

“The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Rules the World”: Constructing
Oppositional Consciousness and Collective Identity in
an Anti-Feminist Backlash Movement

In the last several decades, sweeping social changes have altered the power structures that bind American society. The Feminist or Women’s Liberation movement in particular has dramatically (though not completely) shifted the balance of power in society, the workplace, and the home. While most Americans would agree that the accomplishments of the feminist movement have represented positive steps towards more universal freedom and equality, even generally-uncontroversial gains like access to birth control (other than abortion) are not without critics. To ignore the movements of those who oppose and would seek to revoke progressive changes is to ignore a building source of political and social power in our nation that may very well threaten the rights and freedoms so many Americans (and non-citizens residing in our nation) hold dear.

In order to generate enough social consensus to yield political change, a convincing construction of the issues in question is necessary to build a movement. Convincing and relatable movement narratives —ones that effectively articulate an “us” versus “them” opposition, identify long-term goals, and provide a lens through which members can understand current conditions and future events-- are more successful at recruiting and retaining members that are willing to change their lives and do activism on the movement’s behalf. Collective identity is the “us” feeling associated with shared interests and motivations, while oppositional consciousness is an extension and elaboration upon collective identity, marked by a movement’s successful definition of an oppressive “other.” When a movement successfully defines itself *against*, rather than just in contrast to, a “them” or “they,” often the dominant culture or society, the movement can develop strategies to undermine the perpetrator of their grievances. The practical ways in which both collective identity and oppositional consciousness are produced and continuously instilled in the minds of members by group leadership is still the subject

of debate.

Collective identity and oppositional consciousness are concepts so interlinked that many scholars appear to conflate the two even when their objective is to elucidate just one; in fact, oppositional consciousness appears to have emerged more as an intervention to theories of collective identity production that fail to recognize the distinction between the development of in-group status and the cognitive processes that construct the “other” and long-term anti-establishment goals. Some of these scholars have emphasized the importance of recognizing the ways in which even actors that share a collective identity may not, due to other structural factors like class, share an oppositional consciousness, and conversely, that groups can use frame bridging processes to generate a shared oppositional consciousness without sharing a collective identity. While oppositional consciousness is intimately linked to and often inextricable from conversations about collective identity and shared frames of understanding, a perspective that restores an awareness of oppositional consciousness as different and separate from collective identity to older works yields several revelations: framing processes of all kinds, but particularly the construction of “master frames” that identify systemic enemies and long-term goals, are intimately linked with the generation of oppositional consciousness; while lived experience, the sharing of customs, practices, norms, and values is vital to the construction of collective identity. Free spaces appear to be more strongly linked to the latter, as places for like-minded or similar people to gather and standardize their values and practices, though they can also be venues for the transmission of master frames through narration and storytelling.

I assert that the importance of master frames versus free spaces, when properly contextualized in the socio-historical context that generated the movement in question, varies from movement to movement. Neither can in good conscience be dismissed outright, as both play important roles in the transmission and reinforcement of master frames for retention. I argue that collective identity and oppositional consciousness within a backlash movement cannot be studied outside of the context of a dialectical relationship with an antecedent social movement. The reactionary quality of backlash

movements structures movement institutions, including the types of free spaces available to would-be adherents and ultimately the nature of their collective identity or identities. It also structures the content and character of the master frame used to justify the movement's existence, deeply affecting the oppositional consciousness or consciousnesses that adherents develop.

To test my hypotheses, I conducted qualitative research by generating questionnaires that targeted issues of oppositional consciousness, collective identity, and access to free spaces. The questionnaires were answered by forty-eight individuals that currently self-identify as part of the anti-feminist backlash “Quiverfull” movement. Supplementing and illuminating the data gathered in the questionnaires was an examination of prominent books by movement leaders. Through a critical reading of these key movement texts, I was able to distinguish the model or ideal collective identities and oppositional consciousnesses promoted by movement leadership. Careful attention was paid to descriptions of recruitment strategies, the roles and responsibilities of men and women (separately and together), and the causal explanations for the movement's existence that compose the movement’s master frame.

As hypothesized, free spaces and the identities they propagated were highly gendered and largely aimed towards “encouraging women” in their particular roles; spaces for men were harder to identify. The particular gender roles that these spaces were created to encourage are a result of the Quiverfull rejection of feminist analyses positing the socially constructed nature and oppressive quality of traditional gender roles. While these spaces were definitely important as tools of support and gender standardization among movement adherents, their other functions were perhaps even more influential: they provided places for like-minded people to “gather” and find their worldviews reinforced. These worldviews, which focused particularly on the rejection of feminism as a force for social destruction through low Christian birthrates (due to family planning methods) and gender chaos, were perpetuations and obvious reiterations of the worldviews expressed in key movement texts. Though collective identities were definitively gendered, oppositional consciousness was strikingly consistent

among Quiverfull participants. An analysis of key movement texts, websites, surveys, and interview answers revealed that the master frames identifying the movement's systemic enemies and long term goals created a strong and consistent oppositional consciousness that carried into user-generated internet content and further into the responses of Quiverfull individuals. The logics and worldview provided through these frames were highly effective in convincing individuals to adopt the Quiverfull ideologies and decide that the accompanying lifestyle was right for them.

It is important to note that the twisting or misrepresentation of the goals of feminism, revision and erasure of the history of birth control use, and the causal attribution of *economic* problems or faults in American capitalism to feminism, were important tools for creating such strong opposition to feminism. The failure of the American feminist movement to clearly articulate its true stances and objectives in an accessible way, as well as its sometime-failure to be inclusive of different classes and to tackle hard economic issues (like the death of the family wage, the provision of childcare and support for working mothers, and pursuit of a healthier work-life balance for all workers so that no woman feels she must choose between children and career), has provided ample ammunition for backlash movements like the Quiverfull.