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“I Love Him, and I Know That He Loves Me”: NAMBLA’s Attempts to Construct Ageism as a Social Problem

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"I LOVE HIM, AND I KNOW THAT HE LOVES ME": NAMBLA'S ATTEMPTS TO
CONSTRUCT AGEISM AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

by

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B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2009

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree

Department of Sociology
in the Graduate School
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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Approved by:

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CHAPTER 1- The Infamous NAMBLA

The Daily Show with John Stewart is a widely popular program which addresses political and newsworthy events from a humorous point of view. Although there are many recurring jokes on the program, one of particular interest is that each time the host says the lengthy name of an organization, he replaces their true acronym with “NAMBLA.” For example, “The United States Department of Agriculture, or NAMBLA.” For those unfamiliar with what the latter acronym stands for, the logical question emerges: What is NAMBLA? And why is it so funny?

NAMBLA is an acronym for The North American Man-Boy Love Association. Although I cannot definitively state why NAMBLA is considered funny enough to stand alone as the punch-line of a joke—and it has served as such for many popular television programs, including *The Simpsons* and *South Park*—a closer look at the organization brings up topics of much more sociological relevance. NAMBLA identifies itself as an organization whose focus is primarily political and educational (NAMBLA 2011). Their informational site does not provide an extensive history, only stating that they were founded in 1978 (NAMBLA 2011). NAMBLA (2011) also does not describe their membership in any kind of detail, identifying that even their current membership total is something they prefer to keep private. In his book detailing the socio-historical development of child sexual abuse, researcher Jenkins (1998) notes that NAMBLA’s formation was prompted following accusations against Boston area police officers regarding unfair treatment of suspected child molesters. NAMBLA originally maintained a visible presence in the public, becoming involved in activist causes such as protests of the military draft, supporting reproductive rights, and actively backing gay and lesbian

rights movements (Jenkins 1998). However, in the years since its formation, NAMBLA has gone from being a legitimate political organization to a universally-hated group of assumed-predators. Jenkins (1998) attributes this to a string of bad publicity surrounding scandals and child disappearances in the early 1980s. Despite holding press conferences to refute accusations of kidnapping, pornography, and running child sex rings, “the stigma now attached to the group was devastating” (Jenkins 1998:159).

This research did not begin with a specific focus on NAMBLA. Rather, I stumbled upon NAMBLA in my original quest to review the emergence of child molestation as a social problem. I anticipated NAMBLA would provide a wealth of rebuttals to common claims regarding pedophilia, perhaps something in the realm of biological or historical justifications for relationships between adults and children. However I soon discovered that NAMBLA has not only been constructed as a social problem, but the organization itself is primarily concerned with constructing a social problem of its own.

In conducting research for this endeavor, I have received a variety of reactions, most of which would fall under the category of disapproval or aversion. However, the words of one colleague stuck with me. While discussing the claims made on the NAMBLA statement of purpose webpage, a fellow graduate student remarked, “Wow. If I didn't know where that was coming from, it might actually have some merit.” This statement in itself is enough to cause a societal uproar: *How dare you even consider what these perverts have to say? The justifications of child rapists might have some merit? Deplorable.* Both this person's statement and imagined reactions to it give all the more reason to explore and analyze the rhetoric of NAMBLA and answer some

important questions: How does NAMBLA present ageism as a social problem? Why has NAMBLA been unsuccessful in social problems work? Could legitimate construction of a social problem be accomplished by less problematic claims-makers?

In order to evaluate the social problems work of NAMBLA, a brief review of the study of social problems is necessary.

CHAPTER 2- LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of social problems goes beyond the assumption that there are objective conditions which society considers problematic; instead, the field is predicated on the idea that social problems are socially constructed by claims-makers (Blumer, 1971; Spector and Kitsuse, 1973; Pfohl 1977; Best, 1995; Loseke, 2003). Claims-makers must identify an issue as problematic, frame it in a way receptive to the sympathies of the public, and articulate how and why a social problem must be changed (Loseke, 2003). In order to achieve what Blumer (1971) calls “social legitimacy,” social problems must meet several conditions (303). Loseke (2003) describes the criteria as follows: social problems must be perceived as harmful, widespread, and something that can and should be changed. Without satisfaction of all four, there is likely too little momentum for a “problem” to gain notoriety, sympathy, and demand for action.

These criteria are not satisfied apart from the social, but through social problems work. Social problems work is the blanket term for the efforts of claims-makers who aim to convince a number of people that a certain set of conditions meets the aforementioned criteria to be considered a social problem (Loseke, 2003). The goal is that enough people will acknowledge the conditions as problematic and demand solutions, through either informal social reform or formal legislation. However, public attention is a precious commodity and people only have a limited amount of time, money, and energy to spend on social concerns. Therefore, social problems work is not just a matter of convincing people to identify with one’s position, but also convincing people to take on one social problem over the multitude of other possibilities, as well as to believe one

explanation of a problem over a competing construction of that same problem (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Loseke, 2003; Gusfield, 1996).

Sympathy and Credibility

Clearly the role of claims-makers is pivotal in the process of social problems work. If audiences do not identify claims-makers as credible, there is little hope of legitimizing the social problem. Many factors contribute to a person's perceived credibility, including whether he or she is motivated by moral or personal concerns (Loseke, 2003). Furthermore, claims-makers are subject to their position on the hierarchy of credibility; people with high levels of education, occupational prestige, and social respectability are higher on the hierarchy of credibility and are more likely to see success in social problems work, whereas people on the opposite end of the spectrum are not (Loseke, 2003). It is interesting that Loseke uses children as her example of people with low credibility, as this will be especially poignant in the forthcoming analysis.

The role of victims in the social construction of social problems is equally important. In order for a social problem to make headway, it must be constructed as having sympathetic victims. Drawing on Hochschild's (1979) concept of "feeling rules," Loseke (2003) concludes that Americans "tend to reserve the status of victim for people we feel sympathy toward and we feel sympathy when our evaluations lead us to conclude that *morally good people are greatly harmed through no fault of their own*" (79, emphasis hers). While some victims have difficulty maintaining their status as sympathetic, others—specifically children—are already constructed as innocent

members of society, thus making them more easily constructed as sympathetic victims (Best, 1997; Dunn, 2001; Holstein and Miller, 1990; Loseke, 2003).

Frames and Tactics

Successful social problems construction involves presenting a variety of claims in a way that is easily understood by the general public. Benford and Snow (1988, as cited in Loseke, 2003) identify that claims can be thought of in terms of three frames: diagnostic, which answers the questions of what type of problem this is and how it is caused; motivational, which provides reasoning for why people should be concerned; and prognostic, which addresses what the public's recourse should be to effectively address a problem.

Another way in which claims-makers simplify social problems to make them easier to comprehend and support is to use existing social problems to help in the construction of a new one. Two examples of this are piggy-backing and domain expansion. According to Loseke (2003), piggy-backing occurs "when a new problem is constructed as a different instance of an already existing problem" (61). Domain expansion is similar and occurs when "the contents of a previously accepted social problem category are expanded" to include new victims (Loseke, 2003:62). Piggy-backing and domain expansion allow claims-makers to benefit from the novelty of being a new idea while also capitalizing on the success of previous social problems work. This allows audience members to make easy connections between previously accepted ideas and new claims (Loseke, 2003).

Protect Our Children

As articulated by Loseke, children play an interesting role in the discussion of social problems. They make construction of sympathetic victims easy because children are typically presumed innocent, yet they are not considered credible enough to make claims on their own behalf. We conceive of children as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection (Best, 1990). Social problems work involving child victims is especially possible because people are so emotionally susceptible to claims of concern for their children. It does not take much for suggestions and implications to reach the level of fact (Jenkins, 1998). Jenkins articulates the eventual result of such runaway assumptions below:

It comes to be believed that legions of sex fiends and homicidal predators stalk the land, that the number of active pedophiles runs into the millions, that tens of thousands of children are abducted and killed each year, that sinister cults have infiltrated preschools and kindergartens across the country, that incest affects one-fourth or even one-half of all young girls, that child pornography is an industry raking in billions of dollars and preying on hundreds of thousands of youngsters every year.

(Jenkins, 1998:7)

Regardless of actual statistics, the American public seems game to take these horrifying constructions presented primarily in the media and run with them, so to speak. Furthermore, media representations of such issues are most often presented as problems stemming from “flawed individuals” (Best, 1990:107). Typifications of pedophiles as dangerous lurkers striking at random create easily identified villains who are to be universally feared (Best, 1990). However, audiences are less susceptible to social constructions of institutions as villains, hence social problems involving children

are portrayed more often as the result of individual, dangerous outsiders than the result of institutional or social forces (Loseke, 2003; Jenkins, 1994; Best, 1990).

Although the North American Man-Boy Love Association has previously been considered through the study of social problems, the group has always been approached as a villain in the construction of child sexual abuse. This research aims to take a different approach and consider what work NAMBLA is doing to construct their own social problem of juvenile ageism.

CHAPTER 3- METHODS

This research seeks to determine how NAMBLA attempts to construct ageism as a social problem by analyzing the predominant rhetoric displayed on their official website for themes associated with social problem construction. My analysis is limited to the statements and articles provided on NAMBLA's official website, www.nambla.org. Specific attention is paid to the following sections, as they are predominantly featured on the website's navigational bar and provide the clearest depiction of the organization's political beliefs and goals: Who We Are, Why NAMBLA Matters, NAMBLA FAQ, and What is Man/Boy Love. Sections titled "What People are Saying" and "Boys Speak Out" directly address questions of claims-making and victim statuses, so they were also included in this analysis.

The choice to pursue qualitative methods seemed an obvious one. Much of the research conducted in the field of social problems implements a qualitative read of the data to identify social problems rhetoric rather than the use of a coding scheme (for examples, see Sudnow, 1965, Loseke, 2001, Emerson, 1997, Best, 1990, Best, 1987, Gusfield, 1996, etc.) Furthermore, coding for a preconceived list of concepts seemed to counteract the purpose of this research, which was to let the data speak for itself. A rhetorical analysis fulfills this purpose, which is to simply identify what claims are being made by NAMBLA and what strategies are being implemented to support these claims.

Were this research to pursue a better understanding of NAMBLA's political and social philosophies, interviews would have been a vital supplement to the current method. However, this research does not seek to develop this understanding. This research is also not attempting to determine how NAMBLA's claims are received by the

general public, which could comprise an entirely separate study with vastly differing methodologies. The focus of this research is simply to evaluate the social problems work being attempted by NAMBLA by examining the rhetoric on the organization's website.

Of course, it would be foolish to insinuate that I could remove myself from this research completely. While I cannot claim to have conducted this research in a vacuum, with no personal influences or biases, my goals as researcher were simple: to be as impartial as possible, to explore the data with unobstructed vision, and to take careful inventory of my assumptions and inferences. I believe these goals have been accomplished (although not without complications, which will be further addressed below).

The purpose of this paper is not to explore the ways in which NAMBLA has been constructed as a social problem. Jenkins (1998) does a thorough examination of NAMBLA's relationship with the general public as well as current conceptions of child sexual abuse situated in a socio-historical context. This research is also not aiming to make moralistic determinations about the claims made by NAMBLA, nor to advocate for the acceptance of their position. This paper seeks only to analyze the social problems work attempted by NAMBLA and consider what factors impede them from successfully constructing a social problem.

I believe this to be a worthwhile research area because social problems work can be extremely influential. The right combination of credible claims-makers, sympathetic victims, and believable claims can have a massive impact on public opinion. When effectively executed, social problems work can change the way people think and act, as

well as how societies organize themselves formally and informally. Although (spoiler alert) I will later argue that NAMBLA has not been successful in constructing ageism as a social problem, this does not make them exempt from being worthy of analysis. Much of the study of social problems focuses on issues that have received the status of legitimate, but looking at issues which have been prevented from being achieving legitimacy can be informative as well.

In order to do this, we will examine the strategic word choices implemented by NAMBLA in their claims-making efforts. Then we will look at the requirements to be recognized as a legitimate social problem and evaluate whether or not NAMBLA has satisfied them. Finally, we will consider the repurposing of victims and issues with piggybacking in NAMBLA's attempts at social problems construction.

CHAPTER 4- ANALYSIS

Before attempting to evaluate NAMBLA's pursuit for legitimization as a social problem, let us look at how NAMBLA employs the use of language to aid them in what can certainly be considered an uphill battle. One of the first questions NAMBLA had to consider in constructing their identity as a political group was to choose a name. As previously mentioned NAMBLA had many other political interests, such as gender equality, ending the war in Vietnam, and gay rights, yet they opted to identify themselves with one primary goal: decriminalizing intergenerational sexual relationships. One might wonder why NAMBLA believed change to be a possibility for such a stigmatizing position; possibly because other groups had made similar strides in campaigns that were previously-inconceivable, such as contraception, pornography, and so on (Jenkins 1998). Unaware of the public backlash that would later ensue, NAMBLA assembled and began to strategize toward legitimacy.

The choice of a name for this newly formed political organization was certainly a precarious one. Opting for the North American Man-Boy Love Association, the group made a very important choice: deciding what to call the adult in such a situation. Society does not seem to include any words for people who desire relationships with children that are not extremely value-laden and emotionally charged. *Pedophile*, *molester*, *sexual abuser*, *child rapist*, and the more generic *pervert* all convey a very clear connotation and moral distinction. An article submitted by a NAMBLA member titled "Why I'm Not a Pedophile" identifies issues with having a limited lexicon to describe adults who are attracted to and wish to pursue relationships with young people (Em 1995). Although the author does not have a suggestion for an alternative

description of such adults, he does articulate many problems with the label of "pedophile," including that it is inaccurate and prejudicial, as well as dangerous.

Perhaps this is why NAMBLA opted for something completely generic in their organization's title. "Man" as an identity is not inflammatory or problematic, and is something that people widely and readily identify with. In addition to opting for a value-neutral (if not positive) descriptor for their adult members, NAMBLA employs another tactical move on their website: rarely are the "men" discussed as a singular entity. Nearly every mention of the M in NAMBLA is followed by the relationship-signifying "-boy." By choosing to focus on the interaction between the man and boy, NAMBLA is able to shift the focus away from an abuse model. Man-Boy implies a connection, a singular entity, rather than an abuser-victim situation. This also contradicts the concept of haphazard, predatory assault of children often perpetuated by other claims-makers in association with NAMBLA. By constructing the Man-Boy relationship as simply that—a relationship—NAMBLA seeks to avoid any misrepresentations of who they are and what they do.

This brings us to a most significant rhetorical strategy: including "Boy" in the organization's name. In fact, the majority of the information, articles, and testimonies on the NAMBLA website are about (and often submitted by) boys. This will be reviewed in greater detail in the later section on repurposing "victims", but it is central in the discussion of rhetoric as well. NAMBLA disparages all uses of the word victim, attributing this phrasing to propaganda from the myth-perpetuating media, police, and policy-makers (NAMBLA 2010).

But NAMBLA does believe that boys are victims. Although they avoid this specific nomenclature, NAMBLA's central argument is that all children are victims of institutional ageism. To quote directly from their FAQ page:

Ageism refers to age-based discrimination, and includes the tendency to discount and devalue the feelings and opinions of children and youth. This tendency pervades our society and has implications in every area of a young person's daily life: at home, at work, while shopping, hanging out with friends or going places, and especially at school. It has the socially corrosive -- and costly -- effect of breeding fear and distrust between the generations and isolating them from each other.

(NAMBLA: Frequently Asked Questions 2010)

NAMBLA is not the only group to identify potential issues with ageism, as social scientists have also documented problems with ageism and the ways in which children and teenagers have been denied autonomy and voice. Westman (2001) addresses juvenile ageism as something that should be a grave concern: "The prejudice of juvenile ageism, which is as virulent as racism and as pervasive as sexism, is the greatest barrier to recognizing the interests of children in our political processes, in child caring systems, and in households" (123-124). I venture that NAMBLA members would agree with Westman, as both positions identify juvenile ageism as dangerous and harmful.

In addition to constructing their case as a matter of age discrimination, NAMBLA also takes a clear stance on what they do and do not mean by Man-Boy Love. Consider, first, the use of the word "love" which is culturally regarded to have a positive connotation. NAMBLA could not have chosen a more unambiguous word to build their claims upon. If one were to consider NAMBLA's self-description independent of any other descriptions, NAMBLA seem somewhat difficult to impugn. Who could argue

against love, especially when NAMBLA makes it clear that this love is completely consensual? To ward off concerns about force, NAMBLA makes several things clear on their page explaining "Who We Are":

We condemn sexual abuse and all forms of coercion. NAMBLA does not provide encouragement, referrals or assistance for people seeking sexual contacts. NAMBLA does not engage in any activities that violate the law, nor do we advocate that anyone else should do so.

(NAMBLA: Who We Are 2011)

A large part of the rhetoric on NAMBLA's website centers on consent. Thus the majority of NAMBLA's political efforts have been lobbying against age of consent laws, although they express that this is not just for the benefit of the adults who wish to pursue relationships with children. To the Frequently Asked Question, " You make this seem like such a noble cause, but isn't it really just a selfish one?" NAMBLA responds with the following:

There is a much bigger dimension to the issues we raise, with implications for everyone. The interest that all people share in widespread access to truthful information is more than just philosophical. Too often, politicians take advantage of gaps in public knowledge, and play on public fears to divert attention from their own actions.

(NAMBLA: Frequently Asked Questions 2010)

What could certainly be a problematic discussion is carefully navigated by keeping the rhetoric focused on what is best for children, as well as society as a whole. NAMBLA's official position is one bent on pursuing legal change rather than circumventing the law, although one could speculate that not all members of NAMBLA

or people who sympathize with their message adhere to such a strict code of conduct. However, NAMBLA maintains that their position is one which strictly advocates the respect of laws whether or not these laws are seen as just.

NAMBLA has carefully crafted their group's description to do several things. First, their claims seek to avoid criminalization and specific criticisms such as selfishness or causing harm to children. Second, NAMBLA seeks to establish a widely identifiable cause which people across geographies, biographies, and experiences can support. Finally, NAMBLA attempts to construct ageism reflected by the criminalization of "Man-Boy love" as a social problem. Let us address these attempts and whether or not NAMBLA's claims-making meets the criteria for a social problem.

Social Problem Success?

In order to evaluate whether something can truly be considered a social problem, one must look to the four cornerstones of social problems construction. As outlined by Loseke (2003), those four requirements are as follows: the condition must be perceived as wrong, widespread, something that can be changed and something that should be changed. While this is somewhat elementary in the overall discussion of social problems, these basic factors lay the foundation for NAMBLA's hope of legitimacy. The commonly accepted concept of sexual relationships between children and adults can be described as *pedophilia*, *molestation*, or *child sexual abuse*. Without much exertion one could consider these categories to qualify as a social problem. Sexual abuse of children is certainly considered wrong and perceived to be widespread. Given the current legal ramifications for engaging in such behaviors, it is clear that societal

members and the legislators who represent them agree that *molesting* children is something that can and should be changed. Considerable prison sentences are in effect to deter adults from attempting to engage in sexual behaviors with anyone below the state's age of consent. Current offenders may be enrolled in therapy classes or given hormone treatments in order to reduce their risk of recidivism.

A separate discussion could be had over construction of *molestation/pedophilia* as a social problem. Certainly there are divergences into the varying models of claims-making, including the discussion of the medicalization of offenders. However, for this discussion I am focusing specifically on the ways in which NAMBLA is engaging in this discussion and making their own case to become a legitimate social problem. The questions remains: Has NAMBLA successfully constructed a social problem? Let us consider each requirement.

In order to be considered a social problem, a condition must be perceived as wrong. Unfortunately, the discussion is immediately controversial. As it is framed by NAMBLA, the question is not whether or not adults should be able to have consensual sexual relationships with children, but rather should people who are not legally adults have rights or the ability to make their own decisions? What weight should be given to the desires and opinions of minors? And what damage is being done by institutional ageism? If one were to look to the academic community, it would not be difficult to find support for NAMBLA's evaluation of ageism as discriminatory and harmful.

Interestingly, in a book on preventing child abuse and neglect, Westman (2001) argues that children are oppressed by ageism, which is difficult for adults to recognize because they believe age-discriminating statutes are helping children.

Westman is not alone in concern for the effects of ageism. NAMBLA features quotes from many authors and scholars who express similar ideas. Notable sex and gender scholar Gayle Rubin (1978) is among them, stating:

The statutory structure of the sex laws has been identified as oppressive and insulting to young people. A range of sexual activities are legally defined as molestation, regardless of the quality of the relationship or the amount of consent involved...We must not reject all sexual contact between adults and young people as inherently oppressive.
(via NAMBLA 2003)

Professor of psychiatry Richard Green (1992) echoed this sentiment, stating that NAMBLA membership "is not required in order to question whether every instance of intergenerational sexuality is damaging" (via NAMBLA 2003).

Additionally, scholars featured on NAMBLA's "What People are Saying" page identify another element to the issue of ageism within consent laws: concerns for the well-being of LGBT youth. As lesbian activist Pat Califia (1980) states:

Boy-lovers and the lesbians who have young lovers are the only people offering a hand to help young women and men cross the difficult terrain between straight society and the gay community. They are not child molesters. The child abusers are priests, teachers, therapists, cops and parents who force their stale morality onto the young people in their custody. Instead of condemning pedophiles for their involvement with lesbian and gay youth, we should be supporting them.
(via NAMBLA 2003)

The inclusion of people who are high on the hierarchy of credibility (such as scientists, scholars, writers, and activists) allows NAMBLA a bit of shelter from accusations of self-serving motivations (Loseke, 2003). It would be difficult for NAMBLA

to avoid skepticism regarding whose interests they are truly serving (their own or the children they claim to be concerned for), but the inclusion of respectable outsiders gives the organization more of a rhetorical leg to stand on, so to speak. This allows for the presentation of a united front of both boy-lovers and reputable others who believe that ageism is an issue worth addressing.

In addition to borrowing quotes from high status individuals, NAMBLA also presents their own argument. Once again keeping the focus on boys, NAMBLA (2010) articulates on their “Why NAMBLA Matters” page that they have “spoken out strongly against the shoddy and disrespectful treatment afforded youth in our society and the resulting high rates of child and youth poverty, neglect and alienation.” They further state that they have “consistently highlighted injustices and harm in age of consent laws. Instead of protecting young people, these laws have done the very opposite” (NAMBLA 2010). Although they do not elaborate on what specifically they mean by “disrespectful treatment” or identify an empirical correlation between society’s poor treatment of young people and child poverty, NAMBLA implements strong wording to ignite the emotions of audience members. By adopting an injustice frame, NAMBLA (2012) constructs children as victims of an oppressive system with numerous entities to blame, including legislators, police officers, and society in general (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001).

All of the afore-mentioned constructional tactics contribute to NAMBLA’s efforts at establishing ageism as a social problem. It stands to reason that if age of consent laws are discriminatory and harmful and that this is not an isolated experience, then NAMBLA’s argument satisfies the requirements of a social problem. NAMBLA paints a

picture of widespread harm that can be changed via lobbying and legislation, and therefore should be changed for the safety and well-being of children. However, this analysis would not be complete without a discussion of NAMBLA's repurposing of victims and how testaments from "boys" strengthen the argument.

Whose victim?

As noted in previous sections, NAMBLA employs the rhetorical strategy of focus. Although other arguments appear sporadically throughout the site which invoke biological or historical justifications for intergenerational sexual interest, NAMBLA (2012) keeps the focus on the "-boy" side of "man-boy love". NAMBLA's position cannot be considered a counter-claim to popular constructions of pedophilia as a social problem because they are not providing an alternative construction of the same problem. Rather, NAMBLA presents an entirely different problem. What distinguishes NAMBLA from other organizations who claim to speak on behalf of children's best interests is that NAMBLA prominently features personal accounts from boys who engaged in positive sexual or romantic relationships with older men.

NAMBLA offers an entire publication of personal testaments from boys ranging in age from 11-24. Although only a handful of stories are available to be read online, the site does feature a table of contents including names and ages of the submissions and the titles of their works. Examples include:

- If It Wasn't for Mark I'd Probably Be Dead Today -Carl, age 14
- I Love Him, and I Know That He Loves Me -Darrel, age 16
- It Shouldn't Be a Crime to Make Love –Bryan, age 12 ½
- He Was Very Special and Kind –Barry, age 17

- We Should Be Able to Have the Relationships We Want –George, age 17
- It Was Me Who Started It -Frank, age 15
- It's Adults Who Are Screwed Up about Sex (from Lesbian Gay Youth Magazine)

(NAMBLA: Boys Speak Out, 2005)

While it cannot be determined simply from the titles exactly what the articles describe, they do give an indication as to the boys' overall feelings regarding man-boy love. On this point, one might argue that boys of this age are not emotionally mature enough to recognize that they are being manipulated, taken advantage of, or victimized. This reaction is a central tenet of NAMBLA's entire argument: it is assumed that people under the age of 18 are incapable of knowing what is best and making their own decisions, and therefore justified to deny minors of their sexual agency.

However, for those who give more weight to the perspectives of those who are older and therefore assumed wiser, NAMBLA offers additional testimonies from adult men who are reflecting back on previous relationships which they identify as positive, helpful, and loving. R.C. from Los Angeles offers one such reflection in his letter titled "A Gay Man Speaks Out." In this letter R.C. (1992) identifies himself as a 30-year old gay man. While he himself does not desire relationships with boys, R.C. (1992) discloses that he had a "wonderful affair" with a man of 27 when he was 12 (6). He goes on to describe their relationship as "the most pure, clean, and honest relationship" he has ever had (R.C. 1992:6). The author compares this to relationships he has tried to pursue as an adult gay man, describing his adult dating experiences as "mostly sexual, and everything floats around 'looks' and 'sex,' but if I look back to that first relationship, I found support, caring, spirituality, and commitment, as well as intensity and purity" (R.C. 1992:7). This account of intergenerational sex is certainly different

from the commonly accepted construction involving coercion and severely damaging results.

Another anonymous contributor echoes sentiments expressed by R.C. In a letter entitled "Boy 'Victim' Speaks Out" an anonymous former boy articulates that he initiated this experience, and that he had a positive emotional and sexual relationship with his Boy Scout leader (NAMBLA, 1995). The author describes emotional suffering and regret, not of the relationship itself but of the behavior of his counselor, parents, and the police as he describes being coerced into betraying his lover. He summarizes his experiences by stating:

The moral of the story is this: I feel like the only real crime in this was the way I was treated by the authorities. I was told that everything in the counseling session was confidential, which was not true. I was told that what I was feeling was "bad," which was not true. I was told over and over by people in authority that they were there to help, which was not true. I have suffered through 12 years of pain before I finally saw the light and I know it is because of the way I was treated, not by Gary, but by the people that were legally supposed to protect and care for me.

(NAMBLA 1995)

This author invokes more of NAMBLA's rhetoric than R.C., and uses some powerful phrasing in the process. In describing the way he was treated by the police and his parents and counselor, the anonymous contributor uses phrases such as: *dragged to a counselor, instead of help, disregarded my feelings, hauled me to the station, grilled me, harassed me, degraded all of my emotions, railroaded me into testifying*, etc. (NAMBLA 1995). By employing the experiences of real people, NAMBLA takes their argument for ageism as harmful from hypothetical to actual.

These testimonies also implement the rhetoric that age of consent laws are unfairly prejudicial to gay children and teens, and that man-boy relationships can alleviate societal pressures on closeted youth. The anonymous 'Victim' also described feeling fearful and depressed over how his family and friends would react to his homosexual identity, and expresses concerns over other gay youth having these same experiences. This echoes the sentiment quoted earlier by Pat Califia (1980) that boy-lovers (and girl-lovers) are often the only people interested in or available to help queer children negotiate and understand their sexual identities and desires.

Not all the included testimonies describe prior sexual relationships with adults. Michael Alhonte's statement to the Gay and Lesbian Community entitled, "The Politics of Ageism" addresses age discrimination as a systemic issue rather than providing a personal story of its harms. In discussing the "cyclical, self-sustaining action that makes ageism so dangerous," Alhonte argues that the silence of adolescents is causing immeasurable damage, both to the individual children and to the efforts of gay and lesbian rights organizations (NAMBLA, 2005). He goes on to insist that it is impossible to know the true thoughts, feelings, or emotional capabilities of children because they are essentially brain-washed into internalizing the agency-denying rhetoric of adults around them:

When a child's ideas and feelings are suppressed or invalidated, it is very easy to replace these ideas and feelings with those which are not necessarily the child's own. After this occurs, the child is merely a tiny clone of his/her oppressor - ready to support, in thought, word, and deed, every action of that oppressor, which (s)he has been mistakenly led to believe would have been his/her own action in similar circumstances.

(NAMBLA, 2005)

Prominent featuring of personal testimonies of boys and former boys who had man-lovers is arguably the most effective tool NAMBLA uses in their construction of ageism and discrimination as a social problem. Competing constructions of intergenerational relationships identify boys as purely victimized in these scenarios, often maintaining that such abuse results in physical, emotional, or social damage. However, according to the so-called victims themselves these relationships are positive, consensual, and rife with benefits. Inclusion of such positive perspectives from boys also allows NAMBLA to further avoid accusations that their efforts are self-focused.

Issues with Piggybacking

NAMBLA has also employed the rhetorical strategy of piggybacking or domain expansion. As previously stated, Loseke (2003) describes piggybacking as “when a new problem is constructed as a different instance of an already existing problem,” while domain expansion is “where the contents of a previously accepted social problem category are expanded” (61-62). As Jenkins (1998) notes, NAMBLA has aligned their organization with LGBT organizations since its founding. Cooperating with LGBT organizations to fight for sexual liberation is a main tenet of the original NAMBLA Constitution (Miller, 2003). NAMBLA would likely argue that they are attempting domain expansion, hoping to construct sexual ageism as just another alternative sexual orientation that is being institutionally discriminated against. LGBT rights organizations have gained considerable momentum in America in the last two decades, with the repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, legislation in several states to allow same-sex marriage, President Obama’s open endorsement of gay marriage at his second inauguration, and

Congressional consideration of repealing the Defense of Marriage Act. This has not gone unnoticed by NAMBLA (2011), as they state in the Who We Are section of the website, “as never before, our society is beginning to recognize the value and richness of human diversity.” It is no wonder NAMBLA would like to include themselves in the domain of people who are being unjustly discriminated against for their sexual preferences. However it seems LGBT organizations are not as complicit in this association.

NAMBLA features an article on their homepage entitled “An Open Response to LGBT Misconceptions,” in which authors Herman and Tazelaar (2011) caution the author of a South Florida Gay News article about buying into the governmental and media hype regarding man-boy love. Herman and Tazelaar (2011) address the original author’s regrets that society often portrays the “gay community in purely sexual terms, thus ignoring those aspects of LGBT culture which nurture loving relationships and families and which build communities.” They go on to parallel this with the experiences of boy-lovers by insisting “that men who love boys be so similarly regarded; as fellow human beings for whom relationships built upon mutual trust, respect and nurturance are paramount and who have contributed immeasurably to the benefit of their communities” (Herman and Tazelaar, 2011).

Perhaps LGBT organizations are not thrilled about the association because so much of the anti-gay rights or family values rhetoric uses pedophilia as a cornerstone for their position. It is often argued by people opposing LGBT rights that there is a slippery slope involved; *if rights are granted for gays and lesbians to have sex with whomever they choose, where is the line to be drawn? What is to stop proponents of*

incest, bestiality, and polygamy to argue that they too deserve equal rights? Bad publicity for NAMBLA is no longer simply unfortunate for them, but can act as a liability for LGBT organizations that have been able to legitimize a social problem and see some results in the legislature. As much as NAMBLA would like to be more widely regarded as sexually oppressed, the civil rights and LGBT organizations with which they would like to partner do not seem receptive to such a merger.

This is not to say that *all* queer communities deny a parallel between NAMBLA and the LGBT community. In their anthology based on works presented at the 2003 Gay Shame conference Halperin and Traub (2009) present intergenerational sexual desires as one of many markings of people who are less welcome in official gay communities. The authors describe “sex workers, drag queens, butch dykes, people of color, boy-lovers, bisexuals, immigrants, the poor...” as “the queers that mainstream gay pride is not always proud of” (2009:9). Despite this acknowledgement from the academic community, mainstream activist groups and social organizations have distanced themselves from any association with NAMBLA or its political agenda.

A Considerable Void

Although NAMBLA seems to adequately offer diagnostic and motivational frames, the prognostic frame is where their platform seems to be lacking. NAMBLA argues extensively *why* age of consent laws are harmful and discriminatory, but provides little substance when it comes to suggestions for how to accomplish this. On their Frequently Asked Questions page, NAMBLA (2010) acknowledges that they have never advocated a specific alternative to age of consent laws. To a direct question

regarding what NAMBLA (2010) would like to see in place of age of consent laws, they respond, “We believe young people would be much better protected by laws -- and social attitudes -- that take their opinions, feelings and decisions into consideration” and that they “reject the cookie-cutter approach often used by authorities, moralists, and legislators who presume to know what someone wants without asking them, and who claim to know what is best for every person without having met them.” The response ends with the invocation of a nationalist argument, insisting that North American countries were founded on principles of individualism and age of consent laws prevent Americans from living up to these “core ideals.”

This area is where NAMBLA’s construction seems to fall apart. One would be hard-pressed to identify examples of laws that are entirely applied on a case-by-case basis. This is not to say that NAMBLA is required to have all the answers. However, if they would like to market their ideas to a broader audience and eventually to a receptive legislature, a lack of concrete solutions is going to be a massive obstacle. If NAMBLA—an organization that has been advocating for change for over thirty years—has no ideas as to how change can be implemented, why would anyone else be able to think of a satisfying solution?

CHAPTER 5- DISCUSSION

After considering multiple arguments from the North American Man-Boy Love Association, I feel comfortable in assessing that they have not successfully legitimized juvenile ageism as a social problem. Not only are age of consent laws firmly in place, but the organization itself has little social support.

This is not to say that they do not have points with which people might sympathize. Testimonies from victims speak volumes about the harmful effects of age of consent laws. NAMBLA also has quotes of support from many notable activists, researchers and social scientists, who garner a higher position in the hierarchy of credibility. However it seems as though NAMBLA has multiple points of weakness which prevent them from reaching legitimate social problem status. The foremost issue preventing NAMBLA from seeing success in the social problems game is the problem of image. The predominant construction of NAMBLA is that of a predatory, perverted, dangerous organization. As Jenkins (1998) noted, many of the accusations made about NAMBLA in the mass media were unsubstantiated. This is inconsequential, as “the truth *does not matter* in the social problems game. What matters is what the audience members *believe* is true” (Loseke, 2003: 35, emphasis hers). This means it does not matter how much support NAMBLA can elicit from boys and former boys who believe in the positive power of man-boy relationships—as long as the arguments are coming from problematic claims-makers who are perceived as self-serving and harmful, they will be given little consideration. Regardless of what NAMBLA does well, they have had and will likely continue to have difficulty shaking their extremely negative stigma.

The idea that NAMBLA members are working for the benefit of children and not so that they can legally have sex with children is a difficult idea to sell. Loseke (2003) addresses how audiences are skeptical, specifically of people who seem to have subjective or self-serving agendas. Advocating for the rights of children to make their own sexual decisions is one of the only politically correct directions NAMBLA can go, as they would have even less success (and likely be subject to even more outrage and contempt) if they were to advocate that adults should have the right to have sex with children. This leaves one to wonder whether NAMBLA has genuine concerns for the well-being of the younger generation, or this is simply the most acceptable way to frame their controversial position.

The organization further diminishes their prospects of legitimacy by being inconsistent in claiming the abolition of institutional ageism as their primary political agenda. Although ageism is touted as the organization's foremost goal in the Who We Are and Frequently Asked Questions sections, a recent addition to the website answering questions from a Swiss radio station makes absolutely no mention of age discrimination. Instead, NAMBLA (2012) cites their promotion that "human sexuality embraces a much wider range of expression than society is currently willing to accept" and that man-boy love is "joyful," "mutual," and "respectful." While expansion of accepted sexual practices is certainly another frame NAMBLA could consider in their political efforts, implementing multiple accounts for their motives is confusing and could ultimately invite further doubt about the purity of their intentions.

NAMBLA also has the problem of being vulnerable to scandal. Establishing a position as an organization that respects the laws they disagree with is difficult.

Members would have to refrain from engaging in any kind of questionable behavior, including child pornography and engaging in any acts of “boy love.” While NAMBLA maintains that this is the standard they abide by, even one bad apple can spoil the bunch. One poisonous member with ulterior motives or a penchant for acting on his presently illegal urges would taint the entire organization’s efforts. Perhaps this has contributed to NAMBLA’s current reputation as wolves in activists’ clothing.

The final nail in the coffin, so to speak, is NAMBLA’s lack of clear ideas about how to solve the problem of institutional ageism. Ambiguity is not necessarily indicative of impropriety, but being mysterious about what laws they would like to see implemented as an alternative to the current consent laws is certainly not helping NAMBLA achieve social legitimacy. Perhaps the absence of clear solutions is because there are not many practical, realistic solutions one could suggest to combat this argument. NAMBLA invokes an individualist argument, insisting that it is an American ideal to treat people as individuals. One has to wonder, how would that work? Would children apply for permission to engage in sexual behaviors when they feel they are ready? Who would evaluate such a request? Would parents, teachers, doctors (and which kind—psychologists or medical doctors?), or legislators have a say? Ambiguous wording on NAMBLA’s part makes one wonder whether they are pushing for decriminalization of intergenerational relationships altogether. This would not be satisfying for most, including NAMBLA members if they truly identify with their touted beliefs, as it would put children at risk for being victimized by people who are coercive or forceful rather than loving. As the law stands currently, all relationships between

adults and children are prohibited. While this may prevent some positive relationships from forming, it also prevents any harmful relationships from masquerading as helpful.

As it stands, NAMBLA seems to have too much working against it to ever see any kind of success constructing juvenile ageism/sexual oppression of intergenerational relationships as a social problem. While their ideas may have some merit, as my colleague reluctantly admitted, they will not likely be able to shake the reputation they have garnered in the years since NAMBLA's conception.

I do, however, believe there is a possibility for changes in consent laws. I am surprised the inconsistency between states has not been previously addressed. Currently, some states have an age of consent as low as 16, while others are at 18. Some states allow for age-closeness exceptions, decriminalizing underage sexual activity as long as there is only a small difference in age between the participants. This lack of uniformity means that a sexual act can be condoned in one state, while in another could result in arrest, time in prison, and/or requiring a person to be added to the National Sex Offender Registry. Although many matters of law are left up to the individual states to decide, this kind of disparity seems problematic. I would not be surprised to see another organization take up the cause and make attempts to construct age discrimination a social problem. However, I sincerely doubt that organization will be open to including NAMBLA as a partner in activism.

CHAPTER 6- CONCLUSION

The limitations of this research are numerous. As mentioned, this look at the social problems work of NAMBLA is intended to be exploratory. In no way is it meant to represent an exhaustive analysis of NAMBLA's activism or efforts at constructing a social problem. For starters, NAMBLA continues to update their website, adding new articles and statements which could provide material for expanded analysis. Secondly, the study of social problems is primarily one of perceptions. This research is the perception of one social scientist. Although considerable efforts were made to account for biases and preconceived notions, the analysis provided is still subject to my own lived experiences and social locations. It is possible another researcher could perceive the data differently, and for this reason I advocate further study of NAMBLA's statements and activities.

Another limitation of this research is that it only accounts for a small number of pages within NAMBLA's website. Expanding the data to include significant events beyond the scope of the site, such as news reports associating NAMBLA with criminal activities, NAMBLA's public statements responding to these reports, official and unofficial severing of ties between NAMBLA and other activist organizations, etc. could bring a new perspective regarding their attempts to construct a social problem. The claims made by NAMBLA on the official website are certainly important, but they do not provide insight into how the organization is perceived. One can only speculate from the data explored in this study how society responds to these claims, which is central in the process of being recognized as a legitimate social problem.

As mentioned previously, NAMBLA does not typically respond to interview requests and is famously private when it comes to information about their members. As much as I would have liked to include the perspectives of NAMBLA leaders in my analysis, it was not particularly feasible. However I still consider this lack of inclusion a limitation, as it reifies the false dichotomy of silenced subject and omniscient observer.

Yet another limitation to this research is that there were very few stories available online from “boys speaking out.” NAMBLA offers a printed copy of this publication, which is available for purchase. I considered buying a copy to supplement my analysis but decided against it. This certainly minimized the data available to me, and is perhaps something future researchers interested in the role of boy advocates in NAMBLA’s activism should consider investing in.

The decision not to purchase the supplemental stories was one of many precarious choices made while trying to negotiate my role as researcher during this project. As stated, I wanted to be as neutral as possible. I have wondered if the lack of previous social problems research on NAMBLA is due to the fact that it is difficult to hear what the organization has to say over the deafening noise of the pedophile stigma. It is possible that simply no one else found the organization worthy of a second look, yet I still wanted to give the data space to speak for itself. This effort brought with it a conundrum: How can one create space for a position to be heard without making determinations about whether or not that space is deserved?

The language itself presented a considerable hurdle. While NAMBLA leaders refer to themselves as *lovers* or *boy-lovers*, others refer to them as *pedophiles* and *molesters*. In my writing, should I use *intergenerational relationship* or *child sexual*

assault? Efforts to be neutral revealed that there are no value-neutral ways to discuss sexual relationships between children and adults. I was either with them or against them, so to speak—a dichotomy that is clearly dissatisfying. As you have read, I opted to use the least disparaging terms available to me, which often left me implementing the rhetorical tools NAMBLA provided. This may leave me open to criticism, but it seemed the lesser of two undesirable options.

I am only minimally concerned about this choice because this research will only be consumed by a few select individuals. Although the encouragement has always been to produce research that is fit for publication, that is neither the intention nor the destination of this project. This research is far too problematic for me to even consider it. Even well-informed sociologists have struggled to accept this analysis, primarily because they do not believe NAMBLA is deserving of the attention given to them. The colleague mentioned in the introduction said if she hadn't known where the arguments were coming from, she might feel differently. Therein lies the issue: it is impossible to separate the claims from the claims-makers. It might also be difficult for one to separate an analysis of why NAMBLA has been unsuccessful in constructing a social problem from an instructional essay as to how NAMBLA could be successful in overturning age of consent laws so they may have sex with children. While this may seem like a stretch, it is important to remember that the study of social problems is centered on perception. It does not matter my intentions as researcher, only how people perceive my intentions. As Diamond (2008) and likely countless others have experienced, you can preface your research with all the disclaimers you like but people will still interpret and repurpose it however they choose. I would certainly hope that a

pursuit of publication would not result in my being portrayed as a “pedophile advocate,” but as long as I plan on living and working in the Bible Belt, I will not be testing those waters.

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“I LOVE HIM, AND I KNOW THAT HE LOVES ME”: NAMBLA’S ATTEMPTS TO
CONSTRUCT AGEISM AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

Major Professor: Dr. Chris Wienke