

RESISTING PUBLIC HEALTH:

Working Within the Gay Men's Health Movement to Produce Change

Trevor Hoppe

Joint PhD Program

Sociology & Women's Studies

University of Michigan

The Agenda

- Why Resist Public Health?
- (Already) Proposed Tools for Resistance
 - Review of Feminist Research Methods
 - Drawbacks?
- What I Believe as an Activist-Research
- Putting My Politics into Practice
 - Case Study: My Research Project
 - From Design, to Implementation
- Questions for Future Activist-Scholarship

Why Resist Public Health?:

- The Logic of American Public Health
 - Problem?
 - Disease
 - Example: HIV
 - Cause?
 - “Unhealthy” or “Risky” Behaviors
 - Example: Sex Without Condoms
 - Solution?
 - Change Individuals’ Behaviors
 - Example: Increase Condom Use
 - Strategy?
 - Valorize “Healthy” Behavior, Demonize “Unhealthy” Behavior
 - Example: “Barebacking (e.g. intentionally engaging in unprotected anal sex) is akin to attempted murder”

Why Resist Public Health?

- Increasingly Resembles Religion
 - “Public health today moves closer and closer to religion. Like Western religions, it is deeply interested in behavior as a way of distinguishing the elect from the masses. And it is less interested in empirical examinations of truth. The authority of simple, received wisdom -- fats are bad, cigarettes are worse (and tobacco companies are demonic), exercise makes you whole -- trumps the fine print of the inevitably complicated story that science uncovers. No wonder that, when I asked how we in the public-health profession will explain our failure to say anything about AIDS prevention other than "use condoms" (advice, I pointed out, that is ignored by most adults much of the time, anyway), a senior colleague admonished me to never say that in public.”
 - Alcabes, P. (Nov 9, 2007). What Ails Public Health?. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 54, 11.

Why Resist Public Health?

- Problem Fueled by Analytic Tools' Epistemologies
 - Psychology
 - Level: Individual
 - Measures: Self-esteem, Depression, Mental Health, etc.
 - Kind of Response: "Gay men with low self-esteem are more likely to engage in unprotected sex than gay men with high self-esteem"
 - Epidemiology
 - Level: Population
 - Measures: Disease Incidence, Behavioral & Demographic Trends
 - Kind of Response: "Black gay men are more likely to be infected with HIV than White gay men. Therefore, being Black is a risk factor for HIV infection"

Why Resist Public Health?

- Portrays Gay Men as Victims or as Pathologically Irrational
 - “If there was ever any doubt about the urgent political need to find ways of representing gay male subjectivity without necessary or automatic recourse to psychology and psychoanalysis, the merest glance at contemporary discourses about why some gay men have risky (or ‘unsafe’) sex would dispel it. [...] The causes of such behavior then tend to be sought in various psychological ‘deficits’ that impair gay men’s mental health and interfere with normal functioning. [...] The result is to portray gay men as beset by a number serious psychological conditions, ranging (on the ‘victim’ end of the scale) from internalized homophobia, survivor guilt, and post-traumatic stress disorder to (on the pathological end) low-self-esteem, addictive personality syndrome, sexual compulsiveness, and lack of self-control.”

– Halperin, D. (2007). *What Do Gay Men Want?* The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, MI (pp. 11-12).

Proposed Tools for Resistance

- Problem Similar to Feminist, Anti-Racist Critiques of Science
 - Normative Grounding Assumptions
 - Racist, Sexist Representations in Research
- Broad Approaches for Resistance
 - Epistemology
 - Disrupt Veil of Scientific Objectivity
 - Place “Knower” and “Known” on Same Plane
 - Methodology
 - Contextualize Researcher’s Relationship to Research
 - Incorporate Research Subjects into Research Process
 - Incorporate Community Organizations into Research Process

Proposed Tools for Resistance: Incorporating Research Subjects

- Example: Letting Subjects Approve Written Product
- Sounds Great – But Not So Unproblematic
 - Example: Judith Stacey’s Ethnographic Quandary
 - “Married, fundamentalist Christian” Participant Confesses Lesbian Affair
 - “For example after more than a year and a half and scores of hours of mutual reflections on the meaning of the lesbian relationship mentioned above, this ‘research collaborator’ has asked me to leave this part of her history out of my ethnographic account. What feminist ethical principles can I invoke to guide me here? Principles of respect for research subjects and for a collaborative, egalitarian research relationship would suggest compliance, but this forces me to collude with the homophobic silencing of lesbian experience, as well as to consciously distort what I consider a crucial component of the ethnographic ‘truth’ in my study. Whatever we decide, my ethnography will betray a feminist principle.”

– Stacey, Judith. (1998). "Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography." *Women's Studies International Forum*, 11, 1.

What I Believe as an Activist-Researcher

- Research Process is...
 - Not Egalitarian
 - Always Politically Charged
 - Not Objective
- Therefore, As a Researcher I Must...
 - Minimize Harm to Participants
 - Be Aware of Political Consequences
 - Be Explicit About My Politics, Agenda
 - Be Reflexive

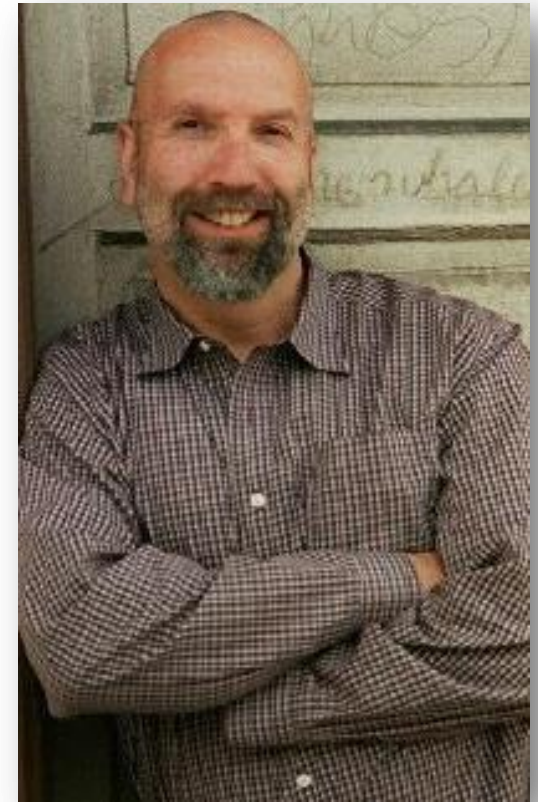
Putting Politics into Research: A Dilemma

- I Needed a Solution
 - Yes: Ensure Community is Engaged with Project
 - Minimize Representational Violence
 - Ensure Questions Asked Make Sense, are Relevant
 - No: Hand Over Keys to Research Subjects
 - Judith Stacey Problem
 - No: Hand Over Keys to a Community Organization
 - This isn't CBPAR
 - HIV/AIDS Organizational Politics Make CBPAR Unwise
 - Reason: Institutional Logic of Public Health Already Described
- I Want to Drive, but... Needed a GPS? Backseat Driver?

Putting Politics into Research: The Gay Men's Health Movement

- Founded in 1990s by Eric Rofes
 - “It came as no surprise that gay men began to see one another, not as brothers and caregivers and lovers and comrades in gay liberation, but as opponents, threats, and enemies to one another’s health. HIV prevention asked us to treat every man we sexed with as if he were infected, in order to ensure compliance with the condom code, even when not necessary. We were told to distrust men’s identified antibody status because ‘men lie.’ [...] The sorry state of HIV prevention, the effective re-pathologizing of gay men as a class, and a rising sex panic emerging from the collusion of gay male journalists and neo-liberal public officials, finally drove some of us to organize.”

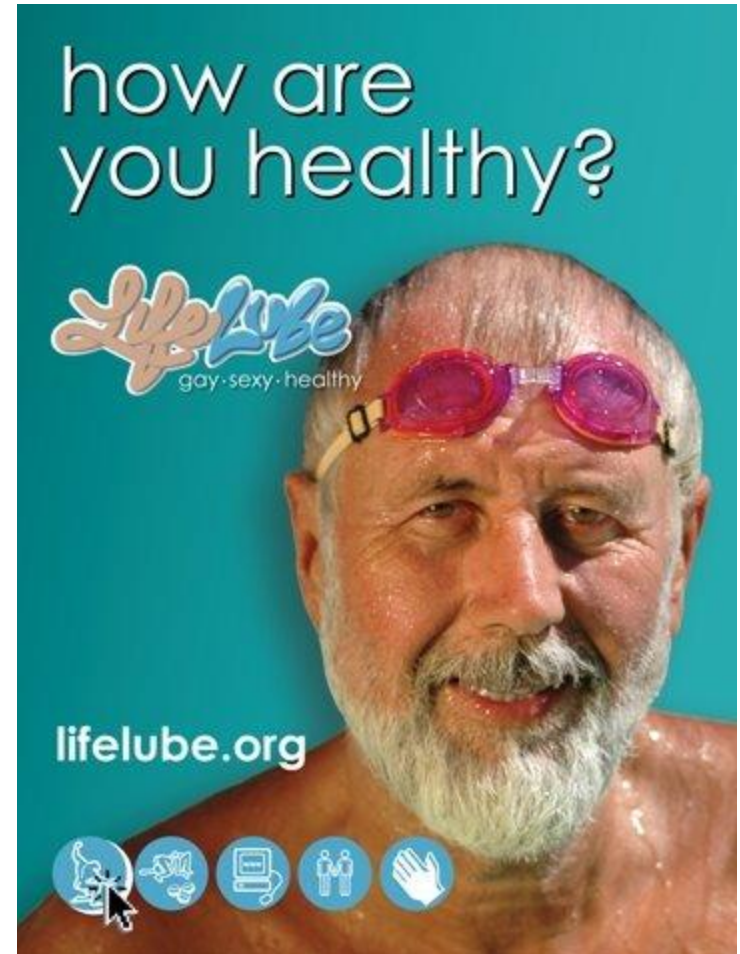
– Eric Rofes (2005). “Gay Bodies, Gay Selves: Understanding the Gay Men’s Health Movement.” *White Crane Journal*, 66.



Putting Politics into Research

The Gay Men's Health Movement

- Who are we?
 - Informal Collective
 - Activists, Researchers, Writers, Educators, Bloggers
 - From Around the World, But Mostly US
- What do we do?
 - Collaborate on Projects
 - Share Resources, Ideas
 - Regional, National Summits
 - Resist, Critique Pathologizing Discourses



Putting Politics into Research: Working Within the Movement?

- What Does “Working Within” Entail?
 - Pulling Back Veil of Academic Objectivity, Secrecy
 - Seeking Feedback at Each Stage of Research Process
- Risks
 - Extremely Vulnerable
- Benefits
 - Enriches Analysis
 - Engages People Outside Academia in Research
 - New Ways of Thinking
 - Widens Audience
 - Reduces Risk of Representational Violence

Putting Politics into Research

- Case Study: My Research Project on Bottom Identity
 - Design
 - Presented Methods at Gay Men's Health Leadership Academy
 - 20 Activists Critiqued, Informed Proposed Project
 - Added Questions, Reformulated Ways to Ask
 - Analysis
 - Presented Preliminary Findings at Gay Men's Health Summit
 - 50 Activists Responded to Initial Findings
 - Helped Narrow Research Question
 - Initial "Coding Memos" Published Online to GMH "Ning" Network
 - Illuminated Gaps in Thinking
 - Provided Alternative Analyses
 - Writing
 - First Draft of Paper Just Posted on "Ning"

Future Questions for Activist-Scholars

- Research → Practice?
 - I've Outline Research Practices, but...
 - How to Put Research into Practice?
 - Especially While Negotiating Academic Careers
 - I'm Not There Yet
- What is the Responsibility of Researcher to Researched?
 - Differently Complicated for "Insider" Scholars
- What *is* Ethical Research?
 - What are Points of Contention?