Micropanics: A Theoretical Explanation for Anti-Gay Hate Crime Perpetration

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Abstract

Lesbians and gay men continue to be framed as a threat to traditional American social institutions, particular the family. Recent research in the social sciences has identified attitudes toward homosexuality, belief in homosexuality as a moral choice, and heterosexism as significant predictors of hate crime victimization (Alden and Parker 2005). Unfortunately, prior research has failed to explain how certain individuals who maintain platforms of sexual prejudice make the leap to committing hate crimes against lesbians and gay men. By incorporating elements of Cohen's (1972) moral panics, Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory and Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization this paper proposes that anti-gay hate crimes serve as isolated incidents of moral panic referred to herein as micropanics.

A Theory of Anti-gay Hate Crimes

Criminological theory includes explanations for a wide array of criminal and delinquent behaviors. Crime can be and is perpetrated for an equally broad variety of reasons. Hate crimes are unique crimes in that the focus of the crime is often on the meaning and impact imparted by the offense itself (Perry, 2002). Perpetrators generally acquire no tangible gains, financial or otherwise in the process of most hate crimes. In terms of bias crimes committed against perceived members of the gay community, the primary motive is often purportedly to express violent disapproval of another person's perceived sexual orientation or "save face" when one's own sexuality is perceived to be threatened. Our knowledge of bias-motivated crimes is still somewhat vague and theories involving hate crime motivations are largely hypothetical (Dunbar, 2002).

Individually, research has shown that an emphasis on traditional gender roles and a belief in homosexuality as a moral choice contribute to explaining negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Whitley, 1990; Lyons, 2006). Together, these attitudinal indicators contribute to prejudice in the form of heterosexism which has been shown to be a significant predictor of violence against lesbians and gay men (Fernald, 1995; Alden and Parker, 2005). Although the aforementioned factors serve as indicators of the propensity to commit hate crimes on the basis of sexual orientation, few theories have proffered explanations as to why people commit these heinous acts of violence. Throughout the remainder of this manuscript, rather than discussing sexual orientation-based hate crimes, I refer more specifically to 'anti-gay' hate crimes in an effort to differentiate hate crimes committed against gay men and lesbians from those committed against heterosexuals or bisexuals.

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Scholars such as Allport (1954) agree that mere prejudice can, given the proper conditions, evolve into aggression and violence. But sexual prejudice alone does not lead individuals or groups to perpetrate hate crimes against sexual minorities. In many cases, people simply go about living their lives without so much as a single public objection to the sexuality of others. In other cases, people funnel their prejudice into active participation in social groups or political action committees centered on maintaining the current social and political landscape concerning matters related to sexual orientation. These non-violent social activities, which fall well within current legal and social guidelines for acceptable behavior, still serve as outlets for expressing disapproval of sexualities that go against the heteronormative standard.

Another group, consisting primarily of young white males, frequently relies on violent acts directed at members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community in order to communicate their sexual prejudice and strike fear throughout the gay community. Without access to legitimate forms of social and political power, this population utilizes more traditional forms of expressing biases; namely through physical violence. Public displays of violence against gay men and lesbians also serve the function of conveying a platform of masculinity and a disapproval of anyone who violates traditional gender norms. According to Kimmel (2006), for men, homophobia is simply a fear of other men, and this fear leads men to exact a toll on those seen as less manly (e.g. gay men and all women). Homophobia, a term which is typically used nowadays to refer to general discomfort with non-heterosexuals, is also referred to as heterosexism or sexual prejudice (Herek, 2000). The most frequently cited theory used to explain the motivation for committing anti-gay hate crimes is social identity theory.

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) was originally developed as a way to help understand intergroup discrimination. The central proposition of the theory is that each social unit or group creates membership criteria that favor the in-group at the expense of other out-groups. According to this theory, in an effort to positively differentiate our group(s) from other groups, we emphasize our perceived superiority on some valued dimension (religion, race, sexual orientation, etc.). We do not belong to one social group; rather we maintain membership in multiple groups. As a result, we also maintain multiple social identities. Our beliefs and actions in any given context match up with the characteristics of our relative in-group and our corresponding social identity. According to social identity theory it is therefore our desire to differentiate ourselves from other groups that drives people to perpetrate hate crimes against members of other groups

> Heterosexuals use denigration and discrimination, including violence, to create a negative evaluation of gay men and lesbians and thereby to create a positive differentiation between the two groups; this results in increased personal self-esteem for them (Hamner, 1992:182).

Social identity theory has already been utilized to help explain bias-motivated crimes (Dunbar, 2002). Although this social psychological theory continues to show promise in explaining anti-gay hate crime perpetration, it has a major shortcoming in that it fails to explain why certain people choose sexuality as the matter of differentiation. There are many other characteristics upon which a group could choose to differentiate themselves. Social identity theory therefore fails to define why, for example, an individual or group of people may choose to discriminate against one out-group (e.g. gay men) and not another (e.g. African American men). In terms of explaining specific forms of hate crimes, the theory seems all too general. It is necessary therefore to develop an explanation regarding why sexual orientation is the chosen dimension upon which certain people use violence to differentiate themselves.

Messages and Reactions

Many scholars speculate that interpersonal crimes are committed by people simply based on their association with delinquent peer groups, or by people whose families instill them with negative perceptions of others. However, with an issue as widespread as violence directed at sexual minorities, we are better served by stepping back and considering the influence of more macro-level interactions. The attitudes held within our peer networks, our family, and even ourselves often originate, in one form or

another, in the teachings of the greater society. We are inundated daily by messages which are transmitted through the media, political venues, schools, religious organizations, and numerous other social institutions. These messages are typically packaged as factual truths and they are often intended to instill within each of us a sense of conformity, fear, and sometimes panic. After all, without a basic sense of conformity to a set of core values how is a society to maintain any level of cohesion? Of course, this model of top-down influence is overly simplistic.

Cultural messages reach us from all directions. Foucault's (1977) notion of the carceral society explains how power is not centrally located. Rather it is shared in differing degrees among all members of a society. Foucault's panoptic model of surveillance has been become a principle of social organization in contemporary western societies. A scowl extended by a random stranger lets us know when we are out of line just as well as a sanction from a formal judicial body. This type of surveillance is all too familiar to us as we learn how to act and behave in modern society. By the same token, cultural messages are disseminated throughout society and they reach us from members of our inner circles as well as from larger institutions. Although power, and therefore messages, are conveyed to us by agents from multiple levels, it is often agreed upon that the origin of these messages is the broader society. Some people are bound to reference how a power elite is in control of multiple social institutions and therefore exercises the greatest influence on our beliefs and attitudes (Mills, 1963). Regardless of who is in control of the messages passed on to us from society or polity, the messages we receive influence our attitudes and ultimately our behaviors. Under select conditions cultural messages traverse mere fear and leave us with what Stanley Cohen (1972) calls a sense of moral panic.

Moral panics surface in situations where a group of people have been defined as a threat to societal values and interests. A moral panic is oftentimes a societal gut reaction to a perceived threat, yet in other situations moral panic has "more serious and lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself." (Cohen, 1972:1). Homosexuality has been the impetus of numerous moral panics over the years (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009). Fear and caution continue to be expressed toward members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered communities throughout much of the United States. Acts of violence against gay men and lesbians are intended to help maintain a conservative moral order based in traditional, heterosexual norms.

Moral panics frequently have their bases in stereotypes and misconstrued opinions of marginalized groups found in the mass media. Stereotypes such as the hyper-feminine gay male or the hyper-masculine lesbian continue to be perpetuated throughout American society. Messages in the media concerning the condemnation of non-heterosexual sexualities are purported to originate in conservatives' dialog over traditional views of marriage and family. Further, widespread panic typically results from reactions to images and messages conveyed through the media by people who occupy the conservative or right wing of the political spectrum (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009). Public fear over the perceived detrimental impact of lesbians and gay men on social institutions such as the family and the church has been documented for decades. However, what is less often discussed is how broad public fear of lesbians and gay men can translate into individual action against sexual minorities. It is my assertion that moral panic can manifest itself in the form of *micropanics*, which are isolated manifestations of moral panic in which an individual or group carries out a violent act in reaction to the widely-held belief that heterosexuality is the only socially acceptable form of sexuality.

Cohen (1972) noted how moral panics often occur when a segment of the population emerges and becomes defined as a threat to society. Over the past thirty years lesbians and gay men have been increasingly depicted as a threat to traditional American society. This broad moral panic affects people on an individual level, and manifests itself in the form of heterosexist beliefs and potentially micropanics. This explanation for anti-gay hate crimes varies from other criminological theories in that the perpetrators of these crimes appear to maintain strong ties to societal beliefs. I am not alone in seeing a link between the motivations of bias-crime offenders and the fears held by large contingents of the society from which they emerge. As Dunbar (2002, 201) points out

> …bias offenders are not thought of as credible commentators of our society. Yet it is exactly this that we ought to consider. The bias crime carries within it a larger message about our social conditions and dilemmas. The bias offender often demonstrates palpably the further extensions of widely adhered to fears and frustrations concerning intergroup problems.

Offenders of anti-gay hate crimes are not acting upon deviant beliefs—rather, they are physically communicating, and thus adhering to, the beliefs held by much of society to the moral position of the majority (Herek & Capitano, 1996). However, in line with differential association and social bonding theory, perpetrators of violent hate crimes do reject society's mores against the use of physical violence as they engage in violent acts against marginalized populations. The final piece of the puzzle is to explain how perpetrators justify their actions.

Most theories of crime argue that delinquent behavior is based on strong ties to a small social group or peer network and weak ties to the greater society (Sutherland, 1947; Hirschi, 1969; Akers, 1985). Contrary to these theories, the argument here is that perpetrators of anti-gay hate crimes actually have very strong ties to the greater society. In fact, perpetrators of hate crimes claim to vehemently adhere to dominant ideologies and they reference this adherence in order to neutralize their otherwise heinous acts. The employment of certain techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza, 1957) helps to minimize both the guilt and blame typically associated with such acts of physical violence. It is my contention that one particular technique of neutralization, denial of the victim, is employed to justify the perpetration of anti-gay hate crimes.

In their original publication, Sykes and Matza proposed five different techniques of neutralization. These are 1) denying responsibility, 2) denying injury, 3) denying the victim, 4) condemning the condemners, and 5) appealing to higher loyalties. In speaking of neutralization they were referring to how these five techniques serve as justifications for engaging in deviant behavior

> It is our argument that much delinquency is based on what is essentially an unrecognized extension of defenses to crimes, in the form of justifications for deviance that are seen as valid by the delinquent but not by the legal system or society at large (Sykes and Matza, 1957:666).

The full proposition made by Sykes and Matza does not apply to bias-motivated hate crimes. It is true that neither the legal system nor society at large condone violent hate crimes. However, in the minds of the perpetrators, society does share their negative sentiment of lesbians and gay men. By employing techniques of neutralization, those who commit anti-gay hate crimes need not be entirely alienated from the larger society (Schmallenger, 2006).

During criminal trials and civil courtroom proceedings, defendants have been known to cite how they were responding to a perceived sexual advance from a gay man (Lee, 2003). Lee (2003) refers to this sort of claim, when made during courtroom proceedings, as "gay panic." In such proceedings, defendants appear not to be committing their crimes as a means of rejecting the greater society. They seem to have strong ties to society, and in their defense pleas can be seen a sincere belief that what they did was justified according to the moral position of the majority. Granted, attitudes toward homosexuality are reported to actually be improving throughout the U.S. (Loftus, 2001; Anderson and Fetner, 2008). However, Steffens (2005) suggests that the documented "improvement" in attitudes toward homosexuality is not so much an improvement as it is a reflection of the growing reluctance of individuals to openly admit having negative attitudes—similar to the impact of society's movement from traditional racism to modern racism. Regardless of whether or not heterosexism is declining in the U.S., much of the public continues to share the sentiment that heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexuality. Evidence of this negative sentiment can be seen in the bi-annual election cycles of States around the U.S. (such as 2008, when the citizens of Florida, California, and Arizona all approved constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage).

The original theory involving techniques of neutralization was intended to be an extension of Sutherland's (1947) theory of differential association. The current use of Sykes and Matza's work differs in that association with a deviant peer group is not a prerequisite for committing hate crimes. Throughout

most literature on delinquent sub-cultures, it is argued that delinquents invert the values held by the broader society and adhere more to the values of a sub-group of delinquent peers. This overlooks "the fact that the world of the delinquent is embedded in the larger world of those who conform" (Sykes and Matza, 1957:666). A group of delinquents may maintain negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men and therefore condone acts of violence against members of the LGBT community, but these feelings of non-acceptance are not specific to the sub-group. It has already been established that much of the larger society mirrors this very sentiment. The difference between sub-group and broader society then is not in the view of lesbians or gay men but in the manifestation of such views into physical violence. Referring back to the literature on sub-cultures, delinquents who engage in anti-gay violence do reject one largely held value of the greater society: the belief in no physical violence. However, their acceptance of only heterosexual lifestyles is not a rejection of values held by law-abiding society; rather it is perceived as a shared belief among both the sub-culture and society as a whole.

Perpetrators of violent crimes committed against people frequently deny the existence of a victim. Presser (2003) found support for this sort of neutralization when she interviewed 27 violent male offenders. Rather than expressing remorse, the men typically excused their behavior on the basis that the victims were deserving of harm. "The injury, it may be claimed, is not really an injury; rather, it is a form of rightful retaliation or punishment" (Sykes and Matza, 1957:668). Well ahead of their time, Sykes and Matza proceed to give the specific example of how assaults against members of the gay community or suspected members of the gay community may be "hurts inflicted on a *transgressor* in the eyes of the delinquent" (1957:668 emphasis added). This is reflected in Lee's (2003) work on the "gay panic" defense. Such assailants may even see themselves as a sort of sexuality-based Robin Hood: robbing sexual minorities to feed the appeasement of the heterosexual majority. Perpetrators thereby deny the very existence of the victim, rendering the individual deserving of injury or harm. This serves as justification for exercising their widely-held belief that non-heterosexual orientations are wrong by committing a violent hate-based crime.

Conclusion

By incorporating elements of Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory, Cohen's (1972) moral panics, and Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization this paper proposes that anti-gay hate crimes serve as isolated incidents of moral panic referred to herein as *micropanics*. According to social identity theory, people emphasize their perceived superiority over members of other groups on some valued dimension, in this case sexual orientation. As mentioned above, social identity theory itself does not explain why people choose sexual orientation as the matter of differentiation. The existence of a current moral panic associated with sexual orientation explains why this is the chosen dimension. Since gay men and lesbians challenge traditional notions of gender and formations of the family, sexuality stands as a viable dimension by which heterosexist people compare their in-group. Denial of the victim is the final component in explaining how people justify committing micropanics against members of the LGBT community. This technique of neutralization is employed in order for people to render the situation victimless, whereby others appear deserving of the harm. Those who perpetrate crimes on the basis of sexual orientation conform not only to one's peer group but also to the beliefs of the larger society. Reference to the broadly-held belief that heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual orientation helps to strengthen the case against the victim. This justification technique coupled with adherence to the broadly-held belief that homosexuality is wrong helps explain how sexual prejudice can materialize into micropanics.

Research on anti-gay hate crimes has yielded little theoretical understanding of why people commit such acts of violence. The use of micropanics as a means for explaining anti-gay hate crimes is unique in that it incorporates an adherence to the moral position of society at large and infuses it with more conventional theories of identity maintenance and crime. Of course, empirical research in this area is needed in order to substantiate this theoretical model. Future quantitative studies on hate crimes could

include the construction of indices that test the validity of this theory. Such studies would be difficult to conduct as they would require lengthy and detailed datasets that include attitudinal measures of the perpetrators of these crimes. It is more comprehensible therefore to take a qualitative approach to testing the theory. One potential test of this theory could be to conduct a content analysis of court documents and transcripts of cases involving violent anti-gay hate crimes. By investigating the original testimonies of violent offenders, researchers can scrutinize the use of neutralization techniques, references to broadly-held moral beliefs, and statements associated with maintaining a social identity. Empirical research testing this theory of micropanics could contribute greatly to our understanding of hate crimes committed on the basis of sexual orientation.

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