“COMRADES IN THE STRUGGLE:” A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION INTO THE LIVES OF MEN WHO PARTICIPATE IN LGBTQ ACTIVISM PROGRAMS

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Sociology

by
Alexa Elizabeth Megna

Spring 2012
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the
Thesis of Alexa Elizabeth Megna:

“Comrades in the Struggle:” A Qualitative Exploration into the Lives of Men who
Participate in LGBTQ Activism Programs

Paul Sargent, Chair
Department of Sociology

Michael McCall
Department of Sociology

Allison Vaughn
Department of Psychology

April 19, 2012
Approval Date
I dedicate this thesis to my little brother, Michael. No, I did not put everything you told me about in my thesis. And, yes, this thesis is dedicated to you because I would have never been interested in this topic if you were not part of my life.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“Comrades in the Struggle:” A Qualitative Exploration into the Lives of Men who Participate in LGBTQ Activism Programs
by
Alexa Elizabeth Megna
Master of Arts in Sociology
San Diego State University, 2012

In this thesis, I examine the reasons why heterosexual men participate in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) activism as well as discover their daily experiences being activists. I looked at gender, sexuality, and activism literature to frame my research question: “What is it like being a heterosexual man who participates in LGBTQ activism?” In this qualitative thesis I focused on interviews with nine self-identified heterosexual men and found three overarching themes between these men’s tales of their activism. The themes are: (1) motivations for participating in activism, (2) the daily experiences of men who are allies, and (3) advice to future allies. By attending to the perspective of these men who participate in LGBTQ activism, not only did I gain an understanding of why men participate in activism but we also understand how sexuality and gender are related to involvement in such LGBTQ activism programs.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................1
   Rationale ..................................................................................1
   Benefits to this Study ...................................................................2
   Definitions ..................................................................................2

2 DATA AND METHODS ..........................................................5
   Participants ...............................................................................6
   Interviewing Methods ................................................................7

3 FINDINGS .................................................................................9
   Motivations ................................................................................9
   Connections to LGBTQ Individuals .............................................10
   Comparison to Civil Liberties Movements ...................................14
   Men who are Heterosexual Allies .............................................19
   Socialization of Men ................................................................19
   Impact of Privilege ....................................................................22
   Reactions to Involvement ..........................................................27
   Advice to Other Allies .................................................................32
   Talk to LGBTQ Individuals and Allies ........................................33
   Self-Reflect on Motivations .......................................................34
   Get Involved with a LGBTQ Group ...........................................35

4 CONCLUSION .........................................................................36
   Discussion .................................................................................36
   Future Research and Study Limitations ......................................39

REFERENCES .............................................................................41
APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE ........................................................................................................47
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Pseudonyms and Affiliation of Participants .................................................................6
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would have never been possible without the support and love of many people. First, I would like to acknowledge my chair, Paul, for being my mentor and surrogate father when I needed one the most. From the days I stammered in his office in a to-do list haze to the times when I came in just to talk, I am so fortunate to call him a friend and mentor. I also would like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Vaughn and Dr. McCall, for their guidance and suggestions. A very special thanks goes out to all the men who participated in this research. This would have never been possible without their openness and commitment to furthering the LGBTQ cause.

It would be regretful if I did not thank my mother who has shown me nothing but support for my goals. Even though she didn’t intend on this course I have chosen, she raised me to never let my gender get in the way of my dreams and fittingly, studying gender is one of my passions because of it. I would have never been able to make it through graduate school without her standing in support the whole way. In addition, I need to thank my grandfather. I am thankful for his endless friendship, for never (ok, maybe once) questioning why I am not yet married, and for letting me ask him a thousand questions about his police work. I also need to thank my brother, Joseph, for letting me edit his essays and lecture him on masculinity. By doing so, he unknowingly increased my confidence about everything I research.

I need to extend a big thanks to the thesis support group: Amy, Stephanie, Lauren, and Tiffany. From the times when they made jokes about my nonexistent thesis drafts to the times when they refused to even mention the word “thesis” under penalty, I would have never finished this without them by my side. I think we can all officially say that graduate students are the worst! In addition, I would like to thank my friend, Michael, for always helping me edit drafts and fix my tenses. Thank you!
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

RATIONALE

In recent years, the prevalence of men who are founders of social justice causes has not been a rare sight. Several popular men, including Blake Mycoskie of TOMS Shoes (2011), Jamie Tworkowski of To Write Love on Her Arms (2011), and the three men of Invisible Children (2011), have sought social change through their organizations. However, in a society where we not only expect men to be homophobic but we also police them by using words like “fag” and “sissy” it is not surprising that there has been little attention devoted to men in activism related to the LGBTQ population. Thus begs the question: Why would a heterosexual man willingly participate in a field where their own sexuality and self-worth might come into question?

To answer these questions, I conducted nine ethnographic interviews with men who participate in LGBTQ activism programs asking them about their work and people’s perception of their work. I also did an in-depth search of research surrounding gender, sexuality, and ally development to add to my findings. This study illustrates the reasons for men’s participation in LGBTQ activism as well as how they feel society views their participation.

Understanding the processes leading to men’s participation in LGBTQ activism has implications not only for recruitment, but also for a greater understanding of how men navigate society’s boundaries of what is defined as masculine and feminine. Research in masculinity studies has found that among men, there is widespread fear of being perceived as a homosexual and very strict guidelines as to what is acceptable behavior for men (Chodorow 1978; Connell 1995; David and Brannon 1976; Davis and Wagner 2005; Kimmel 2007; Pascoe 2007b). Men are not necessarily afraid of a homosexual walking down the street, but they are afraid of being seen as a homosexual, which is understandable given the negative sanctions associated with being seen as such. This well documented fear of being viewed as homosexual leads to an intriguing question of why (and how) some men go against society’s
boundaries to participate in activism related to LGBTQ issues. What would compel a man to participate in an activity that may negatively influence people’s perceptions of his own sexuality and self-worth?

In this thesis, I outline how I went about answering the above question. First, I extensively reviewed the literature surrounding gender, sexuality, and social justice studies to give me a full picture of what research has to say. Second, I explain the methods and precautions I employed during this study. This includes: (a) who my participants were and how I found them; (b) how the interviews were conducted; (c) how transcribing and coding took place; and (d) how my findings were reviewed by a willing participant to ensure accuracy. Third, I explain the three main themes found in this research: (1) Motivations; (2) Men who are heterosexual allies; (3) Advice to other men who are allies. Finally, I conclude by discussing the findings, in conjunction with the literature, and elaborate on limitations and future research areas.

**Benefits to this Study**

This study not only adds to the way in which society perceives men who participate in LGBTQ activism, but also adds real world applications for ways in which we can understand how men undergo the process of participating in these programs and reactions to their involvement. Given research on the intersection of homophobia and masculinity, we would perceive men who participate in open forms of LGBTQ activism as going against the norm and, therefore, understanding how these individuals navigate those boundaries is vital to a greater understanding of related societal processes. This study also illustrates what the boundaries for masculinity are and what happens when men go against those norms. In addition, this study is a resource for all forms of activism programs that are trying to involve men in feminism, LGBTQ rights, and other social justice causes. An understanding of reasons for participating will help programs understand how to recruit more men as members, which, as I will explore later, can be hard to find.

**Definitions**

Before I elaborate on the main themes found, I want to define and explain certain terms that may be misunderstood because of their ambiguity and misuse in popular culture. For example I use the acronym LGBTQ to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and
queer people who have formed either a flexible or concrete identity around their sexuality and gender. In accordance with other scholars, my words employ the use of LGBTQ (Broad et al. 2008; Hill 2004). However, when citing research and participants’ quotes, I use whatever form of the acronym the study I refer to uses; some research refers to only LGBT individuals while others refer to LGB and I intend to stay true to the author’s definition.

In addition, it is important to note that I am talking about men as allies throughout this study. The term ally refers to “a person who is a member of the ‘dominant’ or ‘majority’ group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life though support of, and as an advocate for, the oppressed population” (Washington and Evans 1991:195). As the definition implies, allies provide various support, ranging from legal advocates, friends who listen, and/or people who provide other resources. The term ally best illustrates what the men in this study do in their work with LGBTQ activism.

I also am using men to describe all participants who identify as such. Men/man refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, and norms men are subject to (gender) whereas male refers to biological make up (sex). Similar to the way I will use LGBTQ for my own words and switch to the acronym that the author or participant uses, I do the same for the words male and men. Some authors choose to use males as opposed to men and I use their original words.

It is important to note the definitions and uses of the words homophobia and heterosexism. Homophobia is commonly referred to as an irrational fear, even hatred, of homosexuals whereas heterosexism, like sexism and racism, describes ideas and behaviors that stigmatize homosexuals at an institutional level (Herek 1990; Plummer 2001). Both of these words highlight the institutional and social problems that the LGBTQ community may feel. When referring to these terms, I use whichever fits the scenario.

Finally, it is important to note theoretical standpoints about the binary of hetero- and homosexual. Prominent gender and sexuality theorists agree that the dualism of hetero- and homosexual reminds the homosexual that they are not normal, especially homosexual men (Connell 2008; Fuss 2008; Seidman 2008, 2010). Heterosexual men who are called words like “gay” or “fag” are also reminded that they, like actual homosexuals, are stepping outside of what is considered masculine. Explaining this association, R. W. Connell (2008) writes, “From the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, gayness is easily assimilated to
femininity” (374). Men who step out of the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity into a field that openly supports being LGBTQ are therefore not only pushing the restrictions of masculinity but are also going against sexuality boundaries. Seidman (2008, 2010) also supports Connell’s connection and describes how anti-LGBTQ slurs are intended to preserve the boundaries of what is sexually right and wrong for heterosexuals. He says, “regimes of heteronormativity not only regulate the homosexual but control heterosexual practices by creating a moral hierarchy of good and bad sexual citizens” (Seidman 2008:397). As Connell (2008) and Seidman (2008, 2010) have explained, the binary ideas of hetero- and homosexuality are not only used to remind an LGBTQ person that they are not inside the correct boundaries, but this binary thinking is also used to essentially keep men straight. Again, research such as that mentioned above shows that men may face impediments when it comes to participating in LGBTQ activism. So what would compel them to go against these odds and actually participate?
CHAPTER 2

DATA AND METHODS

This exploration into the lives of men who participate in LGBTQ activism was centered on James P. Spradley’s (1979) application of grounded theory, which was laid out in his book, *The Ethnographic Interview*. Grounded theory is an approach to qualitative research that is defined by gathering data (in this case interviews) and then seeking to generate a theory from emerging patterns grounded in the lived experiences of participants (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Spradley 1979; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Weiss 1994). Spradley’s application of grounded theory is based on that premise and also on my ability to “develop theories grounded in empirical data of cultural description” (1979:11). What this means is that every participant I interviewed possessed the language and skill set to describe their own social environment, so I learned directly from the respondents’ language and usage of that language. In addition to Spradley’s application of grounded theory, it is also important to recognize, from a postmodernist perspective, that people use language to construct their own reality (Murphy 1989; Sapir 1921; Whorf 1956). John W. Murphy describes how language defines an individual’s reality by saying “reality proliferates when it comes into contact with language, because speech acts are dense and always subject to further interpretation” (1989:32). Also, in the tradition of linguistic relativity, the way in which we understand our social surroundings is through culture, which determines how we explain our experiences to ourselves and to others (Sapir 1921; Whorf 1956). As these theorists described, language enables us to explain our social interactions and realities, which allows an ethnographer, like myself, to learn about a persons’ motives and thoughts. Participants’ language will guide me on a tour of their involvement in forms of LGBTQ activism.

The purpose of my ethnographic study on men who participate in LGBTQ activism programs was to connect the individual biographies of these men with public and social history. As C. Wright Mills said, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of society can be understood without understanding both” (1959:3). In addition, Wills and Trondman
(2000) also talk about the purpose of ethnography, presenting our objective and how it connects with readers. They write:

Most basically we are interested in recording and presenting the ‘nitty gritty’ of everyday life, of how ‘the meat is cut close to the bone’ in ordinary cultural practices, and presenting them in ways in which produce maximum ‘illumination’ for readers. If you like, we are interested in producing ‘ah ha’ effects where evocative expression through the data hits the experience, body and emotions of the reader. (Wills and Trondman 2000:11-12)

In the case of this thesis, I used grounded theory and ethnography to understand the language and nuances in participants’ explanations of their involvement in these activism programs. Below I will explain the details of my participants, interview methods, and coding procedures.

PARTICIPANTS

For this study, I interviewed nine self-identified heterosexual men who participate in LGBTQ activism. These nine members included participants from Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA), Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), Safe Zone Ally groups, and other LGBTQ activism groups. I solicited men from different groups to explore their shared experiences in being an LGBTQ ally. In addition, it is important to note that all participants self identified as Caucasian or white. Table 1 lists participants and their affiliations.

Table 1. Pseudonyms and Affiliation of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym of Participant</th>
<th>LGBTQ Activism Group Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>University Safe Zones Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>University Safe Zones Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurley</td>
<td>PFLAG Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>PFLAG Parent and President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sawyer</td>
<td>PFLAG Ally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desmond</td>
<td>GSA Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>GSA Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>GSA Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boone</td>
<td>Spoken Word Poet and Activist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I recruited participants by attending PFLAG and GSA meetings. In addition, members were recruited from the GSA, PFLAG, Safe Zone Ally, and other activism group websites where individuals have their name and contact information freely posted. After each interview, I asked participants if they knew of anyone else who would be beneficial to my study and gave them my card (with a brief study introduction and my contact information) to give to their friends they believed would be interested. Using the snowball method, I was able to interview individuals I would have otherwise not been able to contact.

These details mentioned in my study may expose personal histories of abuse or harassment and, if disclosed, may harm participants’ relationships with others and their careers. For these reasons, I use pseudonyms when referring to informants and have changed all other unique identifiers, including school names and city of residence.

Also given the sensitive nature of this subject matter, adolescents who are under the age of 18 were excluded from this study.

**INTERVIEWING METHODS**

Before the interviews began, participants were assured of their right to confidentiality and that they have the right to withdraw consent at any time. Interviews then followed these procedures: First, interviews were held in a location of the participant’s choosing, whether a coffee shop or in their office. Upon learning of this location, I asked participants a second time if they felt comfortable and free to share intimate information in this setting. If they said yes, we planned to meet at that location, if they said no, we searched for other, more suitable options. This ensured their comfort when discussing intimate details of their participation in the program.

Second, interviews were centered on open-ended questions and prompts, which provided intricate descriptions of the individuals’ reasons for participating in the program. With these questions, participants were able to freely choose which direction they wished to take in answering. Each interview ranged from forty to ninety minutes long. A sample interview guide is located in Appendix. It should be noted that while I did not ask specifically for the participant’s sexual identity, it did come out in their description of their work in the LGBTQ community. Each interview was then tape recorded with the consent of
the individual and was erased as soon as it was transcribed. Transcribing and coding of these interviews began as soon as the first interview.

Finally, the process of finding themes, as guided by the earlier mentioned Spradley (1979), began with transcribing the interviews, coding them to find themes within each transcript (and subsequently in each new transcript), and highlighting important themes that arose in all nine interviews. From then, I looked at the themes where most or all of the participants had something to say regarding the matter. These are the main themes that make up my findings section.

While I tried to limit my voice in the direct quotes, sometimes I have inserted the question asked in order to give context to what the participant was saying. In these cases, I have used an “I” to identify my, the interviewer’s words, and the participant’s pseudonym to identify their words. Within direct quotes, I insert my words by using brackets ([ ]) in order to keep the quote smooth and readable.

In addition, after a draft of the findings was written up, participants who consented to future contact were then sent a copy of the draft to review. They were then asked these questions to help guide my findings: (1) Overall, what do you think of the results? (2) Am I missing anything important? If so, what is missing? (3) Does my argument and collection of quotes that I have used make sense? Doing this ensured my results are credible and reflect the true meanings of what the participants were trying to convey.

In closing, I employed the use of Spradely’s application of Strauss’ grounded theory to work my way through the interview process, transcribing, coding, and finding themes within the data of nine men who consented to an interview about their involvement in LGBTQ activism programs.
CHAPTER 3

FINDINGS

In this section, I will explore the main findings that arose from interviews with nine men who participate in LGBTQ activism. By using ethnographic interview techniques, I was able to explore fully what each participant said and felt about being involved in this activism. When discussing these themes, current and past literature is cited to create a full understanding of each theme and topic. Below the findings are organized by three overarching themes from all interviews. The first theme is participants’ motivations for participating in LGBTQ activism. Within this theme there are two sub-themes: (1) The impact knowing LGBTQ individuals, and (2) knowledge of civil rights movements had on participants’ activism. The second theme shares the daily experiences and what it is like to be a man who is a heterosexual ally. There are three sub-themes in this section: (1) The socialization of men, (2) The impact of privilege, and (3) Others’ reactions to involvement. Finally, the third theme found in all interviews is the advice the participants would give to new and perspective allies. Participants’ offered this advice: (1) Talk to LGBTQ individuals, (2) Reflect on motivations for participating, and (3) Get involved with an LGBTQ group.

MOTIVATIONS

The motivations of these heterosexual men who participate in LGBTQ activism programs show how critical knowing LGBTQ individuals was and how important having awareness about civil liberties was to participating in LGBTQ activism programs. Most participants explained the reason for their involvement in terms of knowing a friend or family member who identified as LGBTQ. In addition, after explaining their involvement because of whom they know, most participants shared their past or present involvement with or knowledge of civil rights, both for women and people of color. The motivations of participants are categorized in these two sub-themes: connections to LGBTQ individuals and comparisons to civil rights movements.
Connections to LGBTQ Individuals

Research shows that having positive attitudes towards the LGBTQ community may lead to a desire to participate in these activism programs. Other studies found that having LGBTQ friends, having liberal attitudes towards women, and having protective attitudes and/or empathy towards LGBTQ individuals have been indicators of having positive attitudes towards this population (Broad et al. 2008; Cotton-Huston and Waite 2000; DiStefano et al. 2000; Eliason 1995; Engberg, Hurtado, and Smith 2007; Goldstein and Davis 2010; Ji 2007; Simoni and Walters 2001; Stozer 2009; Valenti and Campbell 2009). One of the most common reasons for positive attitudes was having LGBTQ friends and family (Cotton-Huston and Waite 2000; DiStefano et al. 2000; Engberg et al. 2007; Goldstein and Davis 2010; Ji 2007; Stozer 2009; Valenti and Campbell 2009). As research shows, having positive attitudes towards the LGBTQ population may influence a desire to participate in LGBTQ activism programs. In the case of this study, my findings reflect the same relationship about how knowing an LGBTQ individual will impact one’s views and votes on LGBTQ rights. In addition, having a positive attitude towards LGBTQ people also impacts the desire to help in a real and tangible way. All participants in this study had friends or family members who identified as LGBTQ and all had liberal views on politics and civil rights.

Two fathers interviewed, who participated in PFLAG, both had gay sons who inspired their involvement in the activism group. In addition, both of their sons attempted suicide shortly after they announced their LGBTQ status. The emotion that was in their voice and eyes as they described this horrifying event told me that these fathers loved their sons very much and were not only concerned with their sons’ wellbeing as gay youths but also that they were concerned about young LGBTQ individuals everywhere. During this process of understanding their sons’ coming out and subsequent suicide attempts, the fathers started to get heavily involved with PFLAG because their sons had brought it to their attention. Research related specifically to PFLAG parents, shows that there is active involvement by fathers in PFLAG events and how parenting can be political (Broad et al. 2008; Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004). One father, Jack described how his son introduced him to PFLAG. He said:
My son came out when he was sixteen and in high school. And I learned about PFLAG at my church. He saw this PFLAG bumper sticker on the car and said ‘Oh! PFLAG!’ And I said, ‘What’s PFLAG?’ And he told me, ‘It’s parents, families, and friends of lesbians and gays.’ So I asked the pastor, ‘Who has the PFLAG bumper sticker on their car?’ And he said he would introduce her to me later. So after the service, I got involved in a conversation with an elderly woman and the pastor said, ‘Oh, I see you have already met her. This is the woman I was talking about.’ So, that was how I heard about it. I attended the first meeting and I was on the board within two months. So that’s how I got involved.

Hurley told a similar story about how he got involved in PFLAG.

I: Tell me about getting involved in PFLAG.

Hurley: Actually my son did. I have always supported him. He has been out for two years now. And I have been totally supportive for him. And I kind of had a feeling that he was that way, you know? Then he found out about PFLAG so we [he and his son] have been going for about probably 6 months. Yeah, so it’s been really nice.

As both Jack and Hurley explained, their main reason for getting involved with an LGBTQ group was not only because their two sons were gay but because their sons found out about PFLAG for them. In addition, there was one participant who was actively involved in PFLAG, but did not have any children to support by participating. However, he did believe that his youngest grandson would eventually identify as LGBTQ and he wanted to be active in the fight for rights (if his suspicions are true). He said this in regards to the possible situation approaching:

And of course, when he [his grandson] started to show this talent at age seven-eight, the family would say, ‘None of them [LGBTQ individuals] in this household. We’re army.’ Let’s be honest, he will need support if our thoughts are correct. I love my son to death but he...everything is black and white, there ain’t no grey. So my grandson will need that support from me and my wife.

The six other participants have known LGBTQ individuals that have impacted their involvement in their activism program. One of the reasons Boone, a poet and activist, believes he became a LGBTQ activist much sooner in his life was because of his two gay uncles. He shared, “I have two gay uncles. Two of my dad’s brothers are gay.” Not only did Boone have two uncles to inspire his activism but he also was deeply affected by three events related to his LGBTQ friends. He describes the first event:

I started getting really close to some of the poets who were gay and started having conversations and dialoguing with them. One of the dopiest poets I ever met was performing with one of my close friends (who is one of the top poets in the nation). The two of them were going to give a celebrity an award [at an award
show]. And they were going to perform a poem and I heard that when the people found out that my friend was gay, they almost didn’t let him perform because it was a Fox News sponsored event. And I flipped, like I flipped out! I lost it! Like I wrote letters and yelled!

The second event was when a “friend of a friend’s brother was killed in New York with his boyfriend outside of a gay club, like execution style.” Then finally, the third event manifested itself in a way that helped Boone realize how upset he was about these two events. He explained:

Like a week after that, I was at a party, I think and something happened, and my friend who was openly gay was there and stepped in and some guy that was at the party was calling him a faggot and all this stuff, and I just turned around and punched the dude in the face. Like they had to rip me off of him I was so mad. I think it was like, honestly, a reflection and expression of all these events and I was just like wow, this stuff is really important to me. And I didn’t know it was until that moment. And so it was like a really tumultuous month where this happened. And it really hit me to the core, unlike anything that I have ever felt before.

When he was describing these three events, I could see the emotion in his eyes and facial expression to the words he was saying. These events truly impacted him at the deepest level. He used the description of these three events to then share about his poem, “Dear Straight Men” that he wrote during that time [which I will refer to under the section: “men who are heterosexual allies”].

Another participant, John, talked about his days as a residence hall director at a college where he met his good friend Joe, who identified as gay. He said this about connecting his friendship with activism:

My connection and passion around being an ally comes from personal experience with good friends, you know, who are gay. And that was when I was pretty young, in my early 20s, I was a hall director and I met him [Joe] who identified as gay and it just opened my eyes. You know? And mostly it was a very positive experience and he is still one of my closest friends. And as our friendship deepened and grew, I got to know him more and recognized that he is a fantastic person and I was never able to be as neutral as I was before…I like to think I was neutral, I didn’t have an interest in supporting people who identified as LGBT. All of a sudden I did because of my friend Joe. I wanted the best for my friend Joe because he was my friend.

---

1 Unpublished poem provided to me for this interview.
Even though John speaks simply about the changes he went through, as he became close friends with Joe, he describes how most of the men I interviewed felt about their LGBTQ friends. They have a great friend who also happens to identify as LGBTQ so why would they not want to be active to create a safe space or ensure equal rights? He later went on to explain this same point and how an ex-girlfriend’s father came out. He said:

But at the same time it was just really clear to everyone that he was such a good man. And [it] really obviously hit me…this real sense of we have to change things so that somebody that’s good of a man doesn’t have to live a lie. And even though it was a good life that he led, it could have been better, if he could have been honest about it. And not be someone he isn’t.

Richard talked about one of his first moments of activism when he realized what a difference he could make for his LGBTQ colleagues. He explained that he was leading a counseling exercise where he was to be evaluated by colleagues and professors behind a mirror when people in the group started saying, “that’s gay,” which began a larger, negative discussion around LGBTQ individuals. Richard then stopped the conversation and asked the individuals to put themselves in LGBTQ individuals’ shoes. He then said:

Some of my student colleagues [were] behind the mirror…one was gay and one was lesbian. And I will always remember them saying, ‘Thank you for doing that.’ And me being you know, there is my first moment where I felt like I did something and maybe made a difference.

In the three interviews with male GSA advisors, two of the participants described their involvement not in terms of their personal interest but in terms of their students who came to them and asked them to be an advisor. Valenti and Campbell (2009) found in their study of Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) advisors that motivation to participate stemmed from having a protective attitude towards LGBT youth. They write: “These advisors could empathize with the struggles of LGBT youth and were motivated by wanting to protect and help them at school” (Valenti and Campbell 2009:234). This was the case with two of the GSA advisors who participated. Michael got involved as a GSA advisor because one of the two advisors had left for paternity leave. He told his story of how it happened:

A guy that I carpooled with was the GSA advisor. He asked me if I wanted to help out, just because I have a lot of gay friends, [the guy that he carpooled with] being one of them and a lot of others.

He then said, after I asked him if he believed being a GSA advisor was his form of activism:
I am just…they need a sponsor and I think it’s a worthy cause. I don’t see it as my little brand of militancy. I mean I think it’s, they need a sponsor. I am here and I am willing.

Another GSA advisor felt the same way about his involvement as an advisor to the club. He said:

One of my students approached me and said that she wanted to start this club on campus and she had a couple of juniors with her that were motivated. All girls. And they wanted to get this off the ground so I said, ‘Sure!’ Sounded like a great thing, they explained to me what a GSA was and what the premise was and it sounded like a great idea, sure!

As described, these two GSA advisors became involved in LGBTQ activism because of their students. The other GSA advisor’s motivations were much different than these two because of his knowledge of civil rights, which I will explain in the next section.

In sum, the motivations for the heterosexual men who participate in LGBTQ activism highlighted the impact having a personal connection, whether a friend or family member, had on getting involved in activism. PFLAG parents chose to get involved because of their gay sons, others because of their deep friendship with a member of the gay community, and some became involved because of their students asking them to.

**Comparison to Civil Liberties Movements**

Participants also described their involvement in LGBTQ activism in terms of being a part of a greater civil liberties movement that was occurring in the United States. Participants were either raised with knowledge of the civil rights movement in the 1960’s or they themselves witnessed it, which led to wanting to be on the correct side of history this time. A few participants who witnessed (or studied) the African American civil rights movement in the 1960’s and the women’s liberation in the 1970’s reflected back on those times in their interviews. Others have been involved in white privilege or anti-racism efforts in their lives and connect that to LGBTQ activism.

Furthermore, in the review of literature, I looked at research about groups of people who participate in civil liberties movements and their motivations do to such. There are many accounts that are centered around individuals who step outside of society’s norms to become an activist, from white individuals fighting against racism to men who are active in feminist groups (Bridges 2010; Chappel 1994; Kimmel 1998; Kivel 2005; Nenga 2011; Thompson, Schaefer and Brod 2003; Warren 2010; Wise 2008). These studies are important to
understand because they explain how people can and will resist society’s norms, much like these heterosexual men who participate in LGBTQ activism programs.

One important area in the literature on activism focuses on white individuals who participate in anti-racism and racial equality groups. Tim Wise (2008), a renowned white privilege author and who identifies white, explains that he often gets asked the question of “what happened to you?” when he explains his work against white privilege. He writes that when most people ask him this it is less about the person wanting to learn how to avoid becoming like him and more out of sheer confusion. He said, “They appear truly perplexed about how I turned out the way I did, especially when it comes to my views on the matter of race” (Wise 2008:vii). He then talks about how as a white man who enjoys the privileges that have been needlessly given to him, that he is “not expected to think the way I do” (Wise 2008:viii). In addition, McIntosh (1992) discovered white privilege, male privilege, and how they are connected in a women’s studies classroom. She writes, “whites are carefully taught not to recognize their white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege” (McIntosh 1992:188). Warren (2010) explains the process of how white individuals become racial activists. One of the main motivations for these individuals becoming activists was having a catalyst that was so life changing; it compelled them to take action. Another large motivation factor of these individuals was having friends and acquaintances of color that were directly affected by racism and discrimination. He also explains the actual process of how these reasons for participating turn into action with a diagram: head to heart to hand. Head explains how white individuals have an interest and some knowledge about racism. Then, heart implies connects the connection between this interest to their values and emotions, which then leads into hand where the head and the heart combine to act on these thoughts and emotions.

Some participants were able to draw upon personal experiences with learning about white privilege and racism in their communities, which they then applied these experiences to their work as an LGBTQ activist. Richard talked about how he first was involved in talks about racism and white privilege and said:

To value difference and to see and hear about these experiences that people are having, uhm, you know of being treated unfairly or hurt, discriminated against. Something about that kind of offends me. So I wanted to get involved in that. I also got involved as a graduate student in doing a multicultural practicum where I
got a lot more exposure to issues of race, ethnicity, nationality that really helped to bring home, you know some of the white privilege kind of stuff.

He later went on to talk about transferring to a doctoral program where there was racial diversity that he was unfamiliar with:

That was an incredibly diverse program! And it really woke me up mostly because I was incredibly uncomfortable when I first entered. My cohort was a cohort of 15 or 16 people and maybe 5 of those people were white. And it didn’t even register to me why I was…I just had this sense of unease all the time in my classes with my cohort. Just without really realizing what it really was my first awareness of just how much I relied on privilege just to get through my life comfortably.

Richard’s activism in LGBTQ programs was a natural progression from white privilege to heterosexual privilege. Boone also talks about how natural it was for him, once he understood and saw racism in high school, to connect that to LGBTQ activism he does now. He told me a story about attending high school in Oklahoma where racism ran rampant in the classroom hallways. He talked about a fellow student on the basketball team who told Boone to “act his own color” on the court. He used his standing as one of the best basketball players in the state to persuade the administration to crack down on this kind of racist talk. He then said this about comparing racism to his form of LGBTQ activism:

So I was already equipped with dealing with these adverse situations where I was the minority in feeling that way and racism in Oklahoma is everywhere. So I think I have already been in that position so it was very easy to bridge the gap between like how I acted towards dealing with my friends who were Black and dealing with my friends who were gay. And the consequences that come with that.

Nenga (2011) researched affluent youth and how they volunteer to give up their class privilege. She explained that one/fourth of participants interviewed talked about how their volunteer work helped them understand and acknowledge class privilege because it made them think about the issue and gain friendships with individuals from other classes. Both of these incidents inspired these youth to become active in social justice and with time, these youth became comfortable with talking about class in their group (Nenga 2011).

Research pertaining to men who are involved in feminist activism shows how men are mocked and that homophobia is still a part of these equality efforts (Bridges 2010; Kimmel 1998, 2008b). Bridges explains that during a “Walk a Mile in Her Shoes” drag event (where men dressed in drag to support women’s equality) the idea of “specter of the faggot” was still evident and “operated as a disciplinary mechanism ensuring that heterosexual
masculinities were kept intact” (2010:19). Men who participated “pretended” to be gay by jokingly sexually harassing each other and performing stereotyped “camp” behavior for the audience, like pursing their lips or speaking with a lisp (Bridges 2010:19). All of these acts were under the pretense that this walk was more fun than serious, reinforcing gender and sexuality inequality they were supposed to be fighting against. Kimmel (1998) explained that men who spoke out in support for women’s suffrage were mocked and stigmatized, like Frederick Douglass who was called “Aunt Nancy Man” in the press during the First Women’s Rights Convention where he spoke in support of women’s suffrage. In addition, there were many men who were publically sexually harassed by the crowd when they participated in marches for women’s rights. In another essay, Kimmel (2008b) explores his own process of becoming a feminist was very difficult process that he is still working on. He shares that in order to do this work, one has to withdraw from the “comfortable security of social behavior that has been well defined over the years and carefully eliminated by easily discernible sets of rules” (Kimmel 2008b:180). In the case of this study, men may feel the same repercussions to their work as these writers have shown.

In accordance with this, Sawyer, a participant, retold stories of the prevalence of gender inequality in the 1950s. Sawyer is still actively involved with women’s rights movements as LGBTQ rights movements. He said this about seeing gender inequality as a young boy:

> When I was in high school you [women] were maybe not told, but you sure as hell were influenced on who you would date, who you would marry, and what field you would go into. When I was in high school, really the only fields available for a woman were elementary education and oh, god, lucky you, you could be a secretary. You couldn’t even get into higher education.

He then explained how livid he was after reading a recent newspaper article about the attack on women’s rights. He said:

> I have been a mega mouth as an activist for a number of years and I have a particular interest in equal rights. And the ridiculous discrimination against the gay community and, oh forgive me, against women too! I mean, just today reading the news…if they get their way, you don’t get the right to vote on whether you have children, whether you get to keep them, or whether you can use birth control, ok? That is just fucking wrong! And that really carries over into the gay and lesbian community. Because you, they, are treated not just second-class citizens for Christ sake but as a non-human.
It is important to note that Sawyer is referring to the current debate over birth control and reproductive rights for women in America, which has recently been covered on all media outlets. From the women’s birth control debate panel, made up of only men, to the Virginia state bill that would require all women seeking abortions to have a transvaginal ultrasound these debates have real consequences for the status of women’s rights (Basset 2012; Hart and Mirkinson 2012).

In addition, Desmond drew on his knowledge of civil rights to compare LGBTQ rights to women and race rights. After mentioning it was important to have a heterosexual male voice within the LGBTQ fight for rights, Desmond said this in response to my question of whether or not having heterosexual men involved in LGBTQ activism was a good thing:

It’s very important. It’s a critical piece. If you look at civil rights…the history of it…it’s no different than whites who stood up for Mexican Americans or for African Americans or the message that William Lloyd Garrison [sent when he] sat with the women at a segregated abolitionism [event] in London, as a protest. That voice is always an important piece to harness in the movement. I see my place in a very worldwide and global movement to bring about change and equal rights. There is a little place there.

Desmond later further described what he was feeling in regards to civil rights and being a GSA advisor. He told me:

I taught history for 20 years before I saw this opportunity. This kind of a wave that was coming and I could see it coming. And I said, ‘I want to be a part of that.’ And I could see clearly, uh, I happened to be uniquely situated to help the students at this high school. I saw that wave coming and I understood the role that I could play because of my knowledge of politics, of history. So I knew that they would see that and that I was the right person for that job. So I made myself available, it’s really what I did. Kind of like (I would not equate myself with George Washington) but during the revolutionary war, he showed up in his military garb, saying put me in charge! So I made myself available and I have never regretted it.

Desmond has quite an expansive knowledge of history and civil rights, which propelled him to join this “new wave.” Michael, another GSA advisor, said this about how basic human rights make his work as a GSA advisor important: “It is recognizing the rights of humans. Not just you need to fit my mold. There is no mold. And that is fair.”

In conclusion, these men who participate in LGBTQ activism have compared and used their knowledge of civil rights to drive their activism into LGBTQ programs. Some participants understood the fight for civil rights because they were alive to see a time when
there were separate bathrooms for African Americans and Blacks or saw how women suffered from not being able to have a career other than as a housewife. Other participants shared their previous involvement with anti-racism and white privilege efforts, which they used to bridge the gap between race and sexuality. Most of participants used descriptions of civil rights to compare to their activism in LGBTQ activism.

**Men Who Are Heterosexual Allies**

This section explores what it is like being a man who is an ally and illustrates the daily lives of the participants, the “nitty gritty” of being an ally. There are three sub-themes that comprise this section: the socialization of men, the impact of privilege, and the reactions these men receive because of their involvement. Given the growing body of research into the culture of masculinity, participants illustrated how they challenge the current stereotypes by being heterosexual men who participate in these programs.

**Socialization of Men**

Research on gender, particularly masculinity, illustrates several points on how men are subjected to hegemonic masculinity, a part of which excludes being associated with LGBTQ individuals. Research not only explores the prolific use of homophobic slurs like “you’re a fag,” but also shows how there is constant policing for men to fit a stereotypical mold of masculinity. In addition, research looking at men who have chosen careers in fields that are traditionally occupied by women shows the scrutiny these men receive and the inherent contradictions in their lives. Understanding the intricacies of the boundaries of masculinity will illustrate the negative connotations associated with being involved in the LGBTQ population and will further fuel reasons why these men who participate in this field are abnormal.

In their classic work, David and Brannon (1976) laid out the four requirements of masculinity men within the United States are held to. The first standard of masculinity, “be a big wheel,” describes how men must hold positions of power and be successful to be described as manly. Masculinity’s second requirement, “no sissy stuff,” entails that anything remotely feminine is prohibited. The third standard requires men to “be a sturdy oak.” This describes how men must be rational, tough, and show no weakness. Finally, the fourth standard of masculinity is to “give ‘em hell.” This requirement states that men must be daring
and risk takers without regard for the consequences and are prepared to use violence (David and Brannon 1976). These four requirements of masculinity can be used to show why a heterosexual man participating in LGBTQ activism programs would be considered abnormal.

Research describes that anti-LGBTQ slurs, like “that’s so gay” or “you’re a fag” not only illustrate distrust and hate for those who are LGBTQ but also are indicators of gender policing of men (Connell 2008; Grossman et al. 2009; Kimmel 2007; Pascoe 2007a, 2007b; Seidman 2008, 2010). Gender policing is defined as a form of regulation that all genders and sexual orientations use to keep their members “in line” in that identity. For instance, a heterosexual man might yell “fag” at a male friend who is acting feminine as a way to tell the friend he is overstepping the boundaries of masculinity. It is hard to escape hearing these slurs on school campuses and from groups of men across the United States.

Davis and Wagner (2005) cite adherence to hegemonic masculinity as a barrier to men’s development as allies. They argue that men are restricted emotionally, socialized to have power, forbidden from having sexual attitudes or emotional ties towards other men, and have their worth measured through their visible success. In ally work, the ally has to be vulnerable, understanding, and a listener—all of which are considered characteristics of femininity. Davis and Wagner are not the only researchers to explain how men are not socialized to gain these “female” characteristics (Chodorow 1978; Connell 1995; David and Brannon 1976; Frye 1983; Gilmore 1990; Jordan and Cowan 2007; Kimmel 1996; Kivel 2007; Thorne 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). From an early age, boys are taught that being hyper-masculine is what being a man is about. For example, boys are taught “warrior narratives” that legitimize the use of violence for good and that fighting the person that called them fag is not only acceptable but is also needed to protect their masculinity (Jordan and Cowan 2007; Kimmel 2008a; Kivel 2007). In addition, boys are also taught the infamous “guy code,” including rules like “boys don’t cry,” “don’t get mad—get even,” and “take it like a man” (Kimmel 2008a:45). These examples of how boys are socialized to be the extreme opposite of the stereotypical female traits may explain why more men do not participate in LGBTQ programs.

During my interview with Hurley, a group of women, who recently attended a gym together, came over to the coffee shop where the interview was held. Hurley noticed the group and used it to describe different acceptable behaviors for men and women. He said:
Like over there with the Curves [gym] group; if I go work out, I am not going to go have guys come to Starbucks with me and talk, you know? And that’s the thing too. Women will take other women and go to the bathroom. I can’t ask my best friend to do the same! What the hell?

Hurley expressed frustration over the fact that there are socially acceptable ways men and women act. If men go against these norms, there are negative sanctions. Richard pointed out the same idea of what happens when men express feminine traits. He explained:

How harshly gay men can be treated if they are acting in ways that are feminine! I think that in particular makes straight men really uncomfortable. And part of that sense of what it means to be homophobic is how we define masculinity as not feminine. That’s what it means to be a man. The first criteria is that you are not female. And female is less than, male is more than, so consequently it doesn’t make sense to a lot of straight men why a man would want to act like a woman. But it scares the crap out of most men. [laughs]

Boone also shared this same idea of how being a man means not expressing “feminine” traits, even though they feel them. He told me:

I think women are like, with all the misconceptions out there with insecurity, men are far more insecure than women are! We just don’t show it! The more insecure we are, the more we puff our chests out, the more we shy away from things. I feel like women have a lot more ability to connect with their emotions. So I think they are able to deal with those things better than we are. So while a woman may be opposed [to LGBTQ people] but you find less women out there throwing f-bombs than guys. And you have a lot more men out there that do that. So I think it is harder to be an activist for me. Most men are terrified of being called gay.

As Boone expressed, he believes he has a more difficult time being an ally because of the impact of socialization. In his poem, “Dear Straight Men”, Boone says this about how socialization prohibits men form expressing their emotions:

Dear straight men / You don’t always have to run from hugs / They aren’t dream catchers of your masculinity / That slowly drain your manhood as you sleep / I promise / Your brothers arms are not sleeves to a straight jacket / That suffocate your unwillingness to be sensitive / You won’t wake up the next morning / Drowsy with a fragmented memory of emasculation and shame / And if you shed a tear / You won’t drown.

Charlie, who runs various programs with men on campus, mentions that at his university, they do specific programming for men because of the negative impact of socialization. He told me about this:

We do some programming here for men and there is a lot of research that men are underserved and then underperforming and then it’s sort of this vicious cycle that men don’t take advantage of the opportunities before them and then it gets worse
because they only stay in a room and play video games. So what is that about? You know, what is male socialization all about and why does it lead men to not serve this way? So I think it is important that we have more and more men step forward and say, ‘this is who I am and this is not the only way to be a man.’ We have been damaged by that enough (with the way to be a man), which is the very stereotypical, strong physically and all those things. So I think it is important there is more than one way to be a man and I think that is important for straight men.

I then asked Charlie to describe the differences he saw between heterosexual women and heterosexual men allies. He said, “I think it is somehow more acceptable for women to care about other people, even if it doesn’t directly benefit them.” As Charlie mentions, there is a common perception that it is more acceptable for women to participate in “emotional work” than it is for men (DeVault 1991; Erickson 1993, 2005; Thompson and Walker 1989).

Hochschild defines emotion work as “the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling” (1979:561). As the definition implies, emotion work requires the individual to be aware of their feelings and others’, which would be considered an aspect of ally work. The men in this study are actively participating in emotion work, which may describe why these men face such speculation from others about their sexuality and activism.

In closing, participants clearly feel the impact of gender socialization in their activism with LGBTQ groups. Some participants believed that being a woman ally was less problematic to society than a man who participates in LGBTQ activism because of the impact of socialization. Others expressed frustration over the idea that norms of masculinity restrict their range of emotions.

**Impact of Privilege**

The impact that privilege has on men who are LGBTQ allies has been prevalent in all interviews for this study. Most of the men I interviewed were very aware of the privilege they have and some even try to use it towards the advancement of the LGBTQ cause. Research has shown one of the main processes men have to go through in order to be an activist is the process of recognizing the privilege they hold (Davis and Wagner 2005; DiStefano et al. 2000; Duhigg 2010; hooks 2007; Ji 2007; McIntosh 1992; Messner 2011; Schacht 2001; Valenti and Campbell 2009). In this section, I explore participants’ thoughts about male privilege in addition to their thoughts about heterosexual privilege, specifically looking at how these ideas connect to their activism work.
For example, Davis and Wagner talk about barriers to men’s ally development in regards to male privilege, hegemonic masculinity, and “men’s contradictory experience of power” (2005:31-33; Kaufman 1999:59). In regards to male privilege, they explain how privilege can be a stumbling block for men who consider social justice action. Firstly, they explain that ally development “requires an understanding of how privilege works” (Davis and Wagner 2005:31). Secondly, individuals who are privileged do not often experience a “critical incident” that compels the individual to truly look at the reasons behind that incident. In addition, those who do experience an incident that makes them take a second look at their privilege often use their privilege as a scapegoat to steer clear of the consequences (Davis and Wagner 2005:32). Finally, Davis and Wagner cite that there is a “lack of environmental incentives” for men to actually change (2005:32). As mentioned earlier, the culture surrounding hegemonic masculinity constantly reminds men to live up to certain standards, which may hinder men’s process of ally development.

An understanding of the privilege and power men hold is an important piece of the LGBTQ activism puzzle. Peggy McIntosh noticed male privilege in her women’s studies curriculum stating, “I understood that much of [men’s] oppressiveness was unconscious,” which highlights one of her most important points that men have the privilege to ignore their privilege even if they are aware of it (1992:188). Messner also describes the process he went through being a teacher who holds privilege. He writes, “My sense of entitlement to unearned privilege allows me to look the other way—away in 1973 from my women colleagues who were not getting the same opportunities to earn money as I was” (Messner 2011:6). Schacht said this in regards to ignoring privilege:

We live in a society where ignorance truly is bliss, especially for those with unearned male privilege and status, which in turn often provides men with an excuse to deny the existence of the very real and harmful sexist hierarchical realities that surround us and the active role men must play in their maintenance. (2001:207)

McIntosh (1992), Messner (2011), and Schacht (2001) highlight one of the most important points of male privilege: the privilege to ignore it.

bell hooks (2007) also explains in her essay on men as “comrades in the struggle” that men are also hurt by their power and privilege, even though they possess the master status of being a man. She notes that men who do go against the norm and join in the struggle feel isolated being the only male around. She writes, “Men who have dared to be honest about
sexism and sexist oppression, who have chosen to assume responsibility for opposing and resisting it, often find themselves isolated” (hooks 2007:633). Messner also adds to this conversation by talking about how men who do support feminism suffer from “the pedestal effect” (2011:7). He explains that women put men on this pedestal because they are the only men actually acknowledging their privilege, which, in return, gives more male privilege. In conclusion, as Messner (2011), hooks (2007), and McIntosh (1992) have explained, male privilege is one of the keys to understanding how men recognize and explain their privilege which may impact their choice to participate in LGBTQ activism.

I asked Richard, a safe zones trainer who is very informed about male privilege, about his thoughts on the connection between male privilege and LGBTQ activism. He said this:

*It has a lot to do with it! I think what really is happening is we don’t realize our dependence on gender and the clarity of the gender picture in the way that we relate. We relate dramatically differently when we know we are taking to someone whose male verses when we are talking to someone who is female and we rely on that information to some degree to make us feel comfortable.*

As Richard explained, society and individuals relate to men incredibly differently than to women. Richard explained that in our society, men are treated as more than women, which affords privileges to men.

As mentioned earlier, two of the three GSA advisors I interviewed became involved in GSA because students asked them to. These two advisors had an interesting perspective on male privilege and working in the LGBTQ activism field. Michael said this when I asked him if men had an advantage being GSA advisors:

*I don’t know why there would be. Maybe. I mean certainly different experiences growing up, facing different barriers due to their [women’s] gender that have not been assigned to me. So I cannot answer that.*

Michael briefly notices that women face certain barriers throughout their lives because of their gender, which men do not face. John had a similar reaction to this question and said, “I don’t know. I wouldn’t know how to answer that. I don’t know if [women] have an easier time.”

When I asked participants about male privilege, many of them mentioned their height, weight, and physical stature as a man. Stereotypically looking “like a man” affords these men privilege to speak before people will question their ideas. Research has been conducted surrounding this phenomenon of tallness, power, and privilege (Butera 2008; Gladwell 2005;
Hall 2006; Martel and Biller 1987). Hall argues that tallness signifies positive traits, such as “success, wealth, leadership, and sexual desirability” (2006:15). In addition Martel and Biller (1987) also argue that individuals are told that tall equates to goodness where shortness equates to less desirable or abnormal. Malcom Gladwell (2005) described this idea of height and power in his bestselling book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. In the book, Gladwell surveyed half of employees of Fortune 500 companies about their CEO’s height. He found that most of the CEO’s were tall men with their average height being just less than six feet. Finally Butera says this about masculinity and tallness:

As masculinity equals power and value in American culture, height is then inexorably and intimately linked with power. In this way, patriarchy feeds heightism and tall privilege, which then cyclically reinforce patriarchy. (2008:14)

The sheer presence and societal connotations of tallness is enough to silence naysayers when these men walk into a room, at least until after they speak. Boone said this when I asked him if his size gave him more privilege:

Interesting. Wow. Yeah, probably I have been privileged. I think when I stand to give a talk at 6’8” and people have seen me play on TV, they listen first. So I think where a lot of times people speak first as opposed to listening, you know? If you don’t command a room very well, your content speaks first and then they hear the words gay and it’s ok and they freak out. Whereas I think that my presence sometimes precedes that. So it’s like a, I don’t know, a buffer. It fits better in people’s heads.

As Boone said, his physical stature affords him privileges. John also talked about how being stereotypically masculine gave him privilege. John said:

I think being the basketball coach, being the heterosexual male…it would have been much more difficult if I were gay. I would have thought twice about, it not knowing the climate. Yes, from my position, there are definitely advantages to being a heterosexual male with a family and three kids. That does make a difference.

He then said, “I am at 6’3” and at 225…people don’t challenge me. What are they going to say?” As John said, because he is large in stature, which is a masculine ideal, he does not experience as many negative reactions. If he did not look this way, he would have thought twice about participating as a GSA advisor.

Hurley also talked about how his stature and status as an ex-sheriff protected his son from being bullying in high school. He explained: “They know I am an ex-sheriff. The wrath
of god will come down on them and I mean, I’m a big guy! That’s another thing that’s in our favor.”

In regards to heterosexual privilege, many men recognized that their status as a heterosexual man, particularly a heterosexual married man, protected them from attacks on their character. Valenti and Campbell found a similar finding, stating that being married “affords an advisor protection against harassment that a gay or lesbian may not enjoy” (2009:241). In my study as well as Valenti and Campbell’s, marriage is a status symbol that allows others to trust and believe the advisor or volunteer is morally “right.” When I asked him whether his sexuality has protected him from negative comments, Richard confessed:

Probably. The fact that I am married. I have only been married for a little over a year. [In] my early involvement I wasn’t a married man so I didn’t have the wedding ring that very clearly sent that signal. But I suspect that probably my sexuality did contribute to me, you know, it’s not like that privilege just gets checked because you’re an ally and it’s still there.

I then asked him why he thought being married gave him privilege, he said:

The assumption of heteronormativity! [Laughs.] It’s like oh there you are, you are ‘normal!’ You know so you may be involved in it but you are not that person. Not that scary person.

Richard points out that being heterosexual and in a committed relationship with another heterosexual means you are not that frightening “unknown” sexuality which is a key argument for Seidman (2008, 2010). Seidman explains that the “regimes of heteronormativity” are used to shame the LGBTQ population and also control heterosexuals by establishing a hierarchy of what is considered good and bad sexually (2008:397). In addition, in an article about how white privilege shapes the United States, Jensen cites that because of unearned white privilege, he doesn’t “look threatening” because he is “not dangerous” (2003:80).

Michael and Charlie both are in committed relationships with their partners. Michael has had a girlfriend (whom he calls his partner) for sixteen years and Charlie said, “Well, I am married, so obviously that’s a privilege.” He then told me about privilege and how people react to him because of it. He shared:

So yeah, I am aware of all the privileges stacked up on privileges and the weight of that stacks up on me sometimes. Most people I think see me as reliable, legitimate, someone who knows what they are talking about because of those privileges. Sometimes I have no idea what I am talking about. When I tell people I am involved in activism, people tend to give me the benefit of the doubt when I
walk into the store, people treat me like a customer, not as a threat. I am almost never treated as a threat or suspect or anything like that.

In conclusion, these men who participate in LGBTQ activism programs experience and are fully aware of the benefits of being a heterosexual man. Participants shared how they feel about their privilege, how being married or in a relationship affords them protection, and how more stereotypically masculine looking men are protected from negative remarks about their activism. The men interviewed believed that these could all be perceived as positives when it came to furthering the LGBTQ cause. By using their own recognition of how privilege works, these men used how society perceives them to protect themselves from harsh comments and critiques of their activism.

**Reactions to Involvement**

I began this study with the intent of looking at motivating factors as to why heterosexual men participate in LGBTQ activism programs. However, the interpretation of other peoples’ reactions to participants’ involvement in activism is an interesting finding because of the intersection of social structures, sexuality, and gender. When participants reflected on the reactions they received, they revealed several pieces of information about how they believe other people feel about their involvement. All participants had a myriad of reactions when talking about their involvement in LGBTQ activism with others; some had negative responses and others had positive responses.

When looking at literature surrounding this sub-theme, I directed my attention to studies related to gendered occupations. I looked at literature about men who work in traditionally women dominated fields, like early childhood education and cheerleading, to see if there are similarities to men who volunteer in a social cause. Research has shown that men who do pass complex barriers to enter a “feminized terrain,” are often publically scrutinized for not living up to a masculine ideal and have to explain reasons why they chose that field (Adams 1993; Anderson 2005; Martin and Collinson 1999; Plummer 2001; Sargent 2001; Williams 1992, 1995). Men who participate in these “feminine” fields are often subject to public scrutiny about their sexuality or are required to do important “masculine tasks,” like lifting heavy boxes and being in charge of disciplining (Leidner 1991; Martin and Collinson 1999; Sargent 2001). In addition Sargent found in his study of men who are early education teachers that “men represent danger whereas women represent love and protection”
Anderson found that male cheerleaders who acted in non-traditional masculine ways were not stigmatized for acting more feminine and “chose not to value whether people perceived them as gay or straight” (2005:351). The men in this study were also less defensive about being asked whether or not they were heterosexual and openly supported homosexuality, which liberated them from the domination of hegemonic masculinity. These ideas regarding men who work in feminine fields are relevant to this study on men who are LGBTQ activists because they may experience the liberation or the stigmatization described above.

In addition, research has shown the importance of “stigma by association” (Goldstein and Davis 2010:480), which describes the stigma allies receive when they have personal contact with LGBTQ individuals or groups. Specifically, Neuberg et al. (1994) found that heterosexual males were looked down upon when they talked with a gay male friend. Goffman defines this phenomenon as how individuals are “obliged to share some of the discredit of the stigmatized person to whom they are related” (1963:30). In addition, Dillon et al. (2004) found that among heterosexual counselor trainees there was a self-awareness of their association with the LGBTQ community and these counselors tried to emphasize their heterosexuality.

When I asked Sawyer what the reactions were to his involvement, his first response was to laugh. He then explained:

Interesting would be a nice way to put it! They ask, ‘Well what are you doing for involvement now?’ And I say, ‘Well, I am still very active in PFLAG.’ They give me the funniest look and ask what’s a PFLAG and then I explain it. And they go, ‘Ohhhhhh…oh, well, that’s nice. Got to go now!’ Uhm, it’s…it’s hard to listen to…

Sawyer, as mentioned earlier, has very strong feelings about civil liberties because he had lived through the African American and women’s civil rights movement. When he was describing how he felt about the reactions he received, I could hear the emotion in his voice. It seemed very clear to me that not only was he upset that people had that reaction on a personal level but also he was distressed because of the larger implications of discriminating against groups of people. He later went on to share about his family’s ultra conservative opinions and attitudes towards his social ideas. He explained:

But they knew that I was active. They just didn’t talk about it too much because we were a staunch Republican household. I was the black sheep. My views were
not welcome in family discussions. But this is the, I am sorry, but this is the kind of manipulation that we [his wife] both experience. It’s hard.

Boone told a story about one specific reaction he had when he was helping out his friend who was DJ’ing at a large sorority party. He had just performed his poem, “Dear Straight Men”, at a university event, and a group of young, tipsy women came up to ask him whether or not he was gay. He explains:

All I said was, ‘Ok.’ And they really wanted to know which one it was and I was like does it matter? And she said that it did. And I said, ‘Did you hear the poem? I mean the point of the poem was that it doesn’t matter! So you obviously did not hear the poem. I failed as a poet because you are asking me this!’ I couldn’t get it into their heads and they walked away really frustrated. Later, one of them tried to dance with me and I didn’t want to, so I am sure she went back to the group and said, ‘He’s gay!’ I think for the most part it is interesting. But yeah, I would say that there are definitely a number of people who come up to me and ask if I am gay or is there something you need to tell us? Like an intervention of some sorts.

He then described what he believed to be some of the reasoning behind the reactions he receives. He said:

Of course there have been bad ones like people saying I am a gay lover and such. You know it...[pauses]. I think most people have good reactions to me. I think it would be different if I wasn’t a poet. If I was just a straight ally...you know people would take me a little bit differently but most of the time when people find out that I am a straight ally, it’s through poetry. It has a tendency to bridge gaps between people and it’s inspiring, it’s a medium that people are touched by. So I think that is a different piece to it. I do have interesting conversations with people asking me if I am gay. Uh, and I never answer the question.

After he said this, I asked him why he never answers the question of whether or not he is gay. He said: “I never answer the question because it doesn’t matter! And if I do answer it, then aren’t I kind of giving into the fact of whether it matters or not?” By not answering this question about his sexuality, Boone is trying to explain that his heterosexuality has absolutely no bearing on who he is as a person and vice versa for LGBTQ individuals. His heterosexuality does not define him, so why would it define a LGBTQ individual?

In addition to Boone not responding to questions about whether he is LGBTQ, Desmond expressed the same reaction to these questions and learned how to “play gay.” He explains that his friend, Dave, gave him some excellent advice when he first began his work as a GSA advisor. He elaborated:

But as far as being perceived as gay, he said ‘You know, you may find it useful to be gay and to be straight. Just pick and choose what you want to do with it.’ For
me, I can choose to be gay (or not gay) simply by what I choose to share with people. So when I first began this work, I chose to be gay. When I say that, I simply mean that I never spoke about my sexual orientation. I found it advantageous to let people assume I was gay. More important to me at the time, was I didn’t want my students ever to feel that there was anything wrong with being gay. And if I would have said what my sexual orientation was every time I spoke, that would be the message. I wanted to do this to make sure that my students knew it was ok. And if what I was about was making sure everyone knew that I wasn’t gay, it was not a message I wanted to send. So I didn’t say anything. But as the club had a history, that was no longer an issue, the school had been used to dealing with the issue. Now my voice is usually a stronger voice as a straight voice. For example, when I speak at the request of groups, they want their audience to know. I don’t out myself, they will do it. Because it is an important voice.

Michael, while claiming that being a GSA advisor is not his form of activism, was in agreement with what Boone and Desmond mentioned above. He said, very briefly, when I asked him if people question his sexual identity:

The kids do. I call my girlfriend of 16 years my partner so they can guess. And wonder if I am. And question. And I think it’s important for them to question.

It is interesting to note that Michael and other participants are referring to “passing” as gay. “Passing” is a common theme within transgender and sexuality literature and refers to a person’s ability to form an identity around their claimed sex category (West and Zimmerman 1987; Zimmerman 1992). In the case of this research, participants are choosing to pass as gay in order to make a political and social point about sexuality. The same way LGBTQ might want to be seen as heterosexual from the public eye, the participants in this study want to be seen as gay or straight, both of which would challenge the norm.

Michael then said that he has had “nothing but support and it’s been great” when describing people’s reactions to his involvement as a GSA advisor. Richard also said that he has no one “react in a way that was not favorable.” He then explained that his sexuality has been questioned before. He clarified:

There have been a couple of times that I became aware of later that someone thought I was gay. But no open instances where someone right in front of me questioned my sexuality or no slurs. I have never had to face that to my knowledge. I guess, not in a way that made me feel uncomfortable or where I was on a receiving end of a hateful comment or anything like that.

Charlie had a similar reaction when telling people about his involvement. He said, “Generally speaking it has been positive. I live in California and I work in higher education,
so the people I tend to be around are like-minded.” He then shared a story about how he would get his toenails painted with his wife because, as a runner, he was constantly having beat up feet and toenails. He said about reactions he would get in regards to his gender bending:

Especially in southern California when I am out of work, I would wear flip flops and I would be in some interesting situations when I was not with my closest friends and people definitely gave me the look like what are you doing? And I used to enjoy challenging that. Yeah, like what’s the big deal? So I guess to answer your question more generally, my experience of being an ally has been more positive. I have certainly received more affirmation and validation than criticisms.

In addition, it’s important to note that Charlie also does trainings for men on campus and some research he has conducted. He explained:

I did a small research project with some of our men who have been involved in various parts of campus life. One of the things they shared is that whenever they are doing something for others they have to have an answer for their friends about why are they doing it. It is definitely not just curiosity…it’s a suspicion, like why would you do that? Why would you go on that trip to serve? Why would you get involved in these retreats? And so in the literature, the term that they are using is explanatory mechanism. So they need to be ready to say, ‘Oh it’s going to look good on my resume.’ Or, ‘This is good leadership development.’ Or, ‘Because so and so asked me to do it.’ So there are these mechanisms, which I provide them with because given the climate, they need them. But at the same time I think it is different for women. I think that women can more easily say that it is great that you are doing that; it will be a great experience. Or there is, I think, a greater assumption of being involved in various activities is a good thing, all by itself and it doesn’t need to be explained.

Jack participates in a lot of online chat boards about religion and LGBTQ rights, which is a passion for him. He prides himself on the theological arguments for LGBTQ rights that he has formed and presented to his religious community. He also talked about how when he is participating in online activism, individuals always think he is gay. He told me this story:

Well, when I am online and I participate in those conservative Christian websites people assume that I am gay. And it is very interesting because I had a woman write paragraphs pleading with me about having a ‘normal life’ and getting married to a woman and having children. She was really speaking from her heart. She was genuinely pleading with me. And I forget my exact reply, but it was basically, ‘I am a happily married straight guy; I have three kids and grandkids. I do appreciate your concern but you really have jumped to conclusions.’
In closing, individuals’ reactions to participants’ involvement in LGBTQ activism provided an interesting look into the lives of men who are allies. Some participants recounted reactions that were positive and affirming of their involvement; others told stories where people questioned their sexuality. Another interesting aspect of this theme was that some participants used the assumption of being gay to their advantage or thoughtfully chose not to tell people what their sexual orientation was because of theoretical backing.

**ADVICE TO OTHER ALLIES**

While my personal and research interests in heterosexual men who participate in LGBTQ activism programs initiated this study, I had an important realization during this process. I recognized that the work I have done is important not only to myself but also more significantly to all heterosexual men who participate in these programs and also to greater society. Blauner writes that “First person sociology gives unheard voices a chance to be heard” (1987:61) and in the case of this thesis, I hope that all of the men who participated in my study have a chance to be heard. Schacht (2001), hooks (2007), Kimmel (2008b), and Messner (2011) shared that men can often feel isolated when doing anti-privilege work so it was important to have a section in this study where men can get advice from other men who participate in these programs. Kimmel said this about his own journey to becoming a feminist: “The greatest impetus has been from other feminist men, who are similarly trying to deal with the ways in which we relate to women, to ourselves, and to each other” (2008b:181). He then went on to point out that he is not an exception in this work. This population is not rare by any means, but as I mentioned earlier there is a lack of literature surrounding heterosexual men who participate in these programs, therefore most of these men have not had a chance to have heard other individuals’ stories or to have their own told.

With that said, I asked all nine participants what advice they would give to other heterosexual men who are interested in LGBTQ ally work. Who else would better know what advice to give than the men who are actually participating? Their responses are divided into three categories: talk to LGBTQ individuals and allies, self-reflect on motivation reasons, and get involved with a LGBTQ group.
Talk to LGBTQ Individuals and Allies

Talking to and knowing LGBTQ individuals is an important piece of advice participants would give to other perspective heterosexual male allies. As mentioned earlier, one of the major findings of this study was that heterosexual men became involved in activism because of someone they knew who identified as LGBTQ. Research has also shown that knowing LGBTQ individuals heightens your sense of awareness of LGBTQ rights and in the case of this study, I found this to be correct (Broad et al. 2008; Cotton-Huston and Waite 2000; DiStefano et al. 2000; Ji 2007). In addition, being acquainted with LGBTQ individuals also heightens one’s awareness of mechanisms of social control that keep hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity in check. Therefore, it is not shocking to find that these men would advise others to get to know LGBTQ individuals. Boone said, “Talk to as many gay, transgender, and bi people that you can! And really try to understand as best as you can.” He went on to say:

I think the biggest thing is finding that common ground to understand it. It’s easy to be passionate about something if you understand it. And it’s much harder to cheer for rights if they don’t know what they are fighting for.

Other participants felt the same way. John said, “If you know somebody (as with every form of prejudice) the more aware you are of people and how we are more similar than different.” Crowfoot and Chesler cited a parallel conclusion, saying that in order to participate in racial activism, “we need to learn about the common styles and characteristics we share” (2003:365). One participant, Charlie, said that if a new ally came to ask for his advice, he would “maybe try to connect that person to a particular member of the GLBT community. Have you talked to so and so?” As he said, Charlie would not only encourage the new ally to talk to LGBTQ individuals but he would also introduce him to other people that would help in his process of becoming an LGBTQ ally. On an essay about being a “strong white ally,” Kivel (2003) shares that listening to people of color is an important and often overlooked way to be an ally. The same is true with LGBTQ allies; knowing and listening to LGBTQ individuals’ concerns and thoughts is one of the first steps towards ally development.

Again, knowing LGBTQ individuals was a major factor to becoming a LGBTQ activist which makes sense as to why participants would offer it as advice to new and perspective allies.
Self-Reflect on Motivations

Some participants underscored the importance of self-reflection in the process of becoming a heterosexual male ally. They found the process incredibly helpful in their own activism process and would encourage other allies to reflect on their motivations of becoming an ally and the place in which they fit within the movement. Crowfoot and Chesler (2003) explain the importance of reflecting on the guilt, fear, and isolation they may feel when they become active in multicultural work. They say that exploring these feelings “leads to an awareness that we do not know parts of ourselves, or are unable to express and act upon those ‘hidden parts’” (Crowfoot and Chesler 2003:364). Participants in this study offered advice to learn how to process these ‘hidden parts.’ Charlie offered this advice:

I would ask that person to reflect about what his motives were and what was leading him to want to do this. I would hope that the person would be in touch with their motives and not just [because] it is the thing to do right now or somebody told me to do this. But I would want the person to reflect deeply about his motives, passions, and interests.

Boone also mentioned how self-reflection would be a part of the advice he would give. He explained the importance of knowing where you fit in the larger LGBTQ movement. He said:

Self-reflection is a big deal. Not everyone can be the one on the front line running toward the burning building, right? That is not everyone’s goal. Not everyone can be Dan Savage. But a lot of people can do small things in their community or be there for one or two friends and that makes a huge difference. So that is another piece of advice. Find out where you fit and don’t try to run at the front lines right away. I am not even at the front lines and it took me a while to get there. But I had to come to that realization that I have limitations and I can do it in my own way. So search within your capacity to do something.

Finally, Richard shared about his own journey to becoming an ally and how privilege became very easy to fall back on when the fight became hard. He explained:

I would say to them be gentle with yourself along the way. The biggest enemies to being able to move through a process, the internal process, are guilt and shame. It’s not very helpful to the extent that, that I struggled with was the extent to which it became very easy to fall back on privilege at the end of the day and kind of have moments where I would just want to give up. ‘Oh I can’t do this. I am always going to fail.’ You know? Whereas it was a lot more helpful to really take the responsibility of it seriously and say it isn’t about my, or me, and my guilt and my shame. The bottom line is I can do my work and I need to do my work, it’s a responsibility that I have and then I have a responsibility to help and to take this to other people to talk about it.
Richard explained that an important step in becoming an ally is being gentle with yourself and understanding the privilege you hold even to be able to struggle with this issue. As participants stated, in ally work one has to learn to use their guilt and shame about their unearned privilege and work through what it really means to give it up. These participants offer important advice about how self-reflection not only helps other allies learn about themselves, but it also allows them to understand their place within LGBTQ activism.

**Get Involved with a LGBTQ Group**

Finally, the majority of participants advised other men who are interested in being a heterosexual ally to get involved with a LGBTQ activism group, whether that is a PFLAG, GSA, or legal rights groups. If the new ally finds this cause important, he needs to actually be involved. One participant, Sawyer, told a story about how his brother challenged him to get involved. He said:

> I was talking to my brother and he said, ‘Are you coming down to the gay pride parade?’ I said, ‘I hadn’t given it any thought.’ He said, ‘Well it’s really going to be neat and you are always protesting, why don’t you walk the talk for this?’ And I was like wow…cruel…but it really hit home and I thought, you know, I should.

He later went on to say that he recommends getting involved in a local LGBTQ center, where all sexualities and genders are welcomed to participate. Desmond said, “Do it! I mean, don’t think too much about it, just do it.” Richard, who was in agreement said, “Bring it on! We need more people to do this work!” Finally, Charlie said, “Well I guess I would say I would try to encourage that person and hope that person would get involved.”

In closing, these participants strongly encourage all future activists to actually get involved in LGBTQ activism. As they said, this work is important and more activists who are men are needed to ensure equal rights for LGBTQ individuals.

As explained above, all participants were able to give their advice to heterosexual men who are contemplating joining an LGBTQ activism group. There were three themes in this section: talk to LGBTQ individuals and allies, self-reflect on motivation reasons, and get involved with a LGBTQ group. It is important to me to give these men an opportunity to offer advice to other men who are thinking about becoming an ally because of the lack of information there is about men who participate in these programs.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION

My intent with this ethnographic study on men who participate in LGBTQ activism was to investigate the lived experiences of these men in order to understand and explain reasons for participation and the daily lives of men who are LGBTQ allies. By using sound methodological techniques, I gained an understanding of these men’s lives that has not been heard before this study. In particular, results highlighted participants’ reasons for joining the activism group, experiences during their time with the organization, and advice they would give other men who were contemplating pursuing this work.

The first theme presented in this study was how these men’s motivations to participate in LGBTQ activism was fueled by knowing LGBTQ individuals and having an understanding of civil liberties movements. Other studies have found that knowing LGBTQ individuals was connected with having positive attitudes towards LGBTQ causes (Cotton-Huston and Waite 2000; DiStefano et al. 2000; Ji 2007; Valenti and Campbell 2009). As the men in my study described, once you know someone on a deeper level, it was incredibly hard not to take action to change social conditions. While no one in my study explicitly said that knowing LGBTQ individuals allowed them to actually participate in activism, it did seem to offer them an explanatory mechanism to use when people asked about their involvement. Many participants also compared their LGBTQ activism work with that of the African American and women’s civil rights movements. They believed that LGBTQ activism was the new frontier in creating a truly equal society and they wanted to be a part of the movement.

The second main theme was about the daily lives and experiences of these men. There were three findings in this section: (1) The socialization of boys into men, (2) The impact of privilege, and (3) People’s reactions to these men’s involvement. First, as described in the literature, the socialization of boys and men is so strict in regards to what is acceptable for men to feel and act upon that men in this study not only felt “cheated” for not
being able to experience a full range of emotions but also faced repercussions when they do branch into feminized terrain. Literature cites how often homophobic slurs like “that’s so gay” are used, how male privilege and power are incredible barriers to change, and how men who work in feminine fields are mocked (Anderson 2005; Davis and Wagner 2005; Kimmel 2007; Messner 2011; Pascoe 2007a, 2007b; Sargent 2001). This literature supports with my findings about how men who do participate in LGBTQ activism programs face barriers because they are not only being an activist but they are being an activist in a field centered around gender and sexuality. The men in my study actively pushed against the norms of masculinity, which created a situation where they saw the flaws in the socialization of boys and their sexuality was questioned. In regards to their sexuality being questioned, some participants decided to use this question to make a political and social position on equality. Even by declining to answer the question, these men were taking a stand against sexuality defining who a person is; whether or not you identify as LGBTQ, your sexuality doesn’t matter.

Finally, the last theme was centered on what advice participants would give other men who are interested in participating in LGBTQ activism. The most cited advice was: talk to LGBTQ individuals and allies, reflect on motivations, and get involved with an LGBTQ activism group. There is inadequate literature surrounding advice that men would give to other men who are trying to be activists, whether in feminism, civil rights, or LGBTQ rights. Some authors have talked about how men feel alone in activism efforts, suffer from the pedestal effect, and although they feel alone, they are not (hooks 2007; Kimmel 2008b; Messner 2011; Schacht 2001). Participants in this study wanted other men to actively struggle against rampant homophobia and hegemonic masculinity in their communities. These participants all believed that not only was their work making a difference, but also that their work was something that changed their lives for the better and therefore, wanted to give advice to other men who want to become active.

So, why another study focused on men? And how is this study relevant? First, it is important to recognize that the men in this study represent Audre Lorde’s (1980) “mythical norm,” which is a stereotype that only a handful of people in our society fit. She describes this norm as being white, heterosexual, of upper-middle class origins, Protestant, and male. It should be noted that most of the power elite fit this mold. The power elite, as described by
C. Wright Mills, “rule the big corporations. They run the machinery of the state…They direct the military establishment. They occupy the strategic command posts of the social structure…” (1956:3). Connecting the mythical norm and power elite, we see that there is a great disadvantage for these men to set aside their plentiful and unearned privilege to work in an LGBTQ related field. Understanding the experiences of these men will not only provide valid and interesting ethnographies but will also show us how society constructs normality based on this “mythical norm.”

This study focused on men because they are a part of this norm: white, male, heterosexual, middle to upper class, and (mostly) religious. Understanding how men, like the ones represented in my study, set aside privilege and strove for equality is important. The men in this study were able to understand the power given to them by society and work in a field that goes against the norms of gender and sexuality. One participant, Boone, highlighted this and said, “Someone like me…that’s what a bigot looks like. I am THAT guy!” Boone and the other participants could have been bigots and heterosexist, but instead they learned about privilege and now strive for equality. How did that happen with these men who are some of the most privileged? Understanding how these participants and other men broke out of norms of masculinity is important to creating an understanding of norm breaking and furthering equal rights.

Finally, it is important to recognize how even though these men have succeeded in moving the boundaries of masculinity for themselves, they still face social repercussions for their work as an LGBTQ activist. Clearly, the socialization process for individuals in our society is so strong that men who go against gender and sexuality norms are reprimanded and isolated for breaking these norms. Men who are actively pursuing equality, which would seem like a worthwhile goal for society, are openly criticized and mocked. Men have not had a revolution where they seek to change the very strict definition of manhood and challenge the stereotypical images of what it means to be a man. The men embodied in this study are trying to revolutionize the definition of masculinity and in doing face repercussions like having their sexuality questioned. In addition, there is so little research on heterosexual men that do transcend the boundaries of sexuality and gender to become activists. This study bridges the gap in research and gives a vibrant picture of the lived experiences of these men.
FUTURE RESEARCH AND STUDY LIMITATIONS

Future research on this topic should focus on several areas of ally work. First, as mentioned throughout this thesis, there is little research regarding heterosexual men who participate specifically in LGBTQ activism programs. Future research should focus on looking at what would willingly bring men out of their engrained privilege. As a larger concern, more research on masculinity and men is needed, especially surrounding topics that men are socialized to ignore.

Second, an interesting finding in this study was the connection between having physically masculine appearance and reactions to involvement. This association should be perused further because looking at the association between physical appearance, masculinity, and activism (both for women and men) will give us a greater understanding about how the socially constructed ideas of height and gender relate to activism. Conversely, looking at reactions to shorter men’s activism would provide an interesting counterpoint to the above-mentioned suggestion. The research surrounding this topic illustrates the connection between power and height: shorter men are seen as deficient and taller men are seen as powerful. Exploring this connection between both tall and short men who are LGBTQ activists would influence how we interpret activism and gender.

In addition, I was surprised that out of the nine men interviewed, four openly identified as a Christian or Catholic. As mentioned by these participants, it was understood that the public opinion of these religious groups and their beliefs on homosexuality were fairly negative. Contrary to that opinion, these four men had incredibly positive feelings towards the LGBTQ community and were actively fighting for their rights. Further research looking at individuals who have a positive view of homosexuality and are committed to a religious faith would provide another way to look at civil rights movement for homosexuality.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, two of the GSA advisors interviewed did not see their work as activism. They were, quite simply, asked by their students to be the advisor and they gladly accepted. The literature surrounding GSA advisors said nothing to explain this small phenomenon. Looking at advisors, like the two in this study who believed they were not doing activism and looking at motivations of all GSA advisors who are men would offer a fuller picture of motivations. In addition, looking at women GSA advisors and their
motivations for participating would provide an interesting comparison to see if this phenomenon is gendered.

While, my study does present valid and methodologically sound findings, there are potential limitations to it. First, my study was limited to nine participants in a small geographical area, sans one participant. Interviewing more men would provide a greater understanding of the motivations and experiences being a heterosexual ally. Second, the only individuals who participated in interviews identified as Caucasian. Men of color may offer a different perspective on being a heterosexual ally, which is needed to understand this group.

This ethnographic study looking at the lives and experiences of heterosexual men who participate in LGBTQ activism programs has not only added to the very small body of literature, but has also revealed important implications of the intersection between masculinity, sexuality, and activism. There were three main themes found in this research: reasons for participation in the activism group, the daily experiences of these men, and advice to other allies. The experiences these men shared about their activism and society’s reaction to it highlighted how boys and men are socialized to fit a strict mold of masculinity. These men all believed that their activism changed their lives and made them a better man; however, despite their love for their work, these men were still critiqued for participating in a field where the boundaries of sexuality and gender are challenged. This research offered a view into a previously unheard of segment of society’s population and provided significant implications into the ideas of masculinity, sexuality, and gender.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE
Tell me about getting involved in [LGBTQ activism group name].
Tell me about what first made you want to get involved.
Tell me about growing up.
Describe your relationships within the [LGBTQ activism group name].

Describe to me what it's like being involved with [LGBTQ activism group name].
What was your first activist experience?
What have been your best experiences?
What have been your worst experiences?
Tell me about your role with [LGBTQ activism group name].

How do you talk about the program with other people?
How do you describe your involvement to other people?
What are their reactions to your involvement?
How do you feel about their reactions to your involvement?
How does your family feel about your involvement?
What are the major objectives of [LGBTQ activism group name]

Are having heterosexual men who participate in LGBTQ activism important?
Why or why not?

Tell me about the differences or similarities between heterosexual men allies and heterosexual women allies.
What advice would you give to other men who are interested in getting involved in LGBTQ activism?

Sum up and regroup. Ask for any questions.