Experiences of Being Heterosexual Allies to Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People: A Qualitative Exploration

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In this qualitative study, heterosexual professionals with an interest in lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) issues were surveyed about their ally work with LGB people. Data were analyzed to describe participants’ experiences. Results are discussed in terms of implications for counseling and student affairs professionals who engage in LGB-affirmative work.

College and university counselors provide a variety of services to lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) clients as well as others concerned with sexual orientation issues. They provide direct counseling and mental health services. Moreover, along with other professionals working in student services and higher education, they engage in what the college counseling literature has called “outreach” or “social-change-oriented” activities (Archer & Cooper, 1998, 1999; Morrill & Hurst, 1971; Morrill, Oetting, & Hurst, 1974). Outreach on LGB issues includes advising LGB student organizations, providing educational programming on sexual orientation issues, helping to develop policies and procedures relevant to sexual orientation issues, and engaging in other efforts to promote affirmation for LGB people and issues.

Heterosexual professionals who are members of the dominant group and who work to end oppression in their professional and personal lives through support and advocacy for LGB people have been defined as heterosexual allies (Washington & Evans, 1991). Overall, the literature related to the experiences of college counselors and other student affairs professionals as they work on sexual orientation issues is limited. Two authors described their own process of doing ally work as heterosexual university counselors (Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1995; Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995). Another author

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presented a general model of heterosexual ally development (Sullivan, 1998). According to these authors, development proceeds from naiveté about sexual orientation, to acceptance of the heterosexist status quo, to conflict or resistance when first perceiving the reality of heterosexism, and finally to redefinition and internalization of oneself as a heterosexual ally. Other authors commented more broadly on the ally work of student affairs professionals, giving advice on such issues as supporting LGB students and dealing with obstacles to being an effective ally (Broido, 2000; Washington & Evans, 1991).

In terms of empirical literature, there is some research related to the training and practices of both counselors and student affairs professionals regarding LGB issues. Several recent reviews of this research indicate that there is much LGB-affirmative professional training and practice in college counseling and student affairs (Croteau, Bieschke, Phillips, & Lark, 1998; Croteau & Talbot, 2000; Phillips, 2000; Phillips & Fischer, 1998). However, the research also clearly indicates that biased practices and limited training are still significant problems. Within this research literature, there are two studies on the experiences of LGB college counselors and student affairs professionals (Croteau & Lark, 1995; Croteau & von Destinon, 1994). There are, however, no empirical studies of the experiences of heterosexual counselors or student affairs professionals as they live and work in ways affirming LGB people and issues.

Questions about the experiences of heterosexual allies in the empirical literature are both "unasked" and "unanswered" (Broido, 2000, p. 364). To help inform the heterosexual ally work of counselors and student affairs professionals, we implemented the first study in this area by surveying a group of heterosexual student affairs professionals who have professional interest in LGB issues. We asked them for open-ended descriptions of their experiences and analyzed the data with the aim of describing the ally experience in ways that would be helpful to the work of both counselors and student affairs professionals.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 87 heterosexual student affairs professionals drawn from the membership of the Network for Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Concerns (Network) in the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). Heterosexual members of the Network were targeted for participation in the present study because they had easily identifiable "information rich cases" (Patton, 1990, p. 169) for studying heterosexual ally experiences of professionals. Demographic data obtained from NASPA indicates that Network membership is 80% Caucasian, 10% African American, 4% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 1% multiracial, and it relatively evenly comprises women (50%) and men (50%).

Procedure

All heterosexual members of the Network were invited to participate in the present study. Because the Network is composed of both heterosexual and LGB members, potential participants were mailed materials for the present study as well as materials for a separate study geared toward LGB professionals (Anderson, Croteau, Chung, & DiStefano, 2000; Croteau, Anderson, DiStefano, & Chung, 1998). Potential participants were instructed to choose between the two studies on the basis of whether they described themselves as heterosexual or LGB. The mailing also included a hot pink "Advocate for Awareness" sticker as an incentive to participate. Nonrespondents were sent two follow-up mailings at approximately 2-week intervals.

Invitations to participate were sent to 553 Network members. Sixteen packages were returned by the post office as “undeliverable,” reducing the potential participant pool to 537. Collectively, 284 persons returned completed materials for either the present study (n = 87) or the study designed for LGB members (n = 197). Five individuals who returned materials indicated that they had been invited to participate by colleagues. Thus, 279 Network members who were invited to participate in one study or the other did so, resulting in a joint return rate of 52%.

Survey

Participants responded to a written survey of open-ended questions soliciting their experiences as heterosexual allies in five content areas. Three of the five content areas provided sufficient data to be analyzed. Specific questions asked in these content areas were as follows: (a) Describe one to three times when you behaved in ways supportive of LGB people and issues and/or identified yourself as an ally to LGB people. Who was involved and what were their reactions? What were your own reactions to your affirmative behavior? (b) Describe one to three times when you did not behave in ways supportive of LGB people and issues and/or hid your identity as an ally to LGB people. Who was involved and what were the reasons for what you did? What were your own reactions? (c) Describe any life events that you believe have been influential in your affirming gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and issues and/or in your becoming an ally to LGB people.

Data Analysis

Four researchers read the raw data and independently identified a list of common ideas detected across participants. These initial conceptualizations of the data were then discussed, and an initial list of codes and their meanings was established by consensus. Consistent with the constant comparative method, codes were applied to the data and refined as new content emerged (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Dependability of coding was increased
through the use of multiple check coding procedures. Coded data were then used to generate an initial summary of the common themes and unique experiences reported. A researcher not involved with the initial coding process confirmed that this draft of the results fit the coded data. The final results section summarizes ally-related experiences in three content areas. Results are organized in descending order with the most common themes reported first. In addition, the data for some themes are presented in more depth than others, reflecting the varying levels of detail provided by the participants. We quote participants, when possible, to capture the richness of their voices.

RESULTS

Participants' Descriptions of How They Acted As Allies

Participating or providing LGB-affirmative programming or training was the most frequently cited type of ally activity. For example, one participant indicated, “I attend, participate [in] and cosponsor events that are designed to educate and celebrate the contributions of LGB people.” Participants frequently mentioned providing or conducting LGB-affirming workshops or presentations such as panel discussions, presentations at professional conferences, classroom teaching, and student or professional training.

Signifying LGB affirmation by visibly displaying LGB symbols was also frequently cited as an ally activity. LGB-affirmative “books, stickers and buttons, and brochures” were displayed in offices “to let folks know I am open to conversations about [LGB] issues.”

Supportive relationships with LGB people were also cited as a frequent ally activity. Participants reported helping students as part of their professional responsibility, for example, by being “a close mentor to a lesbian student government president.” Participants also indicated advocating for LGB students in the face of discrimination. One participant reported helping a student cope with a difficult professor in a department with an “anti-LGB atmosphere” by working “with the student to find answers and appropriate people with whom the student could [talk].” Participants also cited providing guidance or a “listening ear” to LGB students.

Ally activities also occurred in peer and supervisory work relationships. One participant “actively supported a gay co-worker . . . when he sued” for domestic partner benefits. For a gay professional applying for a job, another participant “identified a few people who are ‘out’ for him to talk to about the local [LGB] community.” Relationships with friends or family were also discussed. A participant wrote, “Three of my best friends came out to me and I accepted them and supported them during good times and bad, from telling parents to finding someone special.”

Confronting homophobia and heterosexism was another frequently cited ally activity. Participants reported confronting family members, students,
coworkers, and friends. Two stories are illustrations. According to one participant,

[Watching the television program] *Ellen* with my father, who teaches at a small private college, has been challenging. He thinks that the ‘gay theme’ is hurting the show and doesn’t understand why she [Ellen] feels the need to discuss gay issues. He says, “who cares?” I have spent a good amount of time explaining who cares and why it is important.

Another participant discussed how “students at a residential high school make jokes about themselves and their peers’ sexuality and speculate endlessly about their teachers. I always challenge their assumptions about women being interested in men and vice versa in the same joking manner.”

Advocating for LGB-affirmative institutional policy changes was another frequently cited ally activity. For example, one participant “publicly came out in support of adding sexual orientation to the college’s nondiscrimination clause” and another “challenged the university administration to deliberately seek LGB folks to hire in our top spots.”

Assisting LGB student organizations was cited as an ally activity. Participants often indicated they were advisors for LGB student groups. In addition to being formal advisors, participants reported assisting student groups in acquiring space, financial, or material resources.

**Reactions to Ally Activities**

LGB people’s reactions to the participants’ ally activities often involved LGB people being “appreciative” or “supportive” of the participants’ ally behavior. LGB people “welcomed” the ally behavior and demonstrated “patience” as the participants tried to be allies. Participants also reported that LGB people felt a sense of safety due to the ally behavior, resulting in LGB people more frequently disclosing their sexual orientation to, or seeking contact with, participants. Finally, some participants reported LGB people were sometimes “surprised” by their ally activities or “curious as to why I wanted to work with them.”

The reactions of people not identified as LGB (heterosexual people as well as people whose sexual orientations were not clear in participant responses) were described in several ways. Most often, participants reported that people not identified as LGB were generally “supportive” or “positive” about the participants’ ally activity. Participants also noted positive changes in attitudes and behaviors in others, including “use of [more affirmative] terms and language,” higher levels of involvement in LGB-related “discussions,” and increased “awareness” of LGB issues. Participants did, however, sometimes report less positive reactions from non-LGB others such as being “surprised” and questioning the participants’ motives, often in the form of speculating about the participants’ sexual orientation. Participants also reported getting “negative feedback” from others. The participants reported that others were afraid, anxious, nonaccepting, “shocked,” and even “challenging
and hostile.” A few participants reported that they experienced “silence” or “no reaction” from others.

Participants’ own reactions were not only about their ally behavior but also about how others responded to the participants’ ally behavior. The most frequent type of reaction involved positive emotions, often expressed as a sense of pride in themselves or their ally work. They also frequently reported that others’ reactions to their ally behavior left them feeling “welcomed” and “encouraged” about the importance of their ally behavior. Some participants said that ally behavior was part of their “job” or their “professional responsibility.” Other participants indicated that their ally behavior was a “natural” or “innate” response. Some also evaluated the merit of programming or other ally activities using terms such as valuable, a start, and powerful.

Less often, participants had negative emotional reactions. Some indicated feeling “nervous” or “worried” about the consequences of their ally behavior, such as being “afraid of violence,” when participating in an LGB pride march. Other participants reported feeling “disappointed,” “frustrated,” or “angry” about the homophobia they experienced. Some were concerned about their ally performance and reported feeling “awkward” and “anxious” at times. A few reported that confronting homophobia and heterosexism could be “draining” and “difficult.”

Participants’ Descriptions of Times They Did Not Behave As Allies

Not confronting homophobia and heterosexism was frequently reported. Participants did not respond to “derogatory” or “intolerant” comments as well as “offensive” jokes made by others in social and professional situations. One participant noted, “There have been many times that I haven’t confronted friends or family about homosexual jokes and imitations or that I haven’t corrected misconceptions regarding LGB life-choices.” Most participants described their failures to be an ally in the face of such expressions of homophobia or heterosexism as some form of “remain[ing] silent.” A few participants reported more active involvement, saying they had “laughed at” or “played along with” expressions of homophobia and heterosexism.

Making derogatory comments was mentioned by some participants. They reported using “faggot” and other derogatory terms, telling homophobic jokes, and even “taunting” or “teasing” others. This overtly derogatory behavior was reported as occurring in the distant past.

Lack of action in support of LGB people, such as failing to attend LGB programming, offer LGB training, or advocate for affirmative institutional policies, was mentioned by some participants. For instance, participants reported that they “didn’t march with the LGBTQA/PFLAG group at last year’s homecoming parade,” “[did] not offer LGB training to our student staff,” and “did not push an issue after making an initial statement of support.”
Reasons Given for Not Behaving As an Ally

Choosing not to confront homophobia or advocate for LGB issues because, at times, such actions would be “futile” or not “effective in the long run” was a reason given for not acting as an ally. For example, one participant chose not to confront a homophobic joke made before a program for fraternity men because “I needed them to not turn me off before we even got started.” Participants noted the need to “pick and choose” the “battles” or “the best times” to act as an ally to maximize effectiveness and avoid “no-win arguments.”

Personal ignorance or lack of development concerning LGB issues or other personal struggles or difficulties also contributed to not acting as allies. One participant reported not participating in a LGB pride march because of a lack of “courage” to risk being the target of homophobia. Another reported being too “young and immature” to know the appropriate way to be an ally.

Participants’ struggles with conflict and confrontation were also described as reasons for not acting as an ally. For example, one participant reported having “trouble thinking quickly of appropriate responses in any confrontive situation” and another reported lacking the “confidence in [him or herself] to challenge others.” More often participants described themselves as simply wanting “to avoid conflict and hard feelings.”

Lack of energy to take on LGB issues also prevented participants from acting as allies. One participant said that “starting the LGB discussion can be exhausting,” and another said, “I feel so tired of ‘standing up’ that I ‘stay seated.’” Two less frequently mentioned reasons were participants’ concern that their ally behavior might affect their image or their professional development. For example, they did not want “to seem like a [politically correct] person.” Some feared their ally behavior would have “potential repercussions” for their employment.

Participants’ Reactions to Not Acting As an Ally

Self-critical feelings were the most frequent type of reaction. Participants described themselves as “coping out” or acting like a “hypocrite.” They reported feeling “discouraged,” “not proud,” and “disgust[ed]” with themselves. One participant said, “I felt absolutely terrible and thought about it for days—was so ashamed of myself.”

Negative reactions to the homophobic context in which participants found themselves were mentioned less often than self-critical reactions. For example, one participant who decided to stop confronting their relatives about homophobia said, “I am disappointed in the situation but have learned that challenging these individuals only leads to frustrations.”

Reactions that were more neutral or simply “OK” were also reported. For example, a few participants knew that their not acting as an ally was for strategic reasons and said they felt “OK with the decision.” One participant, who was tired of always advocating, reported working to “convince [my]self that I don’t have to act every single time.” Another reported more self-acceptance by saying, “I also know that no one is perfect, including myself.”
Influential Events in Participants' Becoming Allies

Relationships with LGB people were frequently mentioned as influential. Participants reported several effects of relationships with LGB friends, students, colleagues, or family. Witnessing discrimination made the "pain" of discrimination "real and deep" for participants and led to a need for activism against such discrimination. One respondent became aware of discrimination, violent behavior, and intolerance toward LGB persons through a relationship with a gay college roommate and realized "it wasn't good enough to not be homophobic and to guard against heterosexist tendencies. I had to do these things publicly."

Knowing an LGB person also served to increase awareness and knowledge of LGB issues. Participants reported that interactions with LGB friends, colleagues, and family members "opened my eyes" and "made issues more clear." In their relationships with LGB people they reported the opportunity to have open discussions and to examine personal feelings about LGB issues. A participant stated a gay brother's coming out "gave me the opportunity to examine how I feel about the issues, as well as being able to openly talk about being gay with him."

Educational and professional development was also frequently mentioned as influential in becoming more affirming of LGB people. Participants cited their training in student affairs and counseling, attending an undergraduate institution that valued diversity, attending LGB or diversity classes or seminars, and conducting LGB research or scholarship.

Personal values, such as open-mindedness or equality, were also described as contributing to ally development. Participants specifically cited "growing up in an accepting family environment" and being "raised to respect all people" as influencing their ally development.

The other oppressed social group identities of some participants (e.g., women, persons of color, or Jewish individuals) allowed them to relate to, have insight about, or have empathy for LGB persons. One respondent made the following observation:

I began to think much harder about the parallels between various oppressed or marginalized groups. . . . If I were to stand up for myself as an ethnic minority female, I should also be standing up for others who are falling victim to the same oppressive cycle, although in different forms. I began to see and build connections for myself between all people of color and other marginalized groups including LGBT people in a very real way.

DISCUSSION

Mapping Ally Experiences and Relationship to Existing Literature

The present study used a qualitative data-collection method that provides breadth rather than depth of information by summarizing written data collected from
a large number of participants. This method has been described as being well suited for unexplored research areas and allows for a broad mapping of experiences related to the phenomenon being studied (Croteau & Lark, 1995; Croteau & Talbot, 2000; Patton, 1990). Thus, the results provide an outline of the “territory” of counselors’ and student affairs professionals’ experiences of being allies.

The actions participants reported engaging in are all listed among exemplary student affairs practices concerning LGB issues found in another study (Croteau & Lark, 1995). They also fit well with the three roles of support, education, and advocacy suggested by Broido (2000). Participants’ stories of not behaving as allies are also consistent with the limited discussion in the literature of the challenges that may be faced by allies (Broido, 2000; Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1995; Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995; Sullivan, 1998; Washington & Evans, 1991).

Participants’ descriptions of influential events that increased their awareness and motivation to work as allies emphasize the importance of relationships with LGB people. This echoes the proposed importance of such personal encounters for movement through the early stages of heterosexual ally development (e.g., Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995; Sullivan, 1998) and mirrors the strong, consistent finding that heterosexual people who know LGB people also tend to have more positive attitudes towards them (Herek, 2000). The reported influence of educational experiences is consistent with research on counselor and student affairs professional training (e.g., Phillips & Fischer, 1998; Talbot, 1996; Talbot & Kocarek, 1997). The influential role of personal values such as tolerance and equality lends support to theoretical models for promoting positive attitude change (Broido, 2000; Herek, 2000) and ally development (Sullivan, 1998). Participants’ use of their own experiences with oppression (e.g., a person of color experiencing racism) as a window for understanding LGB oppression is consistent with a dynamic found in another qualitative study of student affairs professionals (Croteau, Talbot, Evans, & Lance, 2000).

Implications for College Counselors and Their Training and Professional Development

Participants encountered challenges in their experiences as allies. Despite these struggles, participants overwhelmingly reported positive reactions to being allies. Along with several other authors (Broido, 2000; Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995; Rapp, 1995), we encourage college counselors to persevere in the face of these challenges; the overall ally experience is a rewarding one. College counseling centers can assist allies by acknowledging the influential roles of relationships with LGB people and training in LGB issues. In practical terms, this means counseling centers should make extra effort to recruit LGB staff and trainees and to provide training and support for working with LGB students (see Phillips, 2000, for training strategies).
Implications for Future Research

Overall, the breadth of data mapped out by this study can serve two general functions for future research efforts. First, the map can be used to identify a specific aspect of the ally experience that could be the focus of a more in-depth study. Second, the map from this study could be used to develop interview guides or other qualitative data-collection procedures for those in-depth studies. For example, any one of the six major ally activities identified in the results could be the focus of a future study using an in-depth interview designed to collect more detailed information about that particular area. A qualitative study focusing on the content, motivations, and meaning making in times of ally action or inaction could also provide a valuable perspective for heterosexual allies.

REFERENCES


