

Conflicted Membership: Women in Fathers' Rights Groups

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Women who participate in mixed-gender, antifeminist movements are not a homogeneous group of actors who face no identity-based conflicts when they mobilize for these causes. Using 23 in-depth interviews with women involved in the American fathers' rights movement—which has as its goal the reformation of child support and child custody laws in ways that are more favorable to men and less favorable to women—I argue that mixed-gender, antifeminist activism has the potential to produce high levels of tension for female participants between their various social identities and their collective movement identity. Indeed, almost half of these women elaborate on how two particular manifestations of their social identities—as simultaneous members of other feminist groups and simply as women—clash with the collective identity generated by the fathers' rights movement. Ultimately, these women coped with these competing allegiances in a variety of proactive ways. In contrast, the other half of the sample experienced no such tensions. These differential patterns of identity-based conflicts are suggestive of the hazards associated with a social movement's efforts to attract a wider membership base over time.

In recent years, social scientists have called increased attention to the ways in which social movement participation shapes each female participant's life by contributing to her individual sense of self (Beckwith 2001; Kuumba 2001). More often than not, this research has explored the ramifications of women's involvement in broad-based feminist and progressive movements, whereby they, along with sympathetic men, are the pivotal actors seeking to confront issues of social and economic injustice (Beckwith 1996, 1998; Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Fonow 2003; Maggard 1990; Rothschild 1979). While the costs of activism such as intraorganization sexism and racism are sometimes noted (Polletta 2002; Robnett 1996, 1997), scholars have more often emphasized the substantial benefits of participating in these types of social movements. More specifically, these researchers have described how women's involvement fundamentally serves their interests by providing them with goals, a sense of purpose, and a collectivity around which to continue building their unified self over sustained periods of time (Rupp and Taylor 1987; Taylor 1989; Taylor and Whittier 1993).

But the costs of participation come squarely back into focus when we consider the women who join mixed-gender, antifeminist movements.¹ With rare exceptions (Blee 2002b; Klatch 1987), scholars have been largely silent on

the composition and nature of women's gender-related dilemmas in these groups. The unspoken assumption is that the costs are minimal—if not absent—among these self-selected and implied homogeneous set of women. This analysis thus aims to shed light on the veracity of these “costless participation” assertions by directly answering the following questions: Do any of these women establish and retain ties to more feminist-oriented, women's organizations simultaneously?² Do they face difficulties with male members inside their groups simply because of their status as women? If the answer is yes to either question, how do these female participants handle their potentially competing allegiances?

The central insight presented here is that even in the most extreme case of gender-based activism—with women working side-by-side with men against feminist interests—women may experience identity-related costs to social movement participation. More specifically, this conflict can emerge when a social movement's collective identity—the sense of “we-ness” that is necessary for the movement to both survive and flourish—clashes with participants' various social identities or with memberships in groups that they also value. That is, some women have to manage their relationships with progressive women's organizations whose goals they might concurrently support. Others might struggle in their roles simply as women within their movement of fellow male members, members with whom they might disagree about their proper role, group tactics, and overall ideology. Equally important, however, is that some women will not experience any identity-based conflict. Operating within a mixed-gender, antifeminist movement for these women seems effortless.

This article explores the presence and absence of these conflicts through an analysis of 23 in-depth interviews of women involved in the fathers' rights movement in the United States. Broadly speaking, the fathers' rights movement, composed primarily of separating, divorced, and unmarried men, aims to reform child support and child custody legislation in ways more favorable to men and less favorable to women. Groups in the movement typically have in-person meetings once per month, during which members discuss their own personal cases as well as plan legislative initiatives. Smaller numbers of women join through their relationships with men as second wives, mothers, and sisters. Alternatively, others join as independent, freestanding noncustodial mothers or child advocates. Interestingly, although the sample size is small and nonrandom, whether these women join via a relationship or independent affiliation is suggestive of whether or not they will experience any type of identity-based conflict.

Theorizing Dual Conflicts for Women Operating within Mixed-Gender, Antifeminist Movements

Women have long played an important role in mixed-gender, antifeminist movements, for example, the pro-life, the New Right, the antisuffrage, the

anti-Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) movements and even racist/patriarchal causes (Blee 1998; Klatch 1987, 1988a, 1988b; Luker 1984; Mansbridge 1986; Marshall 1997; Maxwell 2002; Merton 1981). In order to be successful, these mixed-gender, antifeminist movements, like other social movements more generally, most significantly pivot on the development of a *collective identity* among their members (Gamson 1997; Taylor 1999). Collective identity pertains to the movement's perceived notions of what qualifies as its membership base, boundaries, and stated goals.

Critically, movement participants do not simply interact with other movement participants. They also interact with those in the "outside" world. These external interactions may reinforce an individual's beliefs about the movement's collective identity, but they also might undermine them. More specifically, women may have multiple, competing *social identities* that can result in dueling allegiances. In contrast to a collective movement identity which is shared by the group, a social identity belongs to an individual. Simply put, a social identity is an awareness by an individual that he or she belongs to a specific group, an affiliation which has both meaning and value (Klandermans and de Weerd 2000; Tajfel 1981).

The most important point is that the multiple social identities held by some female members have the potential to subvert the collective identity of the social movement under consideration. There are at least two types of competing social identities that female members might claim while operating within mixed-gender, antifeminist movements. The first relates to their potential social identity as members of outside, feminist organizations. A conflict emerges if many members within the mixed-gender, antifeminist movement believe that these types of external memberships are harmful to their movement overall. Notably, studies that have explored the outside interests of women involved in a variety of antifeminist movements have reported that they are almost homogeneously conservative in their external affiliations. For example, during the 1970s, ERA opponents recruited activists from the John Birch Society, the Eagle Forum, Women for Constitutional Government, and evangelical churches in order to advance their cause in the state legislatures. Similarly, Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) activists during the 1920s were often simultaneous members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and other antivice groups (Berry 1986; Blee 1991; Boles 1979).

Other studies have hinted at the *possibility* (not the realization) of women concurrently holding progressively oriented, feminist affiliations by documenting some of their more liberal views. Within the modern Ku Klux Klan (KKK), for example, Blee (1996, 2002b) noted that women members often refuse to "buy into" the entire racist, patriarchal, and homophobic ideology of the group as a result of their second-rate status within the Klan. They therefore resist severing

all ties to the outside world by having, for example, lesbian friends. In addition, in comparing the associations of pro- and anti-ERA activists in Massachusetts in 1976, Mueller and DiMieri (1982) found consistently conservative and liberal external affiliations for each population. However, they also demonstrated that anti-ERA activists were much more open to holding progressive positions on individual women's issues, such as equal pay for equal work, than pro-ERA activists were open to holding conservative positions on women's issues.

The second social identity that these female members might value and that might conflict with the collective identity of their mixed-gender, antifeminist movement is their status as women. Clashes might occur if they demand a certain level of parity in treatment for their gender within the movement context. On this point, scholars have documented that systems of gender-based subjugation that exist within the world may be no less apparent in social movement organizations (Weldon 2006). For example, women reported sexism within conservative groups such as the Young Americans for Freedom during the volatile 1960s, a period of time when women were emerging in greater numbers than ever before to use their voices in rallying for political change (Klatch 1999, 2001).

In a much more extreme example, Blee studied the complex relationship between the KKK and the WKKK during the 1920s in Indiana. While the two groups were supposed to operate autonomously, Blee (1991) found that Klansmen tried to dominate the WKKK by manipulating the organization's finances and leadership choices. Moreover, when the two groups held mixed-gender affairs, women were relegated to the traditional "women's work" of serving coffee and refreshments. Men, on the other hand, did the "more important" work of plotting their next racist campaign. In her more recent research on the contemporary KKK, Blee (2002b) notes that several of her female interview respondents argued that, although the Klan espouses equality for white women in its propaganda, its members behave in quite a different manner. For example, these same women noted that within the organization itself there is very little room for women to achieve leadership positions. This reality has led female members to encourage their daughters to continue proclaiming their racist ideology at every opportunity but to avoid formally joining any racist organization (Blee 2002a).

In the aggregate, this research suggests that female membership in mixed-gender, antifeminist groups may not always be—but can be—extremely problematic. In terms of the scope of potential responses for those who *do* experience tension, these women can remain silent about their other social identities, so as to avoid conflicting with the collective identity of the larger movement as a whole. Alternatively, they might cope in ways that reaffirm these other social identities, thus challenging and reshaping the nature of the movement's

membership base as it moves into the future. It is an exploration of these possibilities, after a brief delineation of the research context and methodology, which drives the analysis presented here.

Research Context and Methodology

Claiming over 10,000 members in grassroots groups located throughout the country, fathers' rights activists argue that men are victims of gender-based discrimination in the area of family law (Goldberg 1997, 49).³ What, exactly, do they want when they argue for "equal rights" with women? Fathers' rights activists focus their reform efforts on two primary areas of public policy: child support law and child custody law.

In terms of child support, at the end of fiscal year 2006, nearly 24 billion dollars were collected for the 15.8 million cases in the primarily state-run program, statistics that are extremely consequential for those families who are enrolled (Office of Child Support Enforcement [OCSE] 2007). Indeed, there is considerable evidence that regular child support enforcement helps women exit welfare, aids in preventing welfare application in the first place, and/or assists in maintaining the prefamily breakdown standard of living (Garfinkel 2001; Huang, Kunz, and Garfinkel 2002). Nevertheless, because men are the ones who are paying in 90 percent of the awards established (Grall 2007), fathers' rights activists advocate a variety of reforms. Some desire the complete abolition of the program. Others demand more moderate adjustments, such as a reworking of the formulas used to calculate the awards, increased tax breaks for paying on time, and the introduction of "accountability systems" (such as debit cards) so that they can verify that all monies are being spent on their children instead of on their former partners.

Second, child custody policy is a point of contention for fathers' rights groups in their fight for equal rights. In making both legal and physical custody determinations, states currently use the "best interest of the child standard." This standard can take into account a wide variety of factors, such as the children's preferences, their emotional, physical, and spiritual needs, and each parent's ability to meet these needs (May 2001). While this standard is neutral on its face, according to the 2005 Current Population Survey which asks respondents where their child(ren) are living at the time of the survey, approximately 84 percent of all custodial parents were mothers, while only 16 percent were fathers (Grall 2007). Only about 28 percent of these custodial parents reported having some type of joint legal or joint physical custody order in place.⁴ A significant reason for these differential placement rates is that women still do the majority of work in raising children when families are intact (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004). Nevertheless, fathers' rights activists claim that they have the desire and capacity to be fully engaged in the caretaking responsibilities

of their postdissolution family. To overturn this perceived sexism in the current system, fathers' rights groups primarily recommend a standard presumption of 50–50 joint custody—legal and physical—in all states. Alternatively, if the 50–50 standard cannot be achieved, fathers' rights activists advocate the adoption of enhanced shared-parenting laws. These laws would give them more than the standard 20 percent time with their children that is common in most visitation agreements (and thus reduce their child support payments in the process). In fact, many states are already moving in this direction (Crowley 2006a).

With this context as background, the analysis presented here draws from a larger study of fathers' rights groups in the United States. The primary methodological goal was to conduct 1-hour, telephone interviews with both leaders and rank-and-file members. I first searched the Internet and nonprofit directories for possible groups to sample. I included all groups that focused on fathers' rights, even though sometimes they used different labels, such as "children's rights" and "family rights" organizations. An initial complication surrounding this research is that many of these groups are highly ephemeral in nature. Intragroup in-fighting is common, leading to the rapid birth and demise of these types of organizations over short periods of time. Groups also tend to splinter off from one another as members become frustrated with old leadership styles and attempt to strike out on their own under new leadership. As a first step, then, I attempted to identify at least three or four stable groups per state.

From this preliminary set of groups, I examined their array of activities, mission statements, and goals. If child support and child custody issues were primary, then they remained in the pool of potentially sampled groups. If, on the other hand, they appeared to spend the majority of their resources on other issues, such as domestic violence law reform, then they were removed. The organizations had to meet two other criteria in order to be included in this analysis. First, all selected groups had to be active within their particular jurisdiction on family issues. This meant that all selected groups had to have regularly scheduled activities, including monthly or quarterly in-person meetings. Second, I was also interested in maximizing the geographic and thus membership diversity of fathers' rights groups overall. In the end as a result of these two criteria, I had a potential sampling pool of 50 groups across the states.

I attempted to make contact with each group's leader in my defined sample. Fourteen group leaders did not respond to my request for information. Four group leaders' contact information was no longer in service. In addition, four leaders declined participation on behalf of their group and two leaders declined because their groups were no longer active. As a result of both nonresponse and declinations, the final sample consisted of 26 groups, including seven from the northeast, eight from the midwest, nine from the south, and two from the west.

Once a group's leader agreed to be interviewed, I requested permission to ask for members to participate. Using this snowball sampling technique, I was able to secure a total of 158 interviews, of which 23 were with women. All of these respondents answered questions on either five or six topics: (1) Demographics, (2) Group Patterns of Recruitment and Goals, (3) Relationships with Past Partners, (4) Relationships with Their Children, (5) Political Behavior, and (6) Challenges Related to Leadership (asked of leaders only). Female members of fathers' rights groups commented on their identity struggles throughout the interviews, but most commonly when they were asked questions in categories (2) and (5). Under category (2), I asked respondents to describe a typical meeting of their fathers' rights group, as well as to discuss any interest groups or sets of people who are mobilized against fathers' rights activism. Under category (5), I asked each respondent if this was the first time she had participated in a political activity, and if not, to describe her other types of political involvement.

All of the taped interviews, which were conducted in 2003, were then transcribed. I analyzed the written transcriptions of this work using grounded theory methods with the help of the qualitative software analysis program, Atlas.ti. By using the tools of grounded theory, I was able to draw upon the words of each of my respondents to create categories of meaning across the interviews (Strauss and Corbin 1990). These categories were constantly compared, developed, and refined in order to produce theoretical understandings of how female members conceptualized their identity struggles within fathers' rights groups. Finally, all names have been changed to protect confidentiality.⁵

Results

Women who join fathers' rights groups tend to be from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (see Table 1). Twenty-two were white, one black. All had graduated from high school, with a total of 19 pursuing higher education in the form of an associate's degree or further training (12), a bachelor's degree (2), or a graduate degree (5). Fourteen women worked in a white-collar occupation, with two working a blue-collar job. Four were retired and three were unemployed/student/volunteer. Interestingly, the women were divided politically, with five reporting a Republican affiliation, nine self-identifying as Democrats, eight labeling themselves as Independents, and one not providing a party membership. The mean age for the women was 46 years, with ages ranging from 23 to 76 years.

Most significant for this analysis were the reasons each woman gave for joining her local fathers' rights group, and in some cases, actually leading these groups.⁶ Men join fathers' rights groups for a variety of reasons, including personal case management, emotional support, and an interest in changing public policy

Table 1
Female Respondent Characteristics in Fathers' Rights Groups

Race	
Caucasian	22
Black	1
Education	
High school diploma/General Education Development Test (GED)	4
Associate's degree/some college/vocational training	12
Bachelor's degree	2
Graduate degree (master's doctorate, or professional)	5
Employment	
White collar	14
Blue collar	2
Retired	4
Unemployed/student/volunteer	3
Political party identification	
Republican	5
Democrat	9
Independent	8
Other/No response	1
Reason for joining	
Relationship-based affiliation with focal men	
New wife	13
Sister/sister-in-law	2
Grandmother	2
Mother	1
Independent-based affiliation	
Noncustodial mother	3
Activist	2
Mean age (years)	46
Total sample size	23

(Crowley 2006b). Women who associate themselves with fathers' rights groups, on the other hand, can be categorized as having (1) a relationship-based affiliation, due to a significant, positive bond with a man who is experiencing some type of difficulty in his life as a result of a family breakdown, or (2) an independent-based affiliation, including noncustodial mothers and child advocates. In this study,

the majority had a relationship-based affiliation. These members included 13 new wives, two sisters/sisters-in-law, two grandmothers, and one mother of a man who was undergoing difficulties related to child support and child custody issues. The remaining five had independent affiliations. Three of these were noncustodial mothers, and two joined because they considered themselves to be child advocates.

Competing Social Identities: Membership in Feminist Organizations

Approximately half of all women in this sample (10), experienced some form of conflict between the collective identity of the movement and their various social identities. Six had relationship-based affiliations with fathers' rights groups, while four had independent affiliations. While these women were supportive of the fathers' rights movement as a whole, they frequently possessed social identities as members of various feminist organizations as well. This created tension for them in that fathers' rights activists frame "feminists" and "feminist groups" as their most despised opponents in constructing their movement's collective identity. Women members attempted to cope with this tension through educational efforts about their outside interests and by advocating a "gender-neutral" approach to the problems facing dissolved families (see Table 2).

Providing Educational Resources as a Coping Tool

A set of women managed the tension they experienced as a result of their social identity as members of feminist groups and the collective identity of the fathers' rights movement by attempting to educate fathers' rights members

Table 2
Identity Tensions and Coping Mechanisms for Female Respondents in Fathers' Rights Groups

Identity tension type	Coping mechanism
1) Membership in external feminist organizations	A) Providing educational resources B) Advocating gender-neutral solutions
2) Being women within their fathers' rights group	A) Screening out potentially harmful and misogynistic members B) Highlighting unique skills C) Challenging group strategic choices

about their external affiliations. Lynn, a 34-year-old, had a 3-year-old biological son with her new husband. She also was a stepmother to his 11-year-old son. Once she assumed the stepmother role, she found herself saddened that her husband had problems with his ex-wife regarding ongoing access to his child. After living with her husband's heartache, Lynn became increasingly committed to the fathers' rights cause. However, as a victim of domestic violence in her first marriage, she also felt a strong need to retain ties to feminist organizations that work to protect women from domestic abuse. She fulfilled this need by volunteering as a domestic violence educator at her local college campus, because, as she put it: "I didn't look for any help when I was going through it and once I felt secure enough with myself again, I felt like I needed to give something back."

Lynn experienced identity tension in that she also assumed a responsibility to educate her local fathers' rights group about the problem of family violence. Domestic violence is a contentious issue within the ranks of the fathers' rights movement. In fact, fathers' rights groups often make what they view as the proliferation of false allegations of abuse as their central exhibit in their campaign to achieve equality in the family court system. Fathers' rights activists argue that all too often women fabricate charges of abuse to gain an upper hand in custody hearings or simply to oppose joint custody arrangements. As part of their reform campaign, fathers' rights groups advocate for the overhaul of the Violence Against Women Act. This legislation provides financial support to local groups offering services to victims and resources to criminal justice organizations to help prosecute batterers (Crowley 2008). Despite her fathers' rights group's opposition, Lynn struggled to make sure everyone whom she encountered was aware of the problem. She described how she was unable to attend a legislative hearing in her state on the topic of the relationship between joint custody and domestic violence. Because other fathers' rights group members were present at the hearing, she expressed how she truly missed this "teaching moment":

They put out a lot of statistics [about domestic violence], you know, at the hearing that were true. I wish I would've been able to go, but I was in school that day . . . A lot of statistics about like, one in four women are battered in their life and one in six women is battered regularly—they are all true statistics. But it doesn't necessarily mean that the person who is trying for joint custody [is the] person who was the batterer, you know—So I wish I would have been there because most of the people that were in [the fathers' rights organization] that were there hadn't dealt too much with the abuse.—(Lynn)

Note that Lynn regretted her absence at the meeting, where she could have educated her fellow fathers' rights members about the domestic violence issue. However, at the same time, she tried to cope and build trust within the movement by defending the position of many fathers on this issue. This was clear through

her statement that, even though the domestic violence statistics may be true, “it doesn’t necessarily mean that the person who is trying for joint custody [typically the father] is the person who was the batterer.”

Advocating Gender-Neutral Solutions as a Coping Tool

The two child advocates who claimed to be involved in fathers’ rights groups simply because they care about the well-being of all young people also gave voice to this type of tension between their fathers’ rights membership and their membership in other feminist groups. However, in their cases, they coped by reframing the concerns of *both* groups in gender-neutral terms. Interestingly, both women who self-identified as child advocates had experience with the family dissolution process themselves. Lisa, 65 years old and a self-proclaimed activist on many issues including animal rights, has been involved in fathers’ rights groups for over 10 years. She became personally invested in the issue when her ex-husband kidnapped her four young children years ago. She later reported having to travel out of state to retrieve them herself. Since then, she has committed herself to helping families suffering from a family breakdown. Most notably for the discussion here, however, is that her choice of advocacy organizations in the area of feminist issues is very contentious among fathers’ rights activists. That is, Lisa focuses on child support policy and making sure that all women with an order in place actually obtain their legally-entitled payment.

For Lisa, her activism in the child support area made sense because she split up with her husband at a point in time when child support orders were not routinely awarded and enforced. She suffered economically, and as a result joined and then headed her local Association for Children for Enforcement of Support (ACES) group. ACES began in 1984 under the direction of Geraldine Jensen. Jensen, abandoned by her husband and with two young boys and no viable means of economic support, started ACES as a way to pressure the federal and state-level governments to take the issue of child support enforcement more seriously. Lisa continued to champion this child support mission. However, her decision to maintain her membership in ACES caused problems with her local fathers’ rights organization:

I’ve been involved with [ACES] from the beginning, and I am no longer an active chapter President because I am out of the area, but we kept our chapter open in [our current city]. Even my e-mail address, as you noticed, says ACES and a lot of the guys [in my fathers’ rights group] really resent that. Yes, they feel like I am a traitor. [They ask,] what are you [doing heading] a child support organization? You are infiltrating us . . . [However, I think that] if you can put aside differences and share what you have in common, that is where your unity and your strength come from . . . We are all child advocates . . . ACES actually looks at me as a traitor, [too]. They did for the longest time. Now they are a little more open-minded, although [many ACES members] don’t communicate with me anymore. I am looked upon as a traitor in ACES because I have so actively helped work for fathers’ rights.—(Lisa)

Lisa argued that many men within fathers' rights groups had strong, antagonistic feelings toward her other chosen affiliation. In addition, Lisa had to deal with problems from ACES. Their membership viewed her as a "traitor" to their most important cause—securing adequate child support—as well. In response, Lisa tried to quell both sets of concerns by reframing her roles in both organizations—and hopefully those of others as well—as a gender-neutral "child advocate." In her view, if members in both groups shared this vision, they could do much more to help children.

Similarly, Rachel was a 40-year-old, never-married mother of three with the same partner. She reported that, while she and her partner have an excellent relationship regarding the children, they are no longer romantically attached. Drawn to the needs of families across the country, she claimed to be an advocate who was an "active petition signer" on behalf of all types of child-oriented issues throughout her entire life. Rachel refused to locate her professional interests by gender, insisting that the advocacy that she cares about is gender-neutral and in the best interest of children. Professionally, she started out with an interest in child support, but gradually turned her focus to child access and visitation issues as well:

I was helping [the President of ACES] do some ACES things and she told me about [this fathers' rights group leader]. She met this guy and he was a nice guy. I called [him up] and we set up an appointment and we talked. I understood that he was fighting for fathers' rights and I'm gender-neutral. I don't fight for the rights of the male or the female; my interest is in what's best for the children.—(Rachel)

Interestingly, then, like Lisa, Rachel championed the goals of both ACES and her local fathers' rights group. In fact, she perceived herself as performing a necessary bridging role between the two. She tried to encourage members of both groups to focus on the children, because, in her words, "it [has] become a war [between the two groups]—the men against the women." In sum, although her dual membership was problematic in terms of creating mistrust among the rank-and-file of both groups, she reported that she tried to translate their concerns across their sharply worded rhetorical divide by using gender-neutral language at all times.

Competing Social Identities: Being Women

While some women reported tension with their fathers' rights group because of their social identities as active participants in various feminist organizations, the second and far more common theme was the conflict that emerged because of their social identity as women. In this respect, their social identity as fully capable and effective women prompted them to demand parity for their gender in their interactions with men in their own fathers' rights groups. However, part of the collective identity of the fathers' rights movement

is a belief that primarily men have been “wronged by women.” In this sense, then, men should completely direct the fight for reform. Female members of fathers’ rights groups responded to this tension in three ways (see Table 2). Some women actively fought back by screening out potentially harmful and misogynistic members seeking to participate in their fathers’ rights groups. Others highlighted the unique skill sets that they believed that they could bring to the group as women. A final set actively challenged a fundamental weapon in the movement’s strategic arsenal: courtroom tactics designed to discredit women.

Screening Out Potentially Harmful and Misogynistic Members as a Coping Tool

Some women coped with their identity tensions by dissuading certain types of men—men with severe problems relating to women—from participating in their fathers’ rights group. Victoria, 31 years old, described herself as from a socially active, rurally based family that was involved in many issues, including farmers’ rights. Yet surprisingly, her first foray into activism occurred when she helped her mother start her local fathers’ rights organization. She did this primarily to provide support for her brother who was having problems seeing his children. As a member of her group for over 4 years, she had substantial experience in explaining the intricacies of family law as they affected men to all organizational newcomers. She also tried to reduce the personal tension caused by her combined social identity as a woman and the collective identity of the movement overall by carefully screening potential new members:

Generally, if [a potential member is] not showing some character and some genuine concern, if he is just hating his ex, I don’t even mention [the group]. That is not what the group is about. Especially in a group like this, it is so controversial. It shouldn’t be, but it is so emotionally strung that if you have a bunch of guys in there that love their kids, but hate their wives more, there is no point in pulling them in there. There is a point because the kids need their dad, but there is no point in having them come [into the group setting] and just destroy something you’ve tried to make [into] a positive thing. . . . if they seemingly are more venom than spit, I don’t even mention [the group].—(Victoria)

Nonetheless, despite this screening, she still discovered that she needed to “toughen up” in order to cope with the questions about her motivations that would inevitably emerge in the group setting because of her gender:

Now it is a little bit of a support group and the women that come have to develop a little bit of thick skin. [This is so] because the men will say [to other men in the group], what do I think of marriage? [And then] they’ll grab their wallet. You are sitting there thinking, I am trying to help you. You have to tell them [that all women] are not all like that or just grow a little bit of thick skin.—(Victoria)

In the end, then, Victoria found herself doing substantial emotional work to psychologically protect other female members in the group as well as herself.

Like Victoria, Rachel tried her best to cope with new members who might hold harmful attitudes toward women. This was especially important because Rachel directed one of the discussion groups in her fathers' rights organization. Rachel outlined how she used her capacity as gatekeeper to discourage potentially hateful members from joining:

New people come [to the meeting] and they usually sit down because they don't know what's going on. It could be a man or a woman and they're trying to figure out what these men and women are doing together. The women are pretty much shy because there are so many men; the men are pretty much going on about whatever it is that they are going on [about]. So, the women pretty much sit back and just try to wait to figure out what's going on here; [they want] to see if it's a men's meeting or a women's meeting. I have men that come in, [and] if they're new, they'll sit back and say, what the hell's going on? Because here [is] a woman [leading the group] and I came down here to [this meeting and here is a woman]. And I get the "hen party" jokes and those kinds of stuff. And, "You are a woman, and what are you doing here?" And, "I bet you're biased," and actually I have a lot of [old] guys that jump on [the new] guys that say, "Hey, you can't talk to her that way". . . . They say [that] when women take over things, they are just like bitches; I get the feminazi dyke stuff all the time. I get the jokes all the time.—(Rachel)

In this case, Rachel reported being treated poorly and being subjected to gender-related insults. In response, she relied on the more established male membership to defend her and potentially weed out members who would not treat her well. On another occasion, however, Rachel made it clear that she herself would not tolerate members in her group who acted poorly toward their ex-partners, and by extension, her gender:

What I teach [new members] to say when they say the broad, the bitch, the who, the what, or whatever, the asshole or whatever [in describing their ex-partners], [I teach them to] say, "my children's mom" . . . I'm straight to the point with that. [I tell them to stop] . . . So I tell [them] to get some control over it and get started telling [themselves] and everyone else that all the negativity ends now.—(Rachel)

Rachel insisted that even though she tried to educate new male members as to their responsibilities regarding language toward their ex-partners, she was not always successful. Nevertheless, she aimed to help "one person, or one family, or one child at a time."

Highlighting Unique Skills as a Coping Tool

Still other female members reacted to the conflicts between their social identity as women and the collective identity of the movement by pointing to what they perceived as the unique skills they possessed as women to help the movement. Veronica, 48 years old, had previously been a behind-the-scenes activist by giving money to educational causes. However, later on in her life, she found herself a noncustodial mother of four children who experienced an extremely difficult divorce. After Veronica's marriage disintegrated, her husband convinced the court to grant him sole physical custody. Veronica quickly found

herself unable to see her children and without alimony for financial support. As a result, she became a co-president of her local fathers' rights group with another man. Declaring that she was "not really a feminist" but a person who "carries around the Constitution," Veronica nonetheless described her difficulties in leading her group as a woman:

I don't have any problems being a woman leader because I respect the guys. I can hear their situation. [But they still] look at me like, what are you doing here? How come you are here? . . . I do sometimes have trouble controlling meetings because I don't usually order men around. It is not one of my strong points so I rely on [my co-president] to keep order. In that regard, I am just not that good at it. I think that there is definitely a role for women [in the group], but more importantly there is a role for a calm voice.—(Veronica)

Like the other women in this study, Veronica experienced invasive questioning regarding the validity of her presence in the group simply because she was a woman. In response, Veronica voiced her preference to allow her more authoritative, male co-president to keep the meetings running along smoothly. However, Veronica also emphasized her important contribution to the group as a "calm voice" that could help positively channel the at times negative energies of the men who were present.

Beyond providing these groups with a "calm voice" to lead them, other women pointed to their unique contribution in the area of political skills that they viewed as fundamental in ensuring the success of their movement. For example, Laura was a 35-year-old stepmother to a young daughter. Over the course of her marriage, her husband expressed a strong interest in seeing his daughter more frequently than simply on the weekends. However, his ex-wife was preventing this from happening. Laura reacted angrily and became active for the first time in a political cause. She stated that she did not "consider [herself] a feminist because I think [feminist groups] are 'out there.' To me, if you want equality, you don't say, mom is the better parent, you say, we're equal." Laura's main concern was that her fathers' rights group did not tap into the rich, strategic insights that she could offer from her unique perspective as a woman. More specifically, Laura complained that fathers' rights organizations lack the political muscle necessary to make an impact in family policy. She argued that, in the area of political activism, men could learn a lot from women. Here she described how her local fathers' rights organization floundered because it did not take her tactical suggestions seriously:

The biggest reason [more men do not join fathers' rights organizations] is [that] men hold things in. Women talk, write letters, [and] complain. It is murder to get a man to write a letter [to an elected official]. I'm not sure what that is but when I was in charge of the group, I used to tell them to get in touch with their feminine side. You need to bitch—to stereotype it. You hear women do it but the men need to do it in a productive way. Men tend to not do that. They don't get together seeking help.—(Laura)

In sum, Laura criticized her local fathers' rights group for its strategic deficiencies. However, she also hoped that her contribution and those of other women could change her fellow male members' attitudes or behaviors on these issues.

Challenging Group Strategic Choices as a Coping Tool

Finally, others coped with the tension between their social identity as women and the collective identity of the movement by trying to reframe the strategic choices of the movement in ways that reduced the prominence of inter-gender hostility. As a 50-year-old noncustodial mother of four children, Joanna was the only female member of her local fathers' rights group. She refused, however, to endorse an emerging, rallying strategy being promoted by the fathers' rights movement across the country to help win legal victories in the realm of child custody policy. This strategy involved the use of in-court, professional testimony on the topic of parental alienation syndrome or PAS (Schepard 2004).

A small contingent of children's advocates has recently argued that judges should consider PAS, first described by psychiatrist Dr. Richard Gardner in 1985, when making custody and visitation determinations. PAS involves the systematic degradation of one parent by the other using negative words, actions, or allegations of abuse. In the worst-case scenario, it can result in the affected children expressing a desire to no longer see or spend time with the targeted parent. Those who maintain that PAS is a serious problem sometimes ask that judges physically place children with the targeted parent as a form of immersion therapy until the damage that was created by the other parent is undone. However, PAS is extremely controversial, with no rigorously executed academic studies documenting its existence. Moreover, it is not included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), the reference manual that is used by mental health professionals to diagnose psychological disorders. Those who oppose the use of PAS accusations in the courtroom maintain that it is primarily used by men against women in custody disputes.

Joanna described how the PAS accusation against her had led the judge to give physical custody of her four children to her husband residing in a distant state. During the custody deliberations, Joanna complained to the court that she objected to her youngest daughter sleeping with her father (and, at times) grandfather when she went to his house to spend time with him. Attorneys for her ex-husband defended this arrangement as a "cultural" practice and accused her of PAS. Her ex-husband's attorneys then hired a psychologist who had never met Joanna to write a report declaring that she was actively engaged in PAS. This specific allegation, in her view, was largely to blame for her unfavorable custody decision. As a result of these experiences, she emphatically critiqued her own fathers' rights group for bringing in a speaker to address the warning signs of PAS at a recent meeting:

I am disappointed [that the group] brought in a psychologist to talk about parental alienation syndrome and I tried to enlighten them about the destructiveness of that . . . [I don't believe in PAS]. At all, period. At all. It was invented by Dr. Gardner and it is not evidence-based . . . Now, it is most often used against mothers and I don't think it is appropriate for a dad or a grandpa to sleep with a child; I simply don't. [But] if a mother even brings that up, she'll lose all contact with her children.—(Joanna)

Joanna's relationship with her group was therefore very complex. As a non-custodial mother, she had few options in terms of identifying female peers with whom she could relate. Ultimately, she was able to secure some support from similarly-situated men in her local fathers' rights group. However, she continuously challenged one of their key strategic choices in reforming family policy throughout the duration of her membership.

No Competing Social Identities?

It is also important to note that about half (13) of the female members in fathers' rights groups in this study expressed no conflict on any level with their fathers' rights organizations. Of these, 12 had relationship-based affiliations with their local fathers' rights groups. These women, the majority of whom were new wives, possessed no strong social identity as members of feminist groups. They also lacked a powerful social identity as women who believed that they were not being treated fairly by the male members of their fathers' rights groups. In fact, what most distinguished these women was their almost universal condemnation of feminist groups who, in their minds, always sought an unfair advantage for women in cases of family dissolution. On this point, then, their vocalized objections to feminist organizations were remarkably similar to those vocalized by their male counterparts.

Typical of women with no identity conflicts was Britney, a 35-year-old new wife of a man who had two young sons from a previous marriage. Never active on any political issue before, she described how her husband's ex-wife made them both miserable by withholding access to the children. Britney also remarked how this experience molded her contemporary, negative thinking about women's groups in general:

Just because you gave birth doesn't make you a good mother. . . . I guess I see these women [and women's groups] acting on their anger or resentment and they are taking it out on their kids. I am a mom, I chose to be a mom, and I want to be one. [In contrast], my husband's ex-wife just wants the glory, but doesn't put the time in. When she left [her family], she was too busy reliving her 20s by drinking and partying and all this other stuff to be with the kids, so we had them. Then once she decided [that her ex-husband and I were too happy with our new baby girl she decided] that she was going to take these kids away . . . It is not right.—(Britney)

Britney thus viewed her own involvement with fathers' rights groups as a way to give voice to her personal concerns about the future of the American family,

concerns that were not being articulated from her vantage point by mainstream, feminist organizations.

Others without identity conflicts had experienced a wholesale type of conversion from past forms of political activism—when they had allied themselves with a variety of feminist groups—to fathers’ rights organizing. Emmy, a 48-year-old new wife, used to be actively involved with the National Organization for Women (NOW). However, in her role as stepmother to two daughters, she became disgusted with what she regarded as the antifamily agenda of what she termed “radical feminism”:

This is what these [women’s groups] are doing. They are trying to separate the family and they are trying to say [that the reason women should get money in the form of child support dollars is because women make less than men], but I don’t want to hear this stuff, [that you are making] 70 cents to a dollar. . . . I make the same amount of money a man makes. I can’t help it if you made a choice . . . to stay home. That does not mean that United States taxpayers have to pay for your choice [by paying for the child support program] and that is why I have an issue.—(Emmy)

Emmy viewed her life in terms of individual choices, separated from the contextual environment in which women make decisions regarding the balance between their home and work lives. In a similar way, Samantha declared that, at times, she is “embarrassed to be a woman . . . because they act so stupid sometimes. I mean, they don’t think.” Samantha was a long-time activist on child protection issues, for example, her stance in favor of tough, antimolestation laws. Like Emmy, she was also once actively involved in a progressive women’s organization that operated in direct opposition to fathers’ rights groups: ACES. However, she quickly became disillusioned with ACES when she began to work there, as she ultimately came to suspect that the story Jensen told regarding her ex-husband’s “evil” ways to be completely fabricated:

I decided to leave [ACES] because [the group] was a bunch of men-hating women who would keep their children from their fathers and all kinds of things. . . . The women that I saw in the ACES movement were not women who were just there because they were poor and their husbands were not paying them child support. They were women who hated men. [It] was so obvious that this was a hating society . . . It was horrible the things [that Jensen did] and I thought I could not be a part of this. If I can’t be part of the problem, I will be part of the solution. . . . And I thought there were really lots of dads out there who were not being able to see their kids because of women like her.—(Samantha)

From this negative experience, Samantha decided to start working for fathers’ rights organizations, where she could fully agree with their mission and labor enthusiastically on behalf of their legislative goals.

Conclusions

In his scholarship on social movements, Doug McAdam (1992) notes that researchers spend an extraordinary amount of resources trying to understand

differences between activists and nonactivists, but very little time mapping out intragroup differences within a single social movement's members. As a result, all social movement members tend to be portrayed with the same broad-brush stroke of similar participatory motivations and experiences. The homogenization of participants' lives then erroneously becomes part of the received folklore regarding the rise and fall of all social movements over time.

Women operating within mixed-gender, antifeminist organizations are particularly in danger of falling victim to overgeneralization regarding their belief systems and allegiances. They can easily become classified as victims of false consciousness, or alternatively, the heroines of traditional, conservative values. But as this analysis has shown, while approximately half of these members did not experience any identity tensions, the other half had important social identities—both as members of various feminist organizations and simply as women—that clashed with the collective identity of the fathers' rights movement. These critical findings demonstrate that even in this extreme case of mixed-gender, antifeminist activism, women do not necessarily relinquish competing social identities in favor of a collective movement identity when they join a larger cause. Instead, as this analysis has revealed, many women members struggled with their support of the fathers' rights collective identity while being fully cognizant of other, deeply held social identities.

It is also important to note that almost half of those with identity-based conflicts had independent rather than relationship-based affiliations with their local fathers' rights groups. This was in contrast to those with no identity conflicts, almost all of whom had relationship-based affiliations with their local fathers' rights groups. In other words, although the sample size here was small and thus the results only suggestive, women who were independent of a male transitioning through a family breakdown were more likely to experience some form of identity conflict. It may be that emotional independence from these types of difficult family circumstances creates more room for more facets of the self to emerge.

What, then, is next for fathers' rights groups as they attempt to negotiate their relationships with female members? Clearly, opening their membership ranks to women has not been without cost. More specifically, this female membership influx has generated more intragroup dissent about both strategies and goals. Going forward, we can imagine at least three potential options for these organizations as they attempt to cope with their female members. One might be a membership retraction strategy, with fathers' rights groups simply banning women from joining. With this choice, fathers' rights groups would not have to hear identity-based conflicts from female members, much less address them. A second, competing strategy would simply be to maintain the status quo in terms of permitting women to join, which would require men to hear women's concerns but do very little to accommodate those concerns.

In weighing these first two options, fathers' rights groups will have to consider the benefits associated with having female membership of any type. Early fathers' rights groups had leadership and organizational origins in the men's rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Taking on the issue of familial dissolution, the men's rights movement faltered when many of its leading proponents portrayed the majority of women as sexually promiscuous, gold diggers, and financially irresponsible when they filed for divorce (Crowley 2003). Learning from the mistakes of their predecessors, fathers' rights groups worked hard to transform their message into one that was much more politically acceptable. More specifically, they made a number of strategic choices to address their image problem, such as substituting "children's rights" in their names instead of "men's rights" and "fathers' rights." They also started to welcome women into their ranks. While women with a relationship with a focal male undergoing a family crisis appeared to be natural new members, child advocates and noncustodial mothers also unexpectedly joined. This second set of women has been the primary source of identity-based conflicts that were documented in this article. However, there is little evidence that fathers' rights groups have modified their goals and tactics to accommodate these female members. For the time being, women's primary role in fathers' rights groups appears to be one of giving these organizations substantial political cover to make broad-based statements that they do, in fact, speak across gender lines.

The third option for fathers' rights groups is the most radical, and therefore, perhaps the least likely. In this scenario, fathers' rights groups would not only continue to permit women to join, but actively listen to them when they describe how their groups' collective identity sometimes clashes with their various social identities. Truly listening to these women's experiences would mean that fathers' rights groups would have to transform their ideas about a variety of issues, including, for example, the seriousness of domestic violence, the importance of child support to many families' livelihoods, and the eradication of sexism within their ranks. Of course, which option fathers' rights organizations choose and how these decisions affect their long-term viability remain critical and compelling questions for future research.

ENDNOTES

¹This article focuses solely on women involved in mixed-gender, antifeminist movements, rather than single-sex, antifeminist movements.

²In this article, a "feminist" organization is one that primarily functions to advance the interests of women as a group.

³These groups do not address issues that might be of primary concern to black men, nor do they touch upon matters of pertinence to gay men (or lesbian mothers). There are, however,

organizations that focus on helping poor black men improve their capacity to pay child support to their families. These organizations, such as the National Partnership for Community Leadership and the Center for Family Policy and Practice, provide predominantly black men with labor market skills so that they can parent their children with the assistance of as many financial resources as possible. However, it is important to note that these groups are not membership-based groups but rather professionalized advocacy organizations (Crowley 2008).

⁴See Table 9 at <<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/childsupport/chlds05.pdf>>.

⁵Sometimes I inserted words for grammatical clarity or to protect the identity/personal characteristic of a person/organization; these word insertions are always noted by brackets. Punctuation marks were often added to clarify the meaning of the quote.

⁶Although there were only 26 groups in this study overall, because some organizations had co-presidents, there were 31 leaders in total. Of these 31 leaders, six were women.

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