

“Choppy Waters”: Navigating Political Generational Conflict in Social Movement Organizations

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Abstract

Social movements are composed of distinct political generations. Yet empirical work documenting distinct generations is limited, and work detailing the conflict and problems created by generational turnover exceedingly rare. Based on interviews with 39 leaders of LGBTQ+ organizations, supplemented with longitudinal administrative text data from 1,840 LGBTQ+ organizational mission statements, we demonstrate political generational change, and conflict, in the U.S. LGBTQ+ movement. The prior “Legacy” generation is confronted by an “Emergent” generation with different understandings of sexuality/gender, intersectionality, and organizational strategies. These conflictual differences produce material and emotional consequences as the “Legacy” generation takes their resources away and members of both generations feel erased from the movement’s collective identity. Leaders navigate these “choppy waters” by taking either a *harsh* approach, which seeks to dismiss whichever generation is viewed as hindering their organization’s work, or an *inclusive* approach that views generational tension as an opportunity to grow and strengthen their organization and the larger movement. We highlight how the observed conflict between political generations prompts a serious re-evaluation of the “unity through diversity” mantra associated with this movement. Ultimately, political generations are a critical link to understanding transformation and change in social movements with clear implications for collective identity, resource mobilization, and other core social movement processes.

Keywords

political generations, LGBTQ+, organizational leaders, social movements

Social movements must successfully navigate times of change if they are to maintain continuity and coherence, avoid dissolution, and ensure posterity (Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011; Taylor 1989). Political generational turnover is recognized as one source of transformation in a social movement (Reger and Staggenborg 2006; Schneider 1988; Whittier 1997). Whittier hypothesized that generational turnover produces new group boundaries,

interpretive frameworks, and definitions of the opposition. However, despite some theoretical

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attention to this concept (e.g., Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone 2016; Hund and Benford 2007), concrete documentation of political generations in movements, or social movement organizations, is rare. Further, conflict and problems associated with generational turnover remain unexplored. The omission is unfortunate, as change in political generations is likely linked to many other types of change in social movement organizations.

This article investigates political generation turnover in the organizations populating one social movement. We first interviewed 39 leaders of a diverse set of LGBTQ+ organizations across the United States. These leaders described, in real time, that generation change is roiling their organizations. Although our interview guide did not ask about generational tensions, all leaders voluntarily articulated a contentious moment of transition between two generations who hold significantly different views on sexuality/gender, intersectionality, and organizational strategies (which we term “Legacy” and “Emergent” generations). We supplement our in-depth interview data with computational text analysis of 1,840 LGBTQ+ non-profit organization mission statements from 1998 to 2021, corroborating the presence of these perceived changes on a national scale. Leaders further detail the problems this generational turnover creates for organizations associated with the LGBTQ+ movement. We identify two approaches leaders take to navigating the conflict produced by this generational change—one approach views intergenerational turnover as an *opportunity* for learning, and the other views these tensions as a *hindrance* to achieving organizational goals. These findings force a re-evaluation of an important mantra in the LGBTQ+ movement, and especially its organizations: “unity through diversity,” or that movement cohesion happens not in spite of diversity but because of it (Armstrong 2002; Ghaziani 2008). This oft-repeated ethos may, in reality, have masked and be masking important contentions around gender/sexuality, intersectionality, and organizational strategies as

power transfers from the Legacy to the Emergent generation.

We interviewed leaders at the time of perceived generational change, rather than using retrospective and historical accounts. In doing so, our data reveal that organizations in the LGBTQ+ movement are experiencing, as articulated by one leader, “really choppy waters.” Beyond our case, our findings expand the political generation framework to include internal dynamics and conflict, subsequent consequences, organizational adaptation, and leadership strategies taken during transformative periods. We explore how organizations can adapt, innovate, and sustain themselves amid times of significant transition. Indeed, we examine how leaders can successfully navigate and maintain cohesion when their navigation choices have implications for the sustainability of the movement itself. In short, political generations matter. They are a critical link to understanding transformation and change in social movements and, as we demonstrate, one with clear implications for collective identity, resource mobilization, and other well-known social movement theories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Movement Organizations and Political Generations

Social movements undergo periods of change. Over time, transformations may occur in their activities (Taylor 1989), strategies (Schock and Demetriou 2018), collective identities (Melucci 1989; Reger 2014), and master frames (Noonan 1995). But transitional times strain movements. As subcategories within a movement emerge and diverge in beliefs and approaches, dissenting opinions, debates, and even infighting must be managed between individuals and within organizations (Ghaziani and Kretschmer 2018).

The theory of political generations can explain change in social movement organizations, and ultimately change in a social movement itself. Cohort replacement, where a generation imprinted with one collective

identity transitions to another, leads to change in the movement over time (Whittier 1997). According to Whittier (1997:762), a political generation consists of a cohort of individuals who join a social movement during a particular wave of protest. The moment when each generational cohort enters the movement is formative and imprints the cohort with a distinct and enduring viewpoint (Mannheim [1928] 1952; Whittier 1997). This imprint exists because, as a generation is immersed in the movement, they develop a collective identity with distinct boundaries and a unique perspective for how to engage and interpret events (Schneider 1988; Stein 1997; Whittier 1997). Social movements and social movement organizations can therefore comprise several cohorts of individuals, encompassing both a long-standing generation and recent additions (Reger 2014; Sutton 2020; Whittier 1997). New recruits may share fundamental beliefs and objectives with those who came before them, but because they are part of a different generation, they also bring distinct perspectives and characteristics (DeMartini 1992; Mannheim [1928] 1952). Turnover across cohorts thus provides the potential for pivotal change and transformation within organizations and movements.

For a theory of political generations, the question is not whether age or life-stage make participation in a social movement easier (Caren, Ghoshal, and Ribas 2011; McAdam 1989), whether youth are engaged or disengaged in civic life or politics (Putnam 2000), or whether youth are mobilized or socialized into existing social movements (Earl, Maher, and Elliot 2017; Johnston 2019). Nor is the question purely temporal: new political generations form, not as an arbitrary function of time, but because the environment has changed (Mannheim [1928] 1952; Scott and Schuman 1988; Whittier 1997). Importantly, “while age proximity helps place activists in different groups, age categories do not fully” map onto political generations (Sutton 2020:5). Although the idea of political generations is theoretically acknowledged (e.g., Ghaziani et al. 2016; Van Dyke and Taylor

2018), there is little explicit recognition of generations within movements and even less within social movement organizations (for exceptions, see Destine 2023; Stein 1997; Sutton 2020). Older work discusses generational differences in student activism in the 1960s (Klatch [1999] 2023), the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (Gusfield 1957), the New Left (Isserman 1987), pro-choice activism (Ginsburg 1989), and the movement to end violence against women (Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015). Scholarship also recognizes the role of young people and campus activism in, for example, the civil rights movement sit-ins (Morris 1981) and Freedom Summer (McAdam 1986). More recently, Milkman (2017) noted that millennials’ generational perspective fueled the social movements they developed, such as the Dreamers and Black Lives Matter. But much of the work on generations focuses on either one generation or, more commonly, on age variation as opposed to variation in political generations—a fine but distinct point. Apart from limited empirical accounts, political generations as an analytic tool for determining processes of change in social movements remain largely overlooked.

Conflict Across Political Generations

If political generations have been overlooked in social movements scholarship, even less work has considered how political generations and cohort replacement might affect the internal processes of social movements or social movement organizations. Some research suggests benefits to cohort replacement: Sutton (2020), for example, finds interactions between established and emergent political generations were productive in infusing abortion activism in Argentina with new energy, tactics, and inclusive collective identities. Likewise, Luna (2010) emphasizes that intergenerational conflict during the 2004 March for Women’s Lives led to positive shifts in the larger movement for reproductive health. However, a half century ago, Gusfield (1957:323) argued that conflict and other

problems are more to be expected: “When two or more generations appear within the same organization we may consequently anticipate factional conflict.”

Research on symbolic boundaries illuminates why “factional conflict” arises. Political generations are distinct social groups with boundaries contingent upon historical, social, and political context (Lamont and Molnár 2002). When these groups interact in the same social field, such as a social movement, boundary maintenance work is triggered (Bourdieu 1984; Gamson [1975] 1990; Pachucki, Pendergrass, and Lamont 2007). Boundary work can produce stratification and power differentials as the dominant group hoards resources and opportunities, and works to portray the symbolic markers defining out-groups as lesser-than (Lamont 1992; Schneider 1988). These dynamics are especially important in the context of social movements, because changing the cultural understandings of a group is often an explicit movement goal; classification struggles are an exercise in defining the very meaning of the movement (Epstein 1998; Gamson [1975] 1990; Van Dyke and Taylor 2018). The more salient the boundaries are between groups (i.e., generations), the more likely turnover is to be a conflictual process.

Whittier (1997) notes that generational turnover could produce these types of problems, including conflicts over group boundaries, disagreement over frames, and differing views of the opposition. But despite some research on factional conflicts within generations, little empirical work addresses the problems that arise within a social movement organization across generations. Thus, a theoretical perspective positing generational change and conflict relies on internal organizational processes that are largely yet to be observed (cf. Ghaziani 2008; Sutton 2020). Theoretically, expanding the framework of political generations to include the internal processes of power, conflict, and change that occur during turnover provides connection to the existing robust literature on conflict and infighting in social movements (e.g.,

Bernstein 1997; Gamson [1975] 1990; Ghaziani and Kretschmer 2018; McAdam 1982).

The Role of Leaders

We identify leaders of social movement organizations as vehicles for studying political generation change. Social movements can consist of waves of protest, advocacy campaigns, and grassroots organizing, but organizations are an important resource for creating the “mobilizing structures” that enable them (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Organizations acquire financial resources, recruit volunteers, and differentiate and delegate tasks (Walker and Martin 2019). Leaders occupy a unique, structural vantage point into social movement organizations, considering their aim is to keep their various stakeholders (e.g., funders, staff, volunteers, and supporters of different ages, genders, races, sexualities, and abilities) engaged (O’Brien 2019; Taylor and de Laat 2013). Like with other types of change, leaders of organizations in a social movement must navigate generational turnover or risk infighting (Ghaziani and Kretschmer 2018), fractures (Gamson [1975] 1990), or even movement abeyance (Whittier 1997).

Leadership matters to organizations of all kinds (Burns 1978; Gardner 1993; Wilson 1973). In social movement organizations, leaders work to maintain relationships within their organization and across the broader movement (Ganz 2000; Shi et al. 2017); create and maintain shared purpose during times of uncertainty (Ganz 2010); and strategically adapt to changing circumstances (McCammon 2012; Reger and Staggenborg 2006). But how do leaders navigate generational turnover in their organizations? Leaders are concerned with identifying points of division within their organization and developing a way forward by bridging group boundaries—if they can (Andrews et al. 2010; Destine 2023; Ganz and McKenna 2018). Consequently, our study contributes to social movement scholarship by reporting how leaders articulate political generational change, and we expand

the theory of political generations to include power and conflict, the challenges posed by generational turnover, and the strategies used to resolve conflicts and move forward.

Case Selection: LGBTQ+ Movement Organizations

Our focus, the contemporary U.S. LGBTQ+ movement, is an ideal case to consider potential political generational turnover and its consequences.¹ Political and demographic changes over time have created conditions ripe for the development of a new political generation. After achieving the assimilationist goal of marriage equality in 2015, the movement was hit with a wave of new restrictive state bills on LGBTQ+ education and trans healthcare (Ball 2019). Indeed, many scholars and activists contend that the Supreme Court decision legalizing marriage equality was an important watershed moment for the movement (Ball 2019). The transfer of priority from issues of sexual orientation to gender identity may represent a “period rupture” for the movement—a major sociopolitical change that symbolizes a new historic period (Mojola et al. 2021:956). Attitudes supportive of marriage equality and other aspects of LGBTQ+ equality continue to expand generally (Brenan 2024), but the movement faces recurrent and novel threats, such as anti-LGBTQ+ activism, continued violence (e.g., the Pulse nightclub shooting), and hints that the U.S. Supreme Court may undo gains made.

These changing sociopolitical environments coincided with changing demographic trends and LGBTQ+ experiences in the United States. For example, LGBTQ+ identification has rapidly expanded, disproportionately driven by younger Americans and women (Jones 2025). Starting around 2010, youth began showing increased comfort and familiarity with expansive understandings of gender, gender expression, and whether one needs to self-identify or “come out” at all, leading more people to embrace “post-gay” self-understandings (Ghaziani 2011;

Ghaziani and Holmes 2023; Russell, Bishop, and Fish 2023). Relatedly, sociocultural recognition within U.S. society since the turn of the century has expanded in media and other institutions (Garretson 2018) and, discursively, different sexual and gender identities are increasingly recognized (Velasco and Paxton 2022).

Altogether, these changes may mean a new generation of LGBTQ+ activists is engaging the movement in ways significantly different than the generation prior. This shift may cause conflict and disunity, considering that the “reproduction of existing cultural symbols is especially important in the face of inevitable turnover in group membership” (Bhatt, Goldberg, and Srivastava 2022:1686). In other words, if core symbolic markers signifying the prior LGBTQ+ political generation—like the fight for marriage equality, action on HIV/AIDS, “coming out,” the prioritization of white gay men, and even the original pride flag—are losing saliency, then cohesive reproduction of LGBTQ+ activists within existing group boundaries (i.e., an existing social movement organization) breaks down. In short, symbolic distinctions between groups may be heightened and result in potentially conflictual turnover processes.

However, in terms of finding conflict and consequence, the LGBTQ+ movement, and the organizations populating it, could also be considered a “hard case.” Since the 1970s, organizations in this movement have been characterized as embracing a “unity through diversity” mantra (Armstrong 2002). That is, activists believed that incorporating distinct subcommunities and multiple viewpoints into the movement would only strengthen their efforts (Armstrong 2002; Broad 2024). Of course, the ability to consistently use this mantra was and is challenging. As with any movement, internal divisions have arisen at various moments: liberatory versus assimilationist tactics, whether to emphasize similarity or distinction with heterosexual and cisgender communities, and critiques over the gendered, classed, and racialized nature of movement and organizational leadership

and priorities (Alimahomed 2010; Armstrong 2002:135; Ghaziani et al. 2016; Gould 2009; Taylor and Rupp 1993; Valocchi 1999a, 1999b). Yet, this research largely portrays these conflicts as factional differences within the same political generation, as opposed to intergenerational dynamics. Moreover, like Sutton (2020), the intragenerational focus of this research tends to emphasize the productive, and dividend producing, dimensions of factional conflicts (Ghaziani 2008). A focus on intergenerational change will help determine whether and how this mantra continues to operate under more significant disruption.

DATA AND METHODS

We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 39 leadership representatives of U.S.-based LGBTQ+ organizations between August 2022 and April 2024, with most interviews occurring between August 2022 and January 2023. We identified organizations through a combination of sampling techniques, the first of which was stratified random sampling. We began by creating a national administrative sample of all nonprofits that had filed Form 990 with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) between 1998 and 2019. Using dictionary-based computational text analysis on nonprofit mission statements, we identified all nonprofit organizations that work with LGBTQ+ populations (see Velasco and Paxton 2022). We divided the resulting dataset into four geographic regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, West) and subsequently into five revenue categories (average revenues of \$25,500, \$100,837, \$250,817, \$599,127, and \$5 million), leading to 20 strata. We then randomly selected organizations within each stratum to be interviewed.

To fill in gaps, we used a purposive sampling strategy, thus ensuring a diverse sample in terms of organizational size, geographic location, and thematic focus within the LGBTQ+ nonprofit sphere. We also used snowball sampling to uncover participants who were well-connected within the LGBTQ+ nonprofit community but might

not have been readily accessible through traditional methods (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Snowball sampling helped uncover smaller organizations that do not meet IRS minimum revenue reporting requirements. Figure A.1 in the online supplement shows a sampling matrix that denotes the recruitment strategy used to identify each organization selected for this study.²

Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. Given the national scope of our sample, all interviews were conducted via video conferencing. Open-ended questions explored changes to organizational language, programming, and mission design; relationships with stakeholders; decisions about inclusivity and finances; and perceived threats to the organization. We provide the full interview guide in the online supplement. The guide was not designed to ask about generational conflict, yet the nature of the questions inadvertently enabled respondents to identify tensions surrounding generational change. The topic of generational change thus emerged inductively during data analysis. Table 1 includes information on each of our interviewees and their respective organization. Participants ranged in age from 28 to 76 years old, with the average leader in their late 40s. Just under two thirds (64 percent) of our sample was white, with roughly 36 percent Black, indigenous, or people of color. Among our sample, 49 percent identified as male, 41 percent as female, and the remaining 10 percent as non-binary, gender fluid, or with gender identities undisclosed.

Iterative and systematic analysis immediately followed the data collection phase. The first author began the analysis by immersing herself in the data through multiple readings of the transcripts. All three authors engaged in an analytic process involving open and axial coding techniques. Open coding enabled the initial identification of categories and concepts arising from the data, and axial coding facilitated the organization and refinement of these categories into comprehensive themes (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Throughout the coding process, constant comparison

Table 1. Descriptions of Leaders and Their Organizations

Leader Name	Leader Characteristics				Organizational Characteristics						
	Position at Time of Interview	Approximate Age	Years in Position	Years Involved with Org.	Work Sector	Org. Focused on Youth?	Org. Age	Region	Revenue Category		
Adrienne Alec	Executive Director President of Executive Board	Late 60s Late 30s	>10 5-10	>10 5-10	Advocacy, community building Advocacy, community building, direct services	No No	> 40 years ≤ 10 years	Northeast Midwest	4 1		
Alex	Executive Director	Late 50s	>10	>10	Community building	No	21-30 years	Northeast	5		
Andre	Executive Director	Late 50s	<5	5-10	Community building	No	> 40 years	Northeast	2		
Ariel	CEO	Late 50s	5-10	>10	Community building	No	21-30 years	South	5		
Ava	Executive Director	Late 30s	5-10	5-10	Advocacy	No	11-20 years	Midwest	1		
Avery	Founder	Late 40s	>10	>10	Community building, direct services	Yes	21-30 years	South	1		
Blair	Executive Director	Late 50s	5-10	>10	Advocacy	No	11-20 years	Midwest	3		
Blake	Manager	Late 20s	<5	5-10	Advocacy	No	> 40 years	Northeast	5		
Carmen	Executive Director	Late 30s	5-10	5-10	Direct services, community building	Yes	31-40 years	West	3		
Cary	Executive Director	Early 40s	>10	>10	Advocacy, community building	No	> 40 years	Midwest	3		
Casey	Executive Director	Late 70s	5-10	>10	Community building	No	31-40 years	Midwest	5		
DJ	Board Chair	Early 60s	>10	>10	Community building	No	31-40 years	Northeast	2		
Dominic	Program Coordinator	Late 20s	<5	>10	Direct services	No	11-20 years	South	3		
Elias	Executive Director	Late 70s	>10	>10	Community building	No	31-40 years	South	4		
Frances	Founder & Executive Director	Early 70s	>10	>10	Direct services, community building	No	≤ 10 years	South	2		
Harper	CEO	Early 40s	<5	5-10	Direct services	No	21-30 years	West	3		
Jamie	Vice President of Board	Late 30s	<5	<5	Community building, direct services	Yes	11-20 years	Midwest	1		
Jasper	Managing Director	Early 50s	>10	>10	Community building	No	21-30 years	West	5		
Jordan	Executive Director	Early 50s	>10	>10	Advocacy, community building	No	21-30 years	Midwest	2		
Kendall	Senior Director	Late 30s	<5	>10	Community building	Yes	11-20 years	West	4		

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Leader Name	Leader Characteristics				Organizational Characteristics					Revenue Category
	Position at Time of Interview	Approximate Age	Years in Position	Years Involved with Org.	Work Sector	Org. Focused on Youth?	Org. Age	Region		
Lara Leo	Executive Director Interim Executive Director	Late 40s Early 70s	<5 <5	5-10 <5	Direct services Community building	Yes Yes	21-30 years ≤ 10 years	Northeast Northeast	1 3	
Mason Max	Executive Director	Early 30s	5-10	5-10	Advocacy, community building	No	11-20 years	Northeast	3	
Morgan Oliver	Executive Director	Early 40s	<5	<5	Community building	No	> 40 years	West	5	
	Director	Late 40s	<5	>10	Advocacy	No	21-30 years	West	2	
	Executive Director	Early 30s	<5	5-10	Direct services, community building	No	31-40 years	Midwest	4	
Quan	President of Board of Directors	Early 40s	<5	5-10	Advocacy	No	≤ 10 years	South	2	
Quinn	Executive Director	Late 40s	<5	5-10	Community building, direct services	No	≤ 10 years	West	4	
Robin Rory	CEO	Late 40s	5-10	5-10	Advocacy	No	31-40 years	Midwest	4	
	Founder & Board Member	Late 60s	>10	>10	Community building	No	≤ 10 years	Northeast	1	
Sam	President & CEO	Early 60s	5-10	5-10	Community building, direct services	No	21-30 years	South	5	
Sean	Founder & Board President	Early 40s	5-10	5-10	Community building	No	≤ 10 years	West	1	
Sebastian	Executive Director	Late 40s	<5	>10	Advocacy	No	31-40 years	South	3	
Simone	Interim Executive Director	Early 30s	<5	<5	Advocacy	No	31-40 years	West	2	
Tamara	Executive Director	Late 30s	<5	<5	Advocacy, direct services	No	21-30 years	Midwest	2	
Taylor	Executive Director	Early 50s	>10	>10	Advocacy	No	31-40 years	South	1	
Theo	Executive Director	Early 50s	5-10	5-10	Advocacy	No	≤ 10 years	South	5	
Victor	Board Chair	Early 40s	<5	5-10	Community building, direct services	Yes	31-40 years	South	4	

Note: All leader and organization names are pseudonyms. To further preserve anonymity, we report leader age as an approximation and bin the number of years a leader has held their position, number of years a leader has been with the organization, and the age of the organization. Revenue category indicates most recently filed tax filing (relative to 2016). Category 1: < \$58,000; Category 2: \$58,001 to \$141,859; Category 3: \$141,860 to \$386,237; Category 4: \$386,23 to \$1,024,382; Category 5: > \$1,024,382.

techniques were applied to ensure the consistency and credibility of the emergent themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Leaders described subjective experiences within their individual organizations; our interview data thus offer phenomenological insights into how movement leaders understand, interpret, and engage with organizational dynamics (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Husserl [1913] 1982). To extend our scope, we complement our interview data with quantitative insights derived from the administrative tax data mentioned earlier. We expanded the administrative data to include all LGBTQ+ nonprofits from 1998 through 2021, resulting in 1,840 unique organizations and 15,861 organization-year observations. We use these text data to “zoom out” and investigate whether our leaders’ observations are reflected in the trends we can see for all LGBTQ+ nonprofit mission statements.³ We do this by developing dictionaries composed of terms that reflect concepts as they were articulated by our interviewees (see the online supplement for these dictionaries). Additionally, our online supplement includes illustrations of organizational mission statement changes with examples drawn from our administrative data. By validating leaders’ observations at a larger scale and with an alternative source of data, this triangulation strategy bolsters our overall research claims (Axinn and Pearce 2006).

POLITICAL GENERATIONAL CHANGE IN LGBTQ+ SOCIAL MOVEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

“This is a big conversation we’re having: Gen Zs and Millennials, they’re a huge amount of the workforce, of [our city’s] population, and they’re only gonna grow. We need to find a way to make them feel safe and seen; organizational language must find a way to evolve in that way. But the founders are still around. They’re still leaders, still donors. It’s my job to figure out how to bridge those intergenerational differences.” — Tamara

Nonprofit leaders almost universally described experiencing a change in the political generations comprising the LGBTQ+ movement today, as some members of the community age and others enter for the first time. DJ, the Executive Director of Lionheart Network,⁴ described the presence of two generations in their organization:

I sat in on a few of their meetings and just witnessed these older black trans women telling these younger organizers “We’re tired” and sharing their stories . . . and passing this torch on. That’s been beautiful, but also, it has been eye opening. . . . Elders that I have talked to in this work, like, they can’t keep doing it. . . . I want to show the younger staff members and the youth ambassadors that this work is ongoing, but also the torch is being passed.

DJ is not the only leader who described generational change within their organization. Generational changes appear in LGBTQ+ organizations of all stripes, from political advocacy groups on Capitol Hill and national marketing campaigns in New York City to local grassroots initiatives in rural Nebraska. Statements about generational transition transcend geographic, financial, and operational differences among LGBTQ+ organizations. Regardless of their own age, respondents universally constructed a binarized understanding of two generations: reporting the need to attend to a newer generation as the presence, influence, and resources of an older generation wanes.⁵

No organization faced these changes without leaders also describing the challenges and problems accompanying this transition. In LGBTQ+ organizations, leaders described a palpable tension between an older political generation (hereafter the “Legacy” generation, a term drawn in vivo from our participants) and a new political generation (what we call the “Emergent” generation). As stated by Sebastian, Executive Director of Equality Shield, “generational divides . . . present challenges.” To discuss generational change is to bring

up feelings of fear, frustration, and in some cases vitriol. One leader, Sam, described constantly navigating the friction present between younger members of his organization and the “old guard” still active there: “In my profession I’m having to walk the line between these two communities. . . . Sometimes I feel like it’s really choppy waters here. You’re just trying to get through because it’s changing pretty drastically and pretty quickly. I feel like all I try to do is just create a sense of calm.” As he navigates these changes, Sam admitted to feeling “caught in the middle of that [Legacy] generation and younger people.”

Leaders of LGBTQ+ organizations highlighted three key sites where the symbolic boundaries between political generations are most salient in their organizations: (1) conceptualizations of sexuality and gender; (2) perspectives on and attention to intersectionality; and (3) strategic approaches to movement work. Not every organization uniformly encounters all three aspects concurrently, but every LGBTQ+ leader across our varied set of organizations used at least one of these markers to broadly construct and define distinctions between generations. In the following sections, we detail these interconnected shifts. We then examine the challenges that arise from perceived generational change and how LGBTQ+ organizations strategically navigate the problems they describe with their own Legacy and Emergent constituents.

“Sexuality and Gender” or “Sexuality versus Gender”?

“We’ve had older donors be very specific about not wanting to support transgender causes. They just don’t feel it’s part of their movement.” — Sam

Many LGBTQ+ organizations have historically focused on issues of sexual orientation, issues that are often most salient to lesbian, bisexual, and, especially, gay members of the community. Organizations today attempt to center issues of gender identity and fluidity alongside sexuality. For example, Jamie

claimed that programming by his organization, The Gathering, has shifted to target queer, transgender, nonbinary, and intersex people: “I would say we are very ‘TQ+’ [transgender and queer] in our approach. . . . Sex and gender and sexuality all interplay together.” Changes happening at The Gathering are microcosmic reflections of a national trend where LGBTQ+ nonprofits have been steadily incorporating more gender-inclusive language and programming. As shown in Figure 1, since the turn of the century, the number of LGBTQ+ nonprofits who claim only to serve gay, bisexual, and/or lesbian folks has declined. As “LGB” vocabulary has waned, the use of “Trans/Queer+ inclusive” language has skyrocketed. The LGBTQ+ movement has seen a surge in nonprofits who purport to serve trans, queer, nonbinary, gender fluid, and gender expansive persons.

Institutional representatives described two reasons why the movement and its organizations are shifting focus. First, elevating gender identity is a way for organizations to combat anti-trans stigma. Second, and more frequently discussed, is that such changes are in direct response to the priorities of a new cohort. The Emergent generation’s insistence on the “centrality of queerness and prioritization of queerness” drives organizations to, in the words of one leader, “center queerness in [their] conversations [and their] work.” Indeed, leaders noted that the constant urging from the Emergent generation to prioritize these issues can sometimes be taxing. Even though The Gathering shifted to become “very ‘TQ+’ in [its] approach,” Jamie admitted that his staff still “got exhausted by language. We kept chewing on the same words over and over again. We were like, [sigh] ‘Ugh, oh my god, no, we’re just a community center! [laugh].’”

Nearly every organizational leader in our study pointed to views of gender and sexuality as one of the most salient distinctions between generations. Although the Emergent generation’s unwavering persistence on these topics may at times be irritating, when it comes to expansive understandings of gender

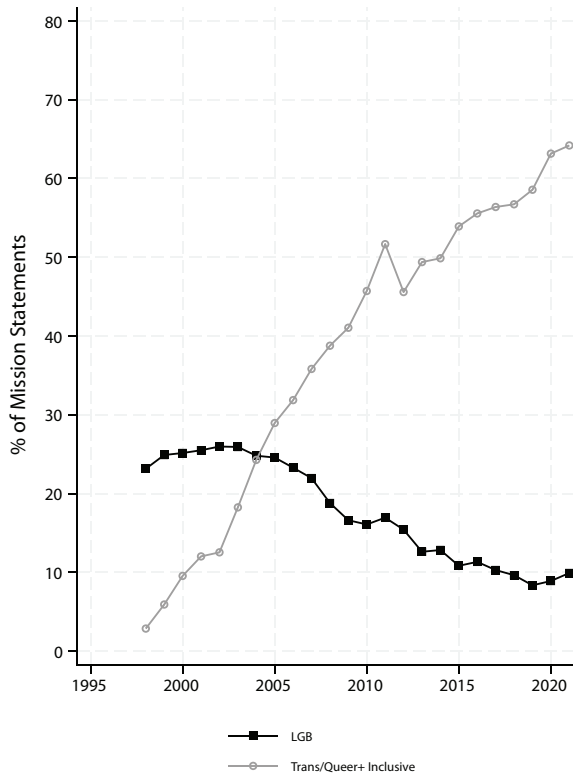


Figure 1. Changes in Sexuality and Gender-Based Language in LGBTQ+ Nonprofit Mission Statements, 1998 to 2021

and sexuality, most leaders suggested it is members of the Legacy generation who find it particularly challenging. “The whole idea of gender nonconforming youth is very disorienting for them,” said one leader of his Legacy members. “Because they’re at an age where ‘You’re gay. You were straight and then you came out. The end.’ Any gray area between that confuses them.” Another leader, whose organization primarily serves the Legacy political generation, admitted that when “working with an older [population]—I mean, sometimes just more conservative, but definitely an older population—they’re just slower to adapt.” Sam agreed, noting that staff at his organization have refrained from adding pronouns to their email signatures, a practice largely supported and adopted by the Emergent generation in the LGBTQ+ movement. Sam claimed that adding pronouns to

staff email signatures would “just disorient” Legacy members in his organization: “They have good intentions. . . . They just come from a different generation.”

Issues for the Legacy generation go beyond simple confusion over new terms. Organizational representatives reported that many constituents are unsettled and even angered by the LGBTQ+ movement’s growing emphasis, as shown in Figure 1, on transgender issues and gender nonconformity. Tamara, the Executive Director of Harmony Inc., recalled how her Legacy members became uneasy when her organization began “raising awareness of the way that gender and race were starting to expand.” Harmony Inc.’s previous executive director had pushed for more programming that centered “people who were masculine of center, nonbinary, or trans[gender] masc[uline] folks, [and] butch studs.” But

Harmony Inc. was originally founded by and for Black lesbian women. Tamara empathized with the Legacy's resistance. These women, she explained, are "pioneers as black queer persons because there's been so much structural disappearing of those like them. . . . [T]hey're seeing themselves disappear from the greater narrative." Tamara understood resistance to change as a valid response from Black queer Legacy members who have historically faced structural erasure. "But," Tamara was quick to acknowledge, "the way that [resistance] comes out is transphobia." Oliver concurred that when working with organizational stakeholders, several Legacy members expressed "pretty inflammatory anti-trans things related to how our organization used to only serve gay men and then we let the lesbians in and essentially that was the end." These divisions can often exasperate leaders and fracture organizational unity. "So, what do I do?" pleaded one leader. "If I talk about 'trans,' they [Legacy members] think it's not about them. I will not keep them engaged. But, like, come on, the 'T' [transgender community] is part of us, part of everything!"

Intersectionality

"We started a BIPOC [black, indigenous, people of color] mentorship group and quickly got funding for it, we applied and got funding like that! We haven't had any resistance, we honestly—wait, except for this older white cis gay guy. He was like 'I just don't get it? What's all the fuss about?'" — Ariel

The LGBTQ+ movement, as one leader proclaimed, is "diverse in every way, and it's important to account for that, [so] intersectional justice is important for the future." Intersectional thinking challenges the notion of any one unified gendered or sexual experience (Crenshaw 1991). "There is no way to understand queerness," one leader explained, "without understanding black queerness and women queerness and trans queerness and rural queerness; there's no way to understand full liberation without understanding the

complexities of those overlapping identities now." As the United States diversifies, contending with the overlapping and intersecting identities of their constituents is a necessary task acknowledged almost unanimously by LGBTQ+ organizations. However, leaders reported that understandings of—and subsequent approaches to—intersectionality are also shaped by political generational divisions and conflict.

Many leaders we spoke with said their organizations have been making strides toward intersectional consciousness, largely at the behest of the Emergent generation. One nonprofit leader admitted his was not "a very diverse organization seven years ago when [he] started" and acknowledged "that's changed drastically" in the past few years. He credited members of the Emergent generation for inspiring this change. Another leader acknowledged that "anti-racism kind of forced the conversation to focus on all types of marginalization." The Emergent political generation is sending a clear message: moving forward, the LGBTQ+ movement must "address racism, ableism, classism [and] acknowledge broader intersections" within the community. As shown in Figure 2, although organizational acknowledgment of intersectionality remains low, the percent of all LGBTQ+ organizations incorporating intersectional vocabulary and attention to overlapping, structural inequalities into their mission statements has increased, rising from almost zero in 1998 to around 8 percent today.

For some organizations, primarily those led by women and/or people of color from the Legacy generation, the relationship between intersectionality and LGBTQ+ work is—and has always been—mutually constitutive. Legacy members' work directly benefits a movement's posterity. Dominic, for example, is a member of the Emergent generation but leads an organization that was founded decades ago with the explicit purpose of elevating intersectional LGBTQ+ experiences, specifically those of Black trans women. "Because we have these intersectional identities," he explained, "I have access to intergenerational

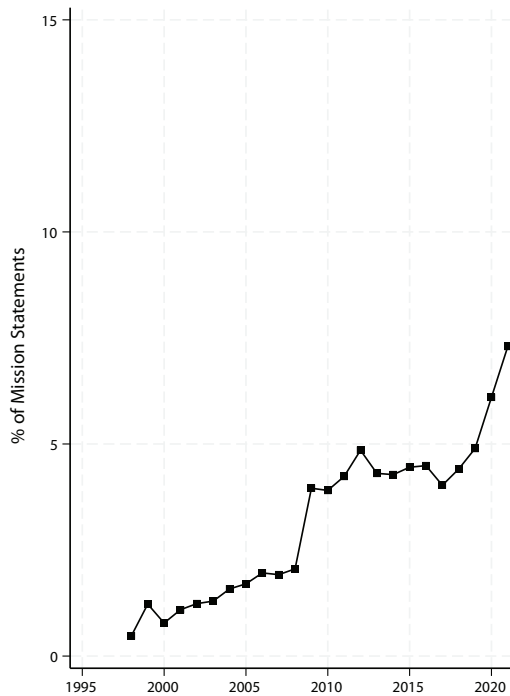


Figure 2. Changes in Intersectionality-Based Language in LGBTQ+ Nonprofit Mission Statements, 1998 to 2021

knowledge about blackness.” Having a space for multiple generations of Black trans persons to gather is crucial, he said, because “the gap in knowledge and wisdom and lived experience very much is received and experienced in an intergenerational way.”

However, for most organizations, the calls for intersectionality reflected in Figure 2 stir controversy by bringing generational tensions to the fore. Tamara acknowledged that some members of the Legacy generation want nothing to do with these issues. Diversity, equity, and inclusion, she said, are “just not priorities for many of those folks.” Other leaders reported similar resistance from Legacy members. As one leader said, when it comes to issues of intersectionality, “there’s just not the concern for a certain generation.” Many leaders find that “at the senior level [of the organization], they’re not interested,” in meaningfully accounting for intersectionality.

Simone was frustrated by the way generational divides show up when thinking of ways

her work can and should be intersectional. However, Simone’s ire was directed toward those on the other side of the generational divide: “What I see is actually more like young people—like younger than me, like, I guess Gen Z people who, for whatever reason, have a problem.” Calls for intersectionality, Simone observed, inevitably devolve into debates about “politically correct vocabulary.” Members of the Emergent generation, she claimed, “just like to be the language police” when advocating for intersectional change. Sebastian, himself a member of the Legacy generation, also connected intersectionality to political generational tensions within his organization. To Sebastian, the Emergent generation engages in “doing this intellectual masturbation about the power dynamics in the room or whatever”:

I could be embroiled in [their] identity politics stuff, Black, White, blah blah blah, forever. I think [they are] a little bit too sensitive about intersectionality. We make it

the only thing we fight about all day long, how to analyze it, how to be precise about it, meanwhile anti-LGBT legislation is being passed. I think it's important to remember who the real enemy is. I think it's lazy to crap on white men.

Another organizational leader lambasted the Emergent generation's strategic privileging of diversity, equity, and inclusion as "being lazy and constantly slowing down the movement." Other LGBTQ+ leaders echoed Sebastian in viewing intersectional consciousness as, in their words, "demands" that are "unnecessarily divisive" and believed them to be hindering real progress. In grappling with intersectionality, these LGBTQ+ organizations confront not only the complexities of overlapping structural inequalities, but also the divergent viewpoints of different political generations of activists.

Strategy

"For example, one of them will say, 'Let's go protest! Let's go yell into the wind!' And I'll say, 'Well, that takes a lot of time and resources . . . and you're going to change nobody's attitude, vote, or make a difference. How about we go this Saturday and canvas with voters? Talk to voters one-on-one.' And they'll say, 'No, that's kind of boring.'" — Sebastian

A third marker that, according to movement leaders, is becoming salient during this period of reported turnover is how the Legacy and Emergent generations utilize strategies to advance the LGBTQ+ movement. Different eras of LGBTQ+ activism are "characterized by different sorts of approaches to change" (D'Emilio 2002:91), with some novel and some repackaged general movement strategies (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005). Factions within movements may disagree about strategy (Destine 2023; Ghaziani and Kretschmer 2018; Gusfield 1957; Whittier 1997). Our organizational representatives acknowledged that different strategies for advocacy, activism, and mobilization coexist

in the movement today, and these different strategies map to different political generations. Members of the Legacy generation, for example, are familiar with the traditional civil rights frames of organizing, including sustained coalition building, long-term organization activities, and a focus on political mobilization. Legacy members of the LGBTQ+ movement strategically "adopted the imperative to come out as the key element in the new movement they were building[,] . . . targeted the key institutions that seemed complicitous in the oppression of gays and lesbians[,] . . . formed organizations, built community institutions, [and] persisted in their efforts to affect law, public policy, and mainstream institutions" (D'Emilio 2002:90).

The new generation of activists and advocates are seen as challenging the civil rights framing of past organizing. Elias from Equality Vision granted that it was "by saying 'we're just like everyone else,' that's kind of how the LGBT community got in the door." But these LGBTQ+ organizations have since welcomed an Emergent generation who seem to eschew this approach. One nonprofit leader and member of the Emergent generation said these older strategies were "not much of a challenge to the status quo, not much of a challenge to the system." She dismissed them as "displays of respectability politics," saying that "maybe people were more comfortable with [those strategies] because they weren't challenged by . . . the needs of young people." Critiques of respectability politics, or when "privileged members of marginalized groups comply with dominant social norms" (Dazey 2021:580), are increasingly common among young people—especially when these political tactics are seen as supporting homonormativity (Duggan 2002). Dominic agreed, saying that his younger constituents "do not appeal to respectability in the way that some of the old strategies do." Indeed, the Emergent political generation of the LGBTQ+ movement brandishes what one leader called a "'we are here, deal with it' attitude."⁶

The Emergent political generation instead calls for "liberation," "solidarity,"

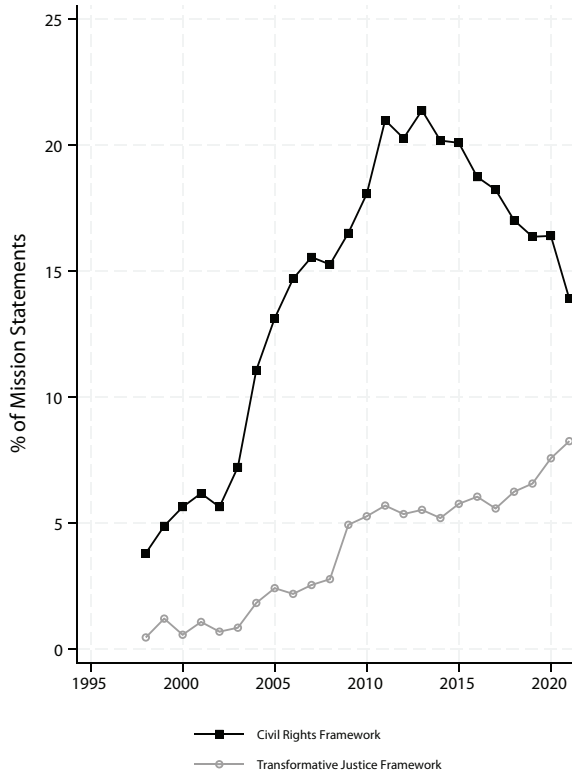


Figure 3. Changes in Civil Rights Frames and Transformative Justice Frames in LGBTQ+ Nonprofit Mission Statements, 1998 to 2021

“transformative justice,” and short-term demonstrations coupled with a pervasive rejection of conformity. “There’s this certain fire that they lead with,” observed Dominic. Folks in the Emergent generation “really burst in the door and knocked that bitch off the hinges. They do not care, okay?” But where Dominic sees the Emergent generation leading with fire, other leaders see smoke and mirrors. Sebastian described the LGBTQ+ movement as mired in “a crisis of fabulousness, where if it’s not shiny and bright and looks like a 10-foot drag queen, they [those of the Emergent generation] don’t want it.” Sebastian explained that someone like himself, a member of the Legacy generation, “wants to sit down and say, ‘Ok, what’s the strategy? What’s the message? How are we going to organize ourselves?’” This strategy, however, fails to resonate with the Emergent members of Sebastian’s organization. “They’re like, ‘No! We want cameras!’”

he said. “[T]hey’re prepared to say things that are inflammatory to get quoted, they’re prepared to do things that are demonstrative, big, right? It’s so exhausting to me because when I ask them, ‘Hey, do you want to volunteer to go canvas?’ It’s [met with], ‘Oh, no no no, I don’t do that stuff.’” Of this Emergent generation, he said, “they’ll find themselves frustrated [with older strategies] because they’re not making an immediate difference.” Scholars have noted that calls for liberation and use of confrontational social media are mobilization strategies commonly used by Emergent organizers (Barcelos 2025; Barcelos et al. 2023). As leaders describe stakeholder fights over which strategies will push the movement forward, Emergent, justice-focused strategic frames are appearing in increasingly more LGBTQ+ mission statements, as shown in Figure 3. Conversely, the incorporation of frames and vocabularies familiar to Legacy strategists

has been in decline in mission statements for nearly a decade.

A lifecourse perspective might suggest that young activists adopt more confrontational tactics and shift their approach with age, implying that today's Emergents might eventually resemble Legacies. Our cross-sectional design prevents definitive claims about lifecourse trajectories, but our respondents consistently emphasized generational differences rather than age-related evolutions when discussing tensions related to movement strategy.⁷ Distinct strategic approaches likely reflect formative social, political, or cultural experiences salient to each political generation. For Legacies, the achievement of marriage equality and other legislative victories may have reinforced the efficacy of institutional tactics and rights-based framing. Emergents, in contrast, have witnessed how discrimination persists despite these legal protections, perhaps fostering their disillusionment with formal strategic approaches.⁸

PROBLEMS WITH POLITICAL GENERATIONAL CHANGE FOR ORGANIZATIONS

"We've been talking about doing some programming that specifically targets inter-generational dialogue. God knows we need it: We need to build those bridges within our own GLBT community." — Leo

Leaders described political generational change as causing problems within LGBTQ+ social movement organizations. Leaders of LGBTQ+ nonprofits identified tensions, wounds incurred, and even bridges burned by members on both sides of the intergenerational divide. "There's lots of ageism and . . . dismissal of what some people have experienced," Tamara explained. "There's always a punitive mentality, like, 'know your place, deal with it, this is the real world' mentality." Tamara clarified that these salvos are not one sided; they are lobbed "from the mentors and warriors and elders directed to the younger generation but also, really, vice versa." Oliver

said that in his organization, political generational change "has shown up in really explicit ways and less-than-attractive expressions of disappointment, distaste, anger, frustration, lack of engagement." In the LGBTQ+ movement today, emotions run high as members of the Legacy and Emergent political generations clash over which group's understanding of gender and sexuality, intersectionality, and strategy is to take priority—a classic aspect of classification struggles (Bourdieu 1987; Lamont and Fournier 1992).

Organizational leaders find themselves consumed by "trying to figure out how to participate in [contemporary conversations] and be relevant while also not isolating aging constituents who are not that familiar with the terms." The priorities of the clashing political generations at times seem inextricably at odds: an organization driven by the preferences of one generation risks being thrown out of alignment with the priorities of the other. Leaders reported that conflicts over gender/sexuality, intersectionality, and strategy are consequential to their organizations. As is commonly argued in work on symbolic boundaries, interactions between groups can result in struggles over both material and symbolic power—affecting the allocation of material resources between groups and symbolic resources like prestige or recognition (Lamont 1992). Our leaders found that conflicts manifest most strongly over (1) resources, primarily financial resources, and (2) strong emotions about erasure/exclusion and collective identity maintenance.

Resources

"I get to have a really high-level conversation with donors who have significant capacity, and a lot of them have pulled away their financial support of their communities because they don't feel as connected to the cause. They don't identify as closely with other identities other than their own. And that is a problem." — Oliver

Prior to the early 2000s, gay and lesbian activists maintained a clear set of goals, even as

specific strategies cycled (D’Emilio 2002:93; Ghaziani et al. 2016). These reformers saw many of their goals enshrined within the legal landscape: homosexuality was no longer classified as a disease, hate-crime sanctions were enacted and sodomy statutes struck down, anti-discrimination protections were put into effect, and same-sex marriage was legally recognized. These protections were certainly not immutable and by no means signaled that equality was fully realized, especially as anti-LGBTQ+ politics became more salient in the United States, but they did signal that the Legacy wave of LGBTQ+ activists successfully achieved many of their objectives. However, these wins also paradoxically created resource problems for LGBTQ+ organizations (O’Brien 2019). Ariel explained how achieving marriage equality, which had for decades been a forefront issue of the LGBTQ+ movement, actually stalled movement support in the years that followed:

That [achieving marriage equality] was their focus. I’ll just be candid. I think a lot of the very wealthy, white, cis[gender] men pretty much just up and left. And also some of the private foundations that they were pretty concentrated in or the private foundations that those people even ran.

Financial problems that occur vis-a-vis political generation turnover often stem from the fact that most donors exist on just one side of the generational divide. “It’s [the] groups over 40, 50, 60 who have the greatest disposable income,” explained one organizational leader. Simone agreed: “Our major donors are generally older. . . . [T]hey’re not young, okay? They’re probably generally like late Gen X or Boomer.” As generational change occurs, money and resources shift as well. “They have power,” one organizational leader said of the Legacy generation. “There’s so much money behind them!” As illustrated in our previous sections, members of the Emergent generation have shifted the movement’s direction, nudging it to pursue different priorities, center different causes, and adopt

different strategies to attain its goals. However, this generation is financially incapable of sustaining the organizations that comprise the LGBTQ+ movement.

Given the political generation turnover within their organizations, leaders must delicately navigate intergenerational differences to retain financial support for their goals. One leader, himself a cisgender white male of the Legacy generation, proclaimed that “many organizations would not be funded [and] many salaries would not get paid if not for many white men” (see also Ward 2008). Despite the reality of this power dynamic, he resisted and resented “the demonization of white males as ‘just the funders of the movement,’” calling it “[t]he laziest assessment that anybody can ever make about the LGBT movement.” Still, in the words of another leader, fundraising discussions almost always entail having to navigate “complicated conversation[s] around the disconnect and the tension between LGBTQ wealth—which is centered with white older gay men—and this kind of really quick shifting of the cause.” Resource problems develop when donors simply do not see the need to donate to a movement that in their eyes no longer represents them or has bent too far to the will of a political generation whose priorities they do not share.

When an organization’s finances are jeopardized, so too is its work. “These kids are at such risk,” Sam said, reflecting on the LGBTQ+ youth many nonprofits serve. “The last thing these agencies need to be worried about is financially risking the future.” Sam believed that by blindly following the demands of the Emergent political generation, some organizations are barreling toward financial risks:

I think they’re going at breakneck speed to be politically correct. And in doing that, I think they’re leaving behind their donor base. . . . They’re moving so quickly that they’re going to leave a lot of money on the table. And it worries me. I just want to point out that everybody wants to be so politically

correct, but it's hard because you've got to bring in donors. And the donors, a lot of them are older. It's just different.

LGBTQ+ organizations can be trapped between a rock and a hard place. One leader, Erin, admitted that "it's a real possibility that I could seriously lose funders by pushing more on this intersectionality work." Most of her donations (and her organization's operating budget) come from Legacy members, a group Erin says, "push back around some certain things" and periodically raise the "question of, 'Do we have to do the whole diversity thing?'" Erin *wants* to honor her Emergent constituents' calls for more intersectional initiatives, but she fears "If we were going to push back, lose a funder, then lose a house because of that? That means youth are going to experience more homelessness." According to Erin, heeding the Emergent generation's calls for intersectional advocacy might alienate her Legacy donors; without their resources, many organizations' ability to help the LGBTQ+ community will be imperiled.

Emotion, Exclusion, and Collective Identity

"[T]hose who have been in Harmony Inc. for over 20 years, some are expressing some anxiety. There's a very real fear of being forgotten. . . . [T]hey're seeing themselves disappear from the greater narrative." — Tamara

The challenges brought by generational change implicate more than just the resources fueling LGBTQ+ movement organizations. The political generation shift is reshaping power structures in organizations, redefining boundaries, and engendering profound emotional turmoil among Legacy and Emergent constituents alike. These emotions are often rooted in specific fears of being excluded from their organization or the movement as a whole. Disrupted by the shifting landscape, many members fear they will become marginalized within—or pushed out of—their

own movement. As one leader explained, "the language we use, the imagery we use, the programs that we develop and design, all of those things" are avenues where an organization can make members feel either represented or excluded, seen or rendered invisible, elevated or erased.

Emergent members, for example, express frustration with the strategies and terms that, while familiar to Legacy members, are now perceived as restrictive. Elias, Executive Director of Equality Vision, reflected that such language "had its merits, it did a lot of good, but it also did have the possible effect of erasing a lot of queer identities." To avoid excluding members of the Emergent political generation, Elias and other organizational leaders have "focused on [their] younger members, on making sure that [they] are not so rigid in [their] ways that younger folks don't feel there's a space for them." Indeed, the evolution of language within nonprofits over the past two decades has increasingly acknowledged the fluidity of sexual orientations and gender identities (Velasco and Paxton 2022).

These shifts, however, are not without emotional consequence for Legacy members. Kendall noted that in his organization, "there have actually been comments from gays and lesbians that they feel like they've taken a back seat." Attending to the priorities of the Emergent generation has made Legacy members, many of whom were historically centered, feel marginalized today. "Older gays and lesbians [are] feeling very erased," said Andre. Indeed, in the wake of political generational change, his organization has weathered "a lot of very emotional conversations about members . . . wanting to be seen." The emotional turmoil that met Andre as his group struggled to rebrand itself demonstrates how fears of exclusion can directly challenge movement organizations:

Nonbinary, queer, trans members wanted to be valuable members of the community and wanted a name that reflected their experience and existence. But then you have

people who have been in the [organization] for a long time and made it what it is. Doing that [changing the group's name] might erase *their* presence in the [organization]. *They* didn't want to be erased. Lesbians and gays felt concerned that if we went too euphemistic that we would seem like a straight [organization] because we've been always out and loud and proud.

Andre said he “was shocked at the depth of it and the emotionality” of his constituents, but other leaders were less surprised by their members' emotional reactions to changes that threatened to exclude them. As Tamara observed, “Our country's culture dismisses the value of aging. . . . God it's a totally appropriate and necessary response that they are digging their heels in and demanding that they stay centered.” Elias emphasized that the LGBTQ+ community is often erroneously thought of as “a lump, like we're all happy and we all get along. That's not always true. There's some real anger out there.” Perhaps some level of conflict and emotional strain between movement members is to be expected (Ghaziani 2008; Gould 2009; Jasper 1998). However, leaders recognized that these emotions and exclusionary dynamics can endanger a foundational principle of their work: collective identity.

Collective identity—a group's shared self-definition forged through common experiences and sustained through interactions with others in the movement (Melucci 1989; Taylor 1989)—lies at the heart of social organizing. If collective identity fractures, the entire action system of a movement can crumble. For organizations within the LGBTQ+ movement, maintaining collective identity is not merely a means to an end but a central pillar of their work. Emotional fears surrounding exclusion and erasure make leaders increasingly concerned that organizational unity is unraveling. Tamara shared how one seemingly small dilemma illuminates the complicated dynamics at play: “I want to keep the word lesbian in our mission statement. I love the punch of it, I love

the politics behind it, I love the history. . . . But I understand why that feels threatening or not expansive enough to invite all to the space.” Legacy members' deep attachment to historical identifiers collides with Emergent members' feelings of exclusion when confronting narrower terminology. Solutions to one generation's emotional needs create new exclusions for the other.

As emotions reach a fever pitch, leaders are witnessing constituents young and old “stepping away from the cause” as issues of collective identity become irreconcilable. When something within the movement fails to reflect their own experience, Sam said, “they don't feel like it's part of them. It's like, ‘Why is that under our umbrella? It's not my fight, that's not my problem.’” Tensions around “who belongs” directly challenge the maintenance of a cohesive organizational identity, and conflicts within organizations threaten consequences for the entire movement (Gamson [1975] 1990). Before issues of collective identity become irreconcilable, leaders like Elias plead for ways to build bridges: “So how do we acknowledge all the members of our community without turning our backs on anyone in the community?”

APPROACHES TO NAVIGATING GENERATIONAL CHANGE

“We've swung in different directions: from placating and leaning into [peoples'] wishes and desires, and then on the other end, really like saying, ‘We don't want you at the table. You can go take your philanthropy elsewhere.’ I think what we're trying to do here is recognize that the things that those folks are saying are really problematic and inappropriate and hateful, . . . get them to understand that, and then move them forward. . . . And that's hard. It's hard. I'm not saying I'm perfect at it. I'm not saying that we've moved the needle a ton.” — Oliver

Organization leaders are tasked with steering their constituents safely through the tumultuous waters stirred by political generation

change. With conflicts straining their organizations, how do LGBTQ+ leaders contend with generational change? We find that LGBTQ+ leaders typically take one of two broad approaches to navigating generational change in their organizations. Some leaders take a *hindrance* perspective that views change as problematic and yields a *harsh* response to constituents from either generation. Others take an *opportunity* perspective that promotes intergenerational education, tolerance, and presence; these leaders advocate an *inclusive* response to ease the inevitable generational turnover.⁹

The hindrance perspective views generational differences as a source of frustration, and harsh organizational leaders may reference different cohorts with scorn. A hindrance perspective sees Legacy members as thorns in the side of a movement trying to move forward. “The only pushback I got in this entire year-long strategic plan process,” lamented one Executive Director, came from “a number of white cis gay men.” A chorus of leaders described similar situations. They scoffed at having to “*dance around* the old white cis folks,” “*deal with* cis white gay men,” or otherwise yield to “older gays and lesbians.” Putting it succinctly, one leader said, “Older cis gay guys, they are the ones that can be a problem.”

Harsh leaders also used distancing and infantilizing language when discussing the Emergent generation. Take Sebastian, who found that his Emergent constituents were regularly displeased with his leadership decisions, specifically his willingness to accept corporate donations for their organization. In response to their criticisms, Sebastian said he will “sit there being like, ‘Ok, so you go fundraise, you pink-haired queer kid!’” He continued, “I love the pink-haired queer kids, but the minute they open their mouth, all they spew is negativity, right?” In this case, as members of the Emergent political generation express discontent over the priorities and actions of their organization, the Legacy leader responds by deriding their appearance, dismissing their youthful naivety,

and criticizing what he perceives to be a bad attitude.

Leaders who adopted a harsh response tended to approach disputes with an assertive, at times defiant, attitude. When constituents expressed disdain for certain language, or donors refused to fund programs for certain members of the LGBTQ+ community, harsh leaders refused to change to accommodate their sensitivities. To these leaders, dwelling on or attempting to bridge differences, especially differences seen as prejudicial, is not productive. As one leader put it, “if they come here and they don’t like who you are, then we don’t need that relationship.” Consider the way that Taylor, the Director of the National Equality Initiative, treats donors who do not fully align with his organization’s mission. “I don’t have a problem rattling older white gay male donors,” Taylor said. “We are in a position where we can say goodbye to donors if they don’t like our mission.” Taylor took an uncompromising attitude, asserting a willingness to challenge others’ views and potentially forgo their financial contributions in the process. This attitude was adopted not just by organizations that had the luxury of financial stability. Several leaders helming smaller-budget organizations expressed no discomfort in confronting or even severing ties with anyone they saw as hindering progress. These leaders send their stakeholders a harsh and exacting message: either get on board or get left behind.

Some leaders, however, took issue with a harsh response. Andre, who led his nonprofit through a strategic plan and subsequent name change, was afraid that treating anyone as an impediment to progress would tear his organization apart. “We consider ourselves a family,” he explained. “Not all of us, but some of us were afraid that the family would split apart. . . . So we wanted to take an approach that was less vicious or traumatic.” When Andre realized the organizational rebrand was leading to unrest among his members, he stepped in to “make sure that everyone was heard and listened to.” Seeing an opportunity, Andre had his staff organize community

conversations where every member was invited to speak, listen, learn, and eventually vote on the proposed change. In the end, it took six years for members to agree on a new name for their organization. But Andre feels like the time and energy were worth it. After all, he said, “We wanted to keep everybody in the boat. [We] didn’t want to lose anybody.”

Leaders like Andre take an inclusive approach to navigating generational change. In contrast to the harsh response, an inclusive response, as one leader asserted, “calls them in rather than calls them out.” Among leaders who discussed their approach to navigating intergenerational conflict, more than half adopted this second strategy, one that is rooted in an opportunity perspective and prioritizes openness, compassion, and tolerance across generational divides. Leaders who see an opportunity to be inclusive exhibit markedly different patterns of interacting with members (and also staff, see Taylor and de Laat 2013) than do harsher leaders. Consequently, we identify three actions characteristic of leaders navigating political generational change with an inclusive approach: educating others, creating space for dialogue, and acknowledging the unique strengths of all involved.

Leaders with an opportunity perspective and an inclusive response believe in the power of education. In the words of one leader, LGBTQ+ organizations constantly face “opportunities to [either] educate or say, ‘You don’t align with our mission, sorry, goodbye.’” Those who take an inclusive approach capitalize on opportunities to educate constituents who are clashing with members of another generation. As one leader explained, “I talk to a lot of old people. And besides the questions about what all the letters stand for and semi-dismissive references to alphabet soup, there often is a lot of openness. I could be annoyed by the ignorance around those issues, or I could actually see that as a great opportunity for conversation.”

Intentionally facilitating space for dialogue is the second strategy typical of inclusive organizations. Leaders who see the need to include both the Legacy and Emergent

generations focus on creating spaces where all members feel safe to engage with others across lines of difference. When she started noticing conflict between Legacy and Emergent members of her organization, Tamara gathered her constituents together for intergenerational dialogues. But Tamara took some time to consider how she would balance two competing imperatives: ensuring everyone was welcome and confirming everyone was safe. “I want to lean into providing personal care for them while centering the code of conduct that ensures everyone’s safety,” she said as she described her mindset at the time. Creating conversations with a sense of safety and joy is characteristic of organizations whose leaders adopt an inclusive approach: they intentionally “express delight for folks who are showing up for these conversations, both folks who have been here and folks who are stepping into the convo for the very first time.” Demanding that all members be present is not simply for the benefit of making all her members feel seen. Tamara understood that the organization itself would gain from having multiple perspectives represented: “Having an intergenerational space where we can have these conversations helps me gain clarity.”

The third component of an inclusive response to generational change is the purposeful acknowledgment of unique strengths brought by members of different political generations. Where others might find heterogeneity something to be softened for the sake of unity, inclusive leaders acknowledge generational differences and highlight how they might be leveraged to foster a more united front. For example, Sam was quick to empathize with older donors of the Legacy generation. “And I’m not justifying it to be clear,” he said of Legacy members who express uneasiness with new, more expansive inclusions in the LGBTQ+ movement today. “But I’m also not like, ‘Oh my god these people are horrible.’ No, no, they worked so hard for advancements in the gay and lesbian community.” Sam identified tension while neither condoning the actions of the Legacy

generation nor disrespecting the legacy of their work.

In contrast to the harsh language used to describe the generations by leaders with a hindrance perspective, inclusive leaders used terms of respect for members of both generations. The Legacy generation was honored as “mentors and warriors and elders,” seasoned leaders with important experience. “Part of our responsibility is to continue that legacy of queer grassroots organizing [led by] lesbian and bi women in their 60s, 70s, 80s,” Jasper said. “Many of them at their heart are activists and community organizers. . . . Plus, they’re badassess! They’ve done these programs before and it’s amazing!” Emergent members, in turn, are recognized as contemporary trailblazers. Up and coming activists, one leader said, are vanguards whose fresh perspective “can optimize our skills and our approach.” Jasper continued, “I’m also very interested in having other younger people in leadership, those with NGO experience, healthcare, ball culture, the social scene. Young organizers, party promoters, academics, event organizers.” Jasper articulated that the unique strengths and strategies of the Emergent generation will optimize her organization’s approach.

Compared to the harsh approach, the inclusive approach takes more time and effort. Leaders travel to church basements, coffee shops, campsites, manicure salons, and members’ homes to better understand the conflicts facing their organizations. “It’s really, really intentional,” said Sam about the necessity to address the conflicts that arise in the wake of generational turnover. “We have to take kind of a healing perspective with these intergenerational connections,” he continued. “We just need to direct it at systems, not at each other. . . . You have to be very, very intentional about it.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Social movements must successfully navigate periods of change if they are to maintain

continuity and coherence, avoid dissolution, and secure their futures. Political generational turnover is recognized as one source of transformation within movements. Yet despite some theoretical attention, concrete documentation of political generations in social movement organizations is rare. Moreover, the conflicts and challenges associated with generational turnover, and the strategies leaders use to navigate them, remain unexplored. This study intervenes by examining processes of political generational turnover to illustrate their dynamics, perceived consequences, and broader implications for studying change in social movement organizations.

To provide this innovative exploration of political generation turnover, we draw on in-depth interviews with organizational leaders and further contextualize these data with descriptive, quantitative insights from over 1,800 LGBTQ+ nonprofit mission statements. Although not a focal point of our original interview protocol, the topic of generational differences emerged inductively as leaders discussed shifts in their organizational missions. Leaders reported that turnover processes are happening in their organizations, and their reports are mirrored in our national-level administrative data. Engaging with this contemporaneous data and drawing on theories of symbolic boundaries allows us to extend Whittier’s original conceptualization by (1) emphasizing conflict across generations, (2) articulating the challenges conflictual turnover creates, and (3) documenting the disparate navigation strategies leaders develop in response. Below, we review our findings, discuss their general implications for research in social movements and organizational sociology, and detail how our insights force a reevaluation of the U.S. LGBTQ+ movement’s “unity through diversity” mantra (Armstrong 2002).

Mannheim ([1928] 1952) states that generations are not constructed temporally but socially. That is, turnover is not based on some number of years passing; instead, it is a function of changing environments that animate the movement and individuals’ responses to

those changes. Although highly correlated with age, political generations are distinct constructs—akin to stating someone has a “second-wave feminist” viewpoint despite that wave occurring decades ago (Sutton 2020). Our first finding, therefore, is that our sample of organizational leaders characterize the changes and conflicts in their organizations as emanating from turnover in political generations. This articulation by itself is important, because we have little empirical documentation of the theories articulated by Whittier (1997) in real time.

Three sources of evidence substantiate the leaders’ views that a shift in political generation is currently occurring in the LGBTQ+ movement. First, conditions are ripe for generational change: the macro-structural forces shaping the modern, mainstream LGBTQ+ movement in the United States have undergone tremendous transformation, creating the potential for the development of a new generation à la Mannheim ([1928] 1952) or Whittier (1997). These changes include unprecedented achievements in social acceptance, civil rights gains (e.g., decriminalization of sodomy, non-discrimination protections, marriage equality), and skyrocketing rates of youth claiming queer identities, all in the presence of recurring and reemerging political threats. These and other developments could certainly create the “significant changes in the environment” required to produce a new political generation (Whittier 1997:762). Second, the leaders themselves articulated change in their organizations as novel. The leaders we interviewed had often been part of their specific organization, and the larger LGBTQ+ movement, for decades. Yet they did not describe the challenges they faced as the common, run-of-the-mill differences one might expect in any age-diverse movement. Instead, their characterizations are of two generations in conflict. Finally, our research design bolsters the claim that a broad-based political generation change is afoot in the LGBTQ+ movement. By drawing a sample from the entire population of organizations that file IRS reporting forms, our interviews capture a cross-section of the

entire movement that spans region, organization size, and mission focus (see Figure A.1 in the online supplement). Articulations of generational distinctions were consistent across our participants, and thus cannot solely be explained by disparate, organization-specific processes. Our corresponding quantitative exploration lends further credence to the changes articulated by our interviewees. Generational change is not a niche trend reported by a small set of organizations, but seemingly ubiquitous in the LGBTQ+ movement. This marks an important contribution to and distinction from prior research that has looked at conflict, generally, and intragenerational conflict, specifically, within the confines of a particular organization or moments of protest (Ghaziani 2008; Sutton 2020).

Against this backdrop of change, our respondents constructed a binary set of generations where distinct understandings of gender/sexuality, intersectionality, and organizational strategies serve as the symbolic markers signifying generational boundaries. Such construction is interesting given that the theory of political generations is not premised on such a binary (Whittier 1997). Yet, from the standpoint of cultural sociology, such a binary may not be surprising. Research stemming from symbolic boundaries and cognitive schemas often finds the use of binaries facilitates easier classification and cognitive processing (Lizardo and Strand 2010; Zerubavel 1996). Studying political generational change helps us identify a tension between these two theoretical perspectives, and how this tension plays out in the decisions leaders make to navigate the tumultuous change they are experiencing.

With these data, our study further extends Whittier’s conceptualization of political generations in three ways. Our first extension of Whittier’s conceptualization is to emphasize the conflictual nature of this turnover process. While Whittier acknowledges conflict, it is not a core aspect of her theorization of political generations. Yet, our interviewees did not just reveal generational distinctions around themes of gender/sexuality, intersectionality,

and strategy. Our interviewees noted “there’s some real anger out there” due to tensions resulting from these divides. Indeed, the cohesive integration of successive cohorts is expected to become conflictual and full of “anger” when shared cultural anchors dwindle, which appears to be happening between Legacies and Emergents (Bhatt et al. 2022). Existing research on conflict in social movements tends to focus on within-generation tensions over boundaries of collective identity, radical versus assimilationist tactics, and appropriate movement targets (Bernstein 1997; McCammon, Bergner, and Arch 2015; Van Dyke and Taylor 2018; Walters 2014). Yet, we demonstrate that political generations can be sites of conflict that cut across many of these traditional sources. Consequently, both literatures are enhanced by bringing them into conversation. For example, we elaborate the role leaders play in navigating this conflict toward fracture (Balsler 1997) or productive advancement of the movement (Ghaziani 2008; Sutton 2020).

Our second extension demonstrates the real consequences, both material and symbolic, that arise from conflictual cohort turnover. Respondents articulated problems that spread across fundamental aspects of a movement: resources and collective identity. Namely, the prior generation, characterized as the “old cis, gay, white men,” were seen as key funders of the movement—although this is the “laziest” characterization according to Sebastian. As they express discontent and pull back in response to the priorities of the new generation, our respondents explained how this population is taking their resources with them. The second core problem concerns emotions and fears of erasure: who is part of the LGBTQ+ movement? Questions of exclusion and collective belonging are particularly important for this movement and span significant research, especially considering that, as Melucci (1989) says, the LGBTQ+ movement is the quintessential identity movement (see also Broad 2002; Ghaziani 2011; Moon 2012; Stone 2009). Ironically, in describing members’ concerns

about erasure, the leaders’ very act of describing generations as a monolithic binary erases sources of diversity within each generation.

Our final extension of the theory of political generation is to acknowledge the need to navigate this change. Current theories of political generations typically emphasize the descriptive characteristics that make generations distinct. Yet, this descriptive approach results in a non-agentic theory of change (i.e., generations are, and turnover simply is). Drawing again on established social movement research on conflict and infighting (Ghaziani 2008), we show how individuals have a role to play in negotiating these processes. In this study, we specifically focus on organizational leaders because they are tasked with keeping organizations together, mollifying stakeholders, and are in a position to make these agentic choices. Our leaders articulated two disparate approaches to navigating this change—which we term *harsh* and *inclusive*. Our finding echoes Fiorito and Nicholls (2023), who report a similar dynamic of a coercive, “calling out” strategy opposite a consensual, “calling in” strategy when examining the undocumented immigrant youth movement. In both movements, actors shape who is maintained in an organization once reaching the other side of a conflictual episode by either shaming them and making their alienation permissible or taking time to emphasize education and dialogue.

In our case, how these organization-specific interactions are managed may result in niche organizations with greater internal coherence but greater between-organization differentiation. Such an outcome runs the risk of overall movement breakdown if shared anchor points become too difficult to achieve (Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011; Levitsky 2007). The other potential outcome is more internally diverse organizations that enable greater points of connection and coherence across the overall movement. This outcome may require more effort to achieve and longer to realize, but it is still possible. Some scholarship indicates that more inclusive leaders successfully facilitate intergenerational

interactions, help younger members navigate issues that would otherwise diminish their enthusiasm, and strengthen stakeholder commitment to the work (Taylor and de Laat 2013). So too do activists provide practical suggestions for leaders to “call in” (Ross 2025) or offer “loving corrections” (brown 2024) as they navigate troubled organizational waters. Additional research is needed to test these observations, but it is our sense that leaders who adopt an opportunity perspective and proceed with an inclusive approach will be better positioned to fulfill the promise of the “unity through diversity” mantra going forward. Through the perspectives they choose and subsequent responses they adopt, organizational leaders will play a crucial role in determining how the movement proceeds in a time of tension.

Given the modern LGBTQ+ movement’s 55-year history (if we start after the 1969 riots at Stonewall), to what extent are the political generational turnover processes, conflicts, and navigation strategies reported by our leaders distinct from other episodes of turnover? Surprisingly, no prior study analyzes a previous turnover process—either because such a transformation has yet to transpire, or because this theoretical approach has yet to be utilized. Certainly, there is considerable research on age variation across the movement, such as younger cohorts’ emphasis on marriage equality over AIDS funding in the early 2000s, distinctions in post-gay identification, and differences between radical, liberation, and incremental assimilation strategies (Egan and Sherrill 2005; Ghaziani 2008; Valocchi 1999b). But these differences have been presented as age variation within a single political generation, as opposed to a significant turnover event in the Mannheimian-sense.

What prior research does reveal, however, is that disagreement has always infused the movement. But this infighting has largely been cast as productive (Ghaziani 2008; Gould 2009). As Armstrong (2002) identifies, an ethos of “unity through diversity” has enabled activists and organizations to weather and accommodate differing viewpoints—both

within and between LGBTQ+ communities. Although Armstrong (2002:135) characterizes this ethos as “a celebration of diversity . . . [among the] ideological and sexual diversity [of] white, middle-class [gay] men,” the sentiment nevertheless took on a meaning of its own and fueled the expansion of the movement. Movement members diverse across sexuality, gender, race, and tactical approach could latch onto symbolic markers that breached distinction and connected them to the larger movement (Lamont and Molnár 2002). This ethos helps explain the increased recognition of communities beyond gays and lesbians, like the incorporation of “T” to represent trans communities in the 1990s and, eventually, the LGBTQ+ initialism used here (Nownes 2010; Stone 2009; Velasco and Paxton 2022). Our findings allow us to shed new light on this old mantra. That is, if “unity through diversity” was true, then we would perhaps not hear about conflictual turnover with “real anger” and some Legacy members walking away, especially financially, because they do not consider the focus on trans issues to be “their issue.”

Consequently, based on these data, we argue that “unity through diversity” is better characterized as unity through *suppressed* diversity. That is, exclusions and power differentials that have always existed in the movement likely suppressed prior conflict within it. Significant evidence demonstrates that early leaders of the movement constructed a distinct, middle-class gay identity privileging cisgender men and their interests—even when attempting not to (see also Armstrong 2002:135; Ferguson 2018; Gamson 1975 [1990]; Valocchi 1999a; Ward 2008). Throughout the movement’s development, individuals outside this archetype often left to form niche organizations and communities (Broad 2024; Hanhardt 2013). During the past half-century, the “cis, white, gay,” and the occasional lesbian, was in charge (Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 1997; Ward 2008). Yet even Armstrong (2002:133) speculated that “tensions around issues of race, class, and gender were brewing under the surface.” Indeed, as the turnover

process changes the power distribution in representational hierarchies, board directorate compositions, programming activities, and organizations' funding allocations, these tensions bubble up to the surface in consequential ways. When "adding the 'T'" was just discursive, for example, power transfer was minimal and did not disrupt established hierarchies (Fiorito and Nicholls 2023; Nownes 2010; Stone 2009). But as power meaningfully shifts toward the Emergent generation, turnover presents a hard test for "unity through diversity," and we are finding that the Legacy generation, if harshly "called out" and not inclusively "called in," may fail this test.¹⁰

In this project, we have provided evidence that a change in political generations is transpiring, the dilemmas this creates for organizations, and how leaders choose to navigate this moment. Establishing this baseline opens up avenues for future research to add variation and nuance to the broader story. For example, would interviews that push further on the generations yield more detail beyond the binary perspective our leaders adopted? Or, for the leaders who seemingly conflate "old, white, cis gay guys" with the Legacy generation, where do they see women or people of color within the Legacy story? One could also examine internal variation: how do different funding strategies, governance models, missions, or reliance on one generation or the other influence these processes? Another strategy would be to examine external conditions: for example, are LGBTQ+ organizations in Republican states more likely to adopt inclusive, "calling in" strategies due to their precarious environment (DeFilippis, Yarbrough, and Jones 2018; Hart-Brinson 2018; Jones, DeFilippis, and Yarbrough 2018)? Understanding the general pattern invites further investigation.

We end by speculating whether the trends we identify are generalizable beyond our case. Given the international scope of this movement, the generational dynamics identified in our U.S.-based research likely manifest globally. In the United Kingdom, for example, the formation of transgender-exclusionary

organizations like the LGB Alliance exemplifies how unmanaged conflict can produce organizational fragmentation along identity lines. Still, significant variation exists in the LGBTQ+ movement globally, and generational boundaries may manifest differently across national contexts. The historical and developmental trajectories of local movements may therefore shape local fault lines.

As Whittier (1997) and Mannheim ([1928] 1952) argue, political generations are sociological constructions driven by macro-structural factors. When changes in these macro-structural factors challenge the fundamental tenets of a movement's purpose and collective identity, turnover in political generations is likely. Indeed, in her Presidential Address at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Ruth Milkman (2017) claimed that "millennials constitute a new political generation, whose lived experiences and worldviews sharply distinguish them from previous generations." The relevance of political generations extends beyond LGBTQ+ activism, offering insights into contemporaneous conflicts found within any number of social movements.

Contentions over intersectionality, or the "new social contract of inclusivity" (as quoted in Fiorito and Nicholls 2023:486) currently cross nearly every movement, from Black Lives Matter (Destine 2023) to the undocumented youth movement (Fiorito and Nicholls 2023) and the environmental movement (Hiraide and Evans 2023). Debates over effective strategy—like the utilization of social media or how to emphasize structural transformation over "respectability politics"—are likewise pervasive (Dazey 2021). And debates over collective identity ("Who *are* we?") are ubiquitous. In our case, reported generational differences in collective identity manifested in tensions over sexuality versus gender and fixedness versus fluidity, but these debates appear elsewhere, as seen among trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) in the women's movement (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020), in qualifications for reparations (Ray and Perry 2020),

or, in right-wing movements, in proper definitions of “American” based on white Christian nationalist boundaries (Whitehead and Perry 2020).

This study suggests that generational friction, although sometimes framed as productive, may actually impede movement efficacy and solidarity if left unchecked and unexamined by movement leaders. Consequently, to reiterate Whittier (1997): political generations are a critical link to understanding transformation and change in social movements and, as we demonstrate, one with clear implications for collective identity, resource mobilization, and other well-known social movement theories. Certainly, more research is needed to determine if political generational change is occurring across movements, the conflicts and challenges produced, and the ultimate strategies used to navigate turbulent times.

Authors' Note

The authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

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Notes

1. Importantly, our study is limited to organizations in the contemporary, mainstream LGBTQ+ move-

ment. We define contemporary as developing after 1969 (Duberman [1993] 2019), with the Stonewall Riots symbolically demarcating the transition from homophile movements toward gay liberation (D'Emilio 2002; Valocchi 1999a, 1999b). We focus on the mainstream LGBTQ+ movement, acknowledging there is a broader movement beyond professionalized organizations and that movement is likely more radical and diverse in approach and goals (Beam 2018).

2. The online supplement further addresses heterogeneity among LGBTQ+ organizations. There, we disaggregate our in-text figures by advocacy/service, revenue, and net assets (see Figures A.2, A.3, and A.4). Despite some structural differences, our analysis reveals remarkable consistency in patterns.
3. An organization's mission statement reflects its culture and priorities. By intention, the mission of a nonprofit takes center stage when making decisions and communicating goals and organizational identity to internal and external audiences (Paxton, Velasco, and Ressler 2020).
4. We use pseudonyms to refer to all organizations and their representatives.
5. Interestingly, leaders of these LGBTQ+ organizations used stark binary terms to describe “two” generations. As we show, they often did not acknowledge generations beyond this binary, despite the fact that the theory of political generations allows more space for several generations to exist simultaneously. Additionally, because leaders spoke in such broad generalities, their utilization of key symbolic markers to make sense of each generation often created simple and ahistoric understandings. But no leader added nuance to their descriptions. These data serve as a reminder that casual observers do not always articulate the social world in line with academic theory. Furthermore, leaders generally did not use length of time one has spent in the movement as a way to place people into one generation or another. Age and tenure in the movement are necessarily correlated, but only three leaders explicitly discussed how long certain members “have been in the fight.” Even then, comments surrounding age and tenure were made to pay respect to the work done by Legacy members, not to establish generational boundaries. Our respondents delineated different generations primarily through worldview and positioning on the three core dimensions of conflict.
6. Of course, it is interesting that leaders used this attitude as a marker of the Emergent generation, given that “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it,” was the slogan for Queer Nation in the early 1990s (Bruce 2016).
7. Leaders could have, for example, used language like, “I was like that, too” or “These kids will learn” to describe the situation in lifecourse terms. That leaders instead focused on generational differences

suggests that current conflicts related to strategy do not, for them, simply reflect different positions in an activist lifecycle.

8. External events in other movements (e.g., BLM, MeToo, Sunrise) could also influence the strategic approaches preferred by the two generations.
9. These two different approaches do not neatly map onto political generations, as members of the Legacy and Emergent generations articulated both perspectives.
10. Armstrong (2002:189) herself speculated that the “unity through diversity” mantra might ultimately imperil the future of the LGBTQ+ movement. Nevertheless, the maxim is still invoked to buoy the mission of contemporary LGBTQ+ organizations, conferences, and initiatives.

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