groups in the church and talk about their pain—if not on their own, as a response to organizers' questions or prompts—in a genre one lesbian member, in a one-on-one conversation, cynically called the "gay show and tell." Liberal church members effectively committed gay members to being in pain, so that the church could look upon them with pity and compassion.

Among liberals, a language of others' pain helped to frame homosexuality as belonging in the church rather than as a defiant rejection of church teachings. Pain became the reason for "us," the putatively heterosexual church, to welcome "them," putatively pained homosexuals, in order to comfort them. To someone with a hammer, it is said, everything looks like a nail; to a church with a spoken mission to heal and care for those in need, gay men and lesbians could be understood as pained souls.

For many liberals, of course, pain would be overcome by the church ceasing to be the kind of place that caused it. However, in the discussions observed here, liberals were unable to articulate that sort of long-term plan, precisely because it lacked common ground with their more conservative churchmates' perspective. Liberals' desire to make the church welcome gay people and affirm homosexuality was constrained by the fact that they shared both and denomination and, at City Church, a congregation with members who felt homosexuality to be inherently sinful. To keep the conversation alive, the liberals at City Church could not (or at least, did not) threaten to bring about great changes in the church. Their terms were shaped by those with whom they debated. Because of its unstated and multiple connotations, the language of pain helped these members to find a semblance of common ground.

[8]For instance, the scriptural story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25–37) suggested to many members that they should help those in need.

THE CONSERVATIVE VIEW: HOMOSEXUALITY AS PAIN OR SYMPTOM

In this section, I consider the uses of pain narratives among those who believed homosexuality to be sinful. While a language of gay pain could make gay men and lesbians seem sympathetic, it worked counter to the goals of the pro-gay members as well. In this case, this "tactical polyvalence" (in Foucault's [1978] terms) came from the sources different groups attributed to pain. Nancy's and Alex's strategy for gaining acceptance for gay men and lesbians could be effective, but it did not necessarily lead to equality in the church, nor did it necessarily change people's theological views about homosexuality. When we examine conservative members' narratives of gay pain, we see themes similar to those found among pro-gay members—winners and losers, pathology, and rejection. In this case however, members define homosexuality as a state of inherent pain, and as a state which causes pain. In this narrative, homosexuality and pain are caused by dysfunction or illness, as well as by rejection, but homosexuality also causes pain by promulgating the competition for winners and losers, or betraying others' expectations.

Pro-gay members saw pain as a result of the church's and society's anti-gay beliefs; by likening the church to those who wrongly inflict pain, this formulation "proved" to liberals that these views were wrong that those in pain, were in fact, among the "blessed meek." Conservatives could also attribute gay pain to wrong-headed anti-gay beliefs and actions, but it did not follow for them that homosexuality was therefore a virtue. Missionary Church member Tina Harrison was a young stay-at-home mom, who used her previous training as a high-school teacher to teach adult Sunday school and Bible Studies. She explained to me her understanding that the church must be welcoming to all people, while helping members to overcome their sin. As she explained her understanding of sin to me as separation from God, a language of pain, of hurting, came into her narrative. She remarked:

> The thing about adultery, homosexuality, all sin is sin in God's eyes. If I tell a little white fib, God does not draw close to me then, because he doesn't partake in sin. If I am involved in adultery, God does not draw close to me then; I have shut my communication off with him. The difference between a little white lie, and adultery, is that adultery has *major consequences*. And homosexuality does too. It has a lot of major consequences. It hurts people. That's why [the Apostle] Paul comes down on that so hard on, those, because they're very self-ce—all sin is very self-centered but those have more significant impacts that hurt others.

When I asked her how homosexuality hurt others, she faltered a bit in her response, which was punctuated with pauses and laughs.

> How does homosexuality hurt others? You want me to tell you all the many ideas I have in mind? [Laughs nervously, pauses to think.] For one thing, number one, I think, it hurts themselves. I, I've known a lot of different gay people, and I've never seen one of them, truly happy.

> It hurts family members a lot, especially my dad—if my brother were to say that he were gay, that would be very hurtful to my dad. And that's not to say that my dad is right, but that what my brother had done would be hurtful to my dad. Does that make sense? But it's also hurtful to the gay person when we don't accept them, so I'm not just saying it's one-way, it's a two-way thing.

In saying she had never met a happy gay person, Tina implied that homosexuality was itself a state of pain, as opposed to a feeling caused wrongly by others. While Tina implied that pain takes many other forms, in her parallel to adultery and in her hypothetical example, someone acting counter to another's trust and reasonable expectations produces the pain of betrayal. Tina defined sin as distance from God, understanding it as something that causes God to not draw close to a person, especially when that person hurt others. Just as in City Church, causing pain was, to Tina, a clear marker of sin. But because Tina knew homosexuality to be sinful, she knew it *must* hurt others. Central to Tina's definition of homosexuality as sinful was a definition of sin as causing pain, thus she believed that homosexuals hurt others. In the latter case, it was the *revelation* that "hurt" those hypothetically upset by the news of a family member's homosexuality, not the sexual acts or desires themselves.

Nonetheless, as at City Church, the assumption was that Christians should not hurt others; the difference was in whether members saw homosexuals primarily as the ones doing the hurting or as the injured others. In Tina's narrative, gay pain did not prove that God approved of homosexuality; gay pain was caused by homosexuality itself, by gay people's *sin*. While the church was supposed to heal pain rather than cause it, gay people set themselves apart by hurting others. This narrative is the converse of Alex Carter's: while he saw the church needing to confess its sin in hurting gay men and lesbians, Tina saw gay people as needing to confess their sin in causing pain.

While seeing lesbians and gay men as pained did not necessarily make homosexuality seem virtuous, the language of pain could also be used to further posit homosexuality as not just sinful but emotionally pathological. While liberal narratives posited society's rejection as indirectly causing some gay people to *get* sick, conservatives posited homosexuality as an illness itself. Many conservatives, in these congregations and in the broader movement, attributed gay pain of the sort Nancy Cook identified, to the dysfunctional conditions that they believed caused homosexuality in the first place. Pain figured prominently in the discourse of the conservative Transforming movement, a Mainline Protestant movement which sought to heal homosexuals and transform them into persons with a more "Godly," non-homosexual lifestyle.

For instance, Missionary Church member Pete Vogel, a seminary administrator in his late twenties, directed his compassion toward the vulnerable people he saw as manipulated by the gay movement. Pete wished to extend compassion to gay men and lesbians, understanding them to be in pain. He stood firm in his belief that homosexuality was sinful, like many of the things that can tempt people.

He was aware that sometimes people with his beliefs had been characterized as intolerant, and he wanted to prove that accusation wrong.

Pete Vogel explicitly criticized the debates between the pro-gay Reconciling and the conservative Transforming movements, saying:

> I almost see it as, [liberal Methodists are] too quick just to celebrate an identity. [. . .] There are some folks [living a homosexual lifestyle] that have [histories of] abuse and things like that. [. . .] If we're in ministry together, then let's bring those people to a point where they can deal with the pain, and experience the healing, and experience the redemption. Rather than using them as a political toy. [. . . B]oth sides are using homosexuals as tokens for their own agendas. And I think the loser is not going to be the Reconciling or the Transforming [movement]. It'll be the person who's in need of healing.

For Pete, both of the Protestant movements dealing with homosexuality could use people for agendas, using them as "a political toy," and elsewhere he referred to the situation as kings and queens, using "pawns" to fight their battles. In Pete's narrative, this sort of instrumental thinking and instrumental "use" or objectification of people was contrary to the work of God and the church. For him the church's primary function was "healing," for homosexuals and everyone else in need. Like Curtis Oakes at City Church, Pete saw "winning" (which requires someone else to lose) as contrary to proper Christian goals. His response to the gay movement was similar to liberal City member Nancy Cook's: she too saw gay people as acceptable to the extent that she could see their "wild" actions as stemming not from intentional political analysis and critique, but from pain. In both narratives, critique does not belong in church; rather, church should be a place for the healing of pain. They differ as to whether they believe the church can and should heal homosexuality itself.

Unlike Tina, who saw gay people as harming others, Pete focused on gays as essentially *harmed*. While Pete believed homosexuality to be sinful, he made it clear that he had nothing against people who identified as gay or lesbian. Pete said:

> For somebody who comes to me and says, "Pete, I don't care about a gay gene, this is really who I am, this is who God made me," I don't hold any condemnation to them. Because to me, "Hey, I don't blame you. You're a pawn. You're a pawn. You've been burnt, probably from the church. And we as Evangelicals have created a place, maybe, where you don't feel safe." Which is sad.

Pete saw homosexuals not as bad people, but as victims—of their abusers or tormenters, of the gay movement that used them as pawns, sometimes even of the church that "burned" them. In his analysis, pain emerges from victimization, including injury to the self, betrayal or endangerment. Victimization did not, however, redeem homosexuality in his eyes; rather, it explained homosexuality in such a way that the church could reach out to its victims—to heal them of their homosexuality.

In conservative narratives, homosexuality and pain were both symptoms of dysfunction—by healing pain, the church could heal people of homosexuality

itself. Framing their efforts in terms of Christian love and healing, terms their liberal counterparts could not easily dispute, conservatives could use narratives of pain to welcome homosexuals in order to help them renounce their sin and change their sexual identity. Like Jesus to a sinful woman he met at a well, they could show love while saying, "Go, and sin no more" (John 8:11, KJV). As in the liberal case, narratives of pain helped to endorse welcoming gay men and lesbians into the church, but on the speakers' own terms.

COMFORT, PAIN, AND POLITICS

The ideals of church as a place of healing and mutual care shaped how people could think about homosexuality, and provided the sense of shared faith in spite of members' very different beliefs about whether homosexuality were sinful. When we juxtapose these two narratives, it becomes easier to see what they had in common, and thus what common assumptions might become accepted as the sides worked toward reconciliation. These common assumptions—that gay men and lesbians are in pain, that pain is unquestionably bad and must be comforted—are reproduced as the taken-for-granted, foundational assumptions in the debate, foreclosing other views from entering into the picture.

Most immediately, these narratives worked together to assert that gay men and lesbians were in pain in the first place, and approached the church needing comfort rather than demanding equality. To Missionary's Pete Vogel as well as to the pro-gay Nancy Cook of City Church, a language of gay pain made gay men and lesbians unthreatening; their suffering rhetorically purified them. To the extent that they ceased to threaten other members' worldviews, they could become part of the church. They could even change Christianity, moving away from the more traditional stance that could "burn" gay people, but they would not change its essential self-definition as heterosexual.[9] It certainly seems that liberals' labeling and problematization of anti-gay beliefs help to chip away at the legitimacy of overtly anti-gay statements and policies, but we must attend to what emerges to fill in the gap—is it equality, or in what ways might it work as a different form of heterocentrism?

As in other cases (Cadena-Roa 2002; Jacobs 1996; Perry 2002), emotions fit into culturally available narratives, demanding certain outcomes. By analyzing these narratives, we can begin to see what both sides took for granted: the premise that church was a zone of heterosexuality. This premise, in effect, powerfully defined the uses members could make of the vocabulary at their disposal and shaped how they could act. Narratives of pain left untouched members' grounding assumptions about whether or not homosexuality was sinful. Conservatives agreed with liberals that the church should be a place of welcome and healing for everyone;

[9]See Warner (1993) for analyses of how heterosexuality structures social institutions.

thus, both saw the pain frame as a legitimate rationale for the church to welcome gay men and lesbians. Almost all of those we have heard from recalled the pain that individual Christians or the church itself has inflicted on gay people, and they saw that fact as unfortunate. But in effect, gay men and lesbians were defined as belonging in church to the extent that they could be defined as pained. None of the members active in these discussions questioned that gay men and lesbians felt pain, or that it was bad to feel pain.

Whether a speaker thought that homosexuality was a sin or a gift or just happenstance, the language of pain reproduced the power and privilege that non-gay members had—the power to decide to give or not give comfort and the privilege to "just be," unmarked by their own special pain.[10] While putatively heterosexual members were, on the whole, expected to display a full range of human emotion, they effectively required that gay men and lesbians evince certain forms of pain in order to be members (see Rubin 1993). The assumptions shared by both liberals and conservatives, that they, the Church, should comfort the afflicted and care for those in pain, left gays and lesbians in both cases to take the latter role (the afflicted) even as they sought belonging in the former. In their efforts to create narratives of welcoming, putatively heterosexual members defined feeling rules for gays and lesbians, and by producing those rules, they retained for themselves the structural position at the top of the sexual hierarchy in the church—the very hierarchy some of them wished to dismantle.

Echoing Swidler's focus on emotion languages as devices for making sense of life, I have shown how narratives of pain served as a resource in church struggles over the proper response to homosexuality, allowing members to speak to each other (see also Williams 1995). I have also shown how people in positions of relative power (i.e. putative heterosexuals) used different narratives to define feeling rules, reproducing social hierarchies and naturalizing these hierarchies with a language of feelings. These languages, in fact, worked to produce gay and lesbian subjects by shaping how gay and lesbian members could legitimately present themselves in church space.

Consider the remarks of Jane Redmond, a lesbian in her mid-thirties, at a forum where she and her life partner, Becky Lee, were invited to speak as guests in a City Church speakers' series on Christian relationships:

> We've had members say they love us, they love the sinner, and hate the sin, or however they put it. But you know, really, that's a hateful thing to say. You tell me you love me, salve your conscience, and then leave me to go home and lose sleep. It's just hateful. . . . It's painful, to have the church stop being the home it's been for us.

Jane's comments highlight the emotions central to church debates about homosexuality. From reading her words, one might ascertain that she was angry. But when she made these remarks, she spoke quietly and stared ahead of her, not making eye

[10]Halley (1993) analyzes a similar dynamic in juridical settings.

contact with others present at the meeting. And she concluded her remarks with a confession of pain. Because "pain" could be understood in the many ways we have seen, reference to it could obscure the differences between the sides by allowing people to hear what they wanted to hear. Jane seemed to use pain language strategically; by tempering her language with references to "pain," she made her own remarks seem less threatening, and therefore less challenging, to those who disagreed with her, even as she suggested that they might be "hateful."

In American society, we might consider it "natural" for someone in physical pain to feel anger, cursing at a hot pan as it burns him or clenching his teeth to resist the urge to hit someone back. Many social scientists see such a response as biologically hardwired into human beings (Thoits 1989). But in these congregations, anger never appeared as a legitimate response to gay pain in the feeling rules laid out for gay and lesbian church members. The potentially political action of marching in a gay pride parade had to be understood not as a righteously angry march for justice or even as a reasoned critique by equals, but as an outcry of the pained. Deborah Gould (2001) has shown how, in the context of the gay movement in the 1980s, a mix of ambivalent feelings could be mobilized into collective, righteous anger, fueling the effective political interventions of ACT-UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). In the cases examined here, such anger was not legitimate for the gay men and lesbians seeking inclusion. Anger is not necessarily any more politically effective than pain, but we must consider why it seemed so important that gay men and lesbians be defined as *pained* in this particular context.

In their introduction to a special issue on emotions in social movements, McAdam and Aminzade (2002) have called for sociologists to attend to how emotions can depoliticize and demobilize people as well as politicize and mobilize them. In the debates we have seen here, the language of pain effectively depoliticized gay and lesbian members in three ways. First, pain language itself turned members' sights inward rather than outward. While people express anger *at* others, demanding their change or apology, pain reflects solely on one's inner state. As we saw in the remarks highlighted above, members reconciled gay political action and critique with their desire to welcome gay people into the church by positing the former as a result of inner pain rather than anger at the church or society. Second, because many of the gay members I spoke with at City Church did not characterize their emotional states as overwhelmed by pain, they remained quiet about their homosexuality. From this perspective, it seems that whatever other reasons they may have had to be quiet about their sexual orientations, this reticence allowed them to avoid the pity of their fellow church members; it allowed them to function in church as ushers, Sunday School teachers, choir members and the like, without the burden of having constantly to demonstrate a pain they did not necessarily feel. They might have acted similarly to avoid having any singular emotion used to define them. This reticence did not preclude gay members and their allies from organizing, but it is difficult to imagine that the congregation would not have had

a more visible and demanding gay population if this notion of gay pain were not in place.

Finally, even as liberals implicitly attempted to criticize anti-gay policies, by casting gay men and lesbians as pained, members silenced potential critiques of the church. Whereas emotions have been central to many social movements, as the recent move in social movement theory shows, in these cases when members posited pain as central to gay experience, they *negated* the critique gay men and lesbians might make—of denominational policies or members' beliefs. Pain became their extenuating circumstance, and the people in it required healing and comfort, not to be engaged as rational adults. Pain narratives may be useful or even necessary to one phase of social change, to be supplanted later by rhetorics that imply a more egalitarian outcome may be within reach. But activists should be aware of the limitations of pain language and be strategic about it. Focusing on collective goals rather than collective pain could well prove more generative and less self-defeating (Brown 1995).

By being aware of how emotion narratives shape feeling rules, activists and others might also focus on changing feeling rules to make them more egalitarian, as the women's movement has worked to do (Hochschild 1983). What I call narratives of pain have been central to many movements, from abolition (Sánchez-Eppler 1992) to more contemporary movements such as those around homelessness (Allahyari 2000), breast cancer (Klawiter 1999), multiculturalism and the women's movement (Brown 1995), and some of the backlash to multiculturalism (Berlant 1997). This analysis suggests that a more broad-range historical-comparative study may be in order, which would examine when narratives of pain serve stated goals and when they fail to, and how such narratives fit into competing movements.

To conclude, Hochschild shows how certain forms of power work through feeling rules, but if we are to fully understand these processes, we need to look at how people produce these rules in the course of everyday life—not necessarily coherently, but as a nonetheless effective process of *bricolage.* I have shown here how attention to emotion narratives can help us as we seek to understand struggles over social change. Seeing how feeling rules are produced within hierarchies sheds light on the reproduction of those hierarchies. At the same time, we have seen how the particular weight of pain narratives can obscure both differences and similarities in opposed views, thus generating consequences some actors do not intend. When we think critically about American political culture, we must attend to the key role played by narratives of pain and other emotions—how they differ, and most importantly, what they naturalize.

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