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Making Up Allies: The Identity Choreography of Straight LGBT Activism

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Abstract This qualitative study investigates the contemporary landscape of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) politics and activism, specifically the concept and identities of "straight allies." Through in-depth interviews with 13 individuals who identify as straight allies, we explore how these heterosexuals engage in LGBT politics and activist cultures. We take a grounded theory approach to data analysis, through which the concept of "passive" and "active" activism emerges as a framework to understand these allies' meaning-making practices, as well as how they negotiate the emotional, interpersonal, life-historical, and mass-mediated complexities of being straight allies when interacting with LGBT communities and engaging in pro-LGBT politics. We draw upon Thompson's (2005) theory of ontological choreography to posit "identity choreography" as way to describe and make sense of the heterogeneous knowledges and experiences our participants use to constitute their straight ally identities and to evaluate others' ally identities and activisms. Implications for future research on LGBT politics and straight allies, particularly in terms of education, attitude change, and activism, are discussed.

Keywords Allies · Activism · Heterosexuals · Identity · Politics

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Despite evidence indicating increased levels of acceptance or so-called tolerance for sexual minorities in various social worlds and contexts (Garcia 2014; McCormack 2012), little empirical research has focused specifically on the production of affirmative attitudes among heterosexuals toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. In the USA, specifically, substantial media attention has been directed toward straight celebrities who support LGBT political issues (e.g., marriage equality, open military participation, antidiscrimination protections, hate crime legislation), including actor-producer-philanthropist Brad Pitt, comedian Kathy Griffin, and multiplatform star Beyoncé (Huffington Post 2013). Though such high profile activism ranges from tweeting support for historic legal decisions about same-sex marriage to donating thousands of dollars to LGBT organizations, straight people who support LGBT rights in the public sphere often do so in the context of organized social movements and institutions, including PFLAG National; the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN); Safe Space programs on college campuses; and Gay-Straight Alliances in high schools (Mayberry 2013). And while much media discourse about what have come to be known as "straight allies" is congratulatory (e.g., MSNBC 2011), ally politics are not without controversy, especially from those who see allies as benefiting socially, monetarily, politically, or otherwise from their involvement in social justice movements and politics (Murphy 2010).

The "It Gets Better" Project (henceforth IGB) is easily one of the most widely recognized pro-LGBT social movements of the past decade (Parker-Pope 2010; Stelter 2010). Though gay sex advice columnist and activist Dan Savage initiated IGB and many LGBT celebrities and individuals who are not public figures made IGB videos, straight people—including Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and pop star Ke$ha—composed some of the most-watched IGB videos (Grzanka and Mann 2014). Positing IGB as an LGBT activist formation

and conceptualizing the campaign as an analytic and empirical starting point, our project aims to achieve a greater understanding of straight individuals' motivations for participating in pro-LGBT activism and, in particular, to understand how individuals' identities as "straight allies" are constructed and maintained. This interdisciplinary project takes a symbolic interactionist approach—wherein individuals' identities are framed as creatively and purposefully constructed, maintained, and transformed within particular social settings—and draws upon the fields of LGBT psychology, the sociology of sexualities, and queer theories of emotions and affect to explore the emergent social identity of the "straight ally" (Ahmed 2004; Goffman 1959; Mead 1934). Our objective is to better understand how the straight ally identity is produced in the social worlds of those who identify as allies and how they came to this identity by way of interactions with (a) mass media coverage of celebrity activists, LGBT rights issues, bullying, and queer youth suicide, (b) technology such as social media and networking via the Internet, (c) LGBT individuals or attendance at Pride events, and (d) informal and organized social movements, such as IGB and Gay-Straight Alliances (Ghaziani 2011; Gamson 1995; Toomey et al. 2011). Arguably, American media coverage of LGBT issues has recently cohered into a narrative in which supporting LGBT rights is a the default position of most socially conscious Americans—regardless of their sexual orientation (SO) or gender identity (Garcia 2014)—but more empirical research is warranted to explore how such a political position manifests and is taken up in the lives of actual straight, cisgender people, particularly those who come to identify as allies.

Through in-depth interviews with 13 straight allies, we explored the meaning-making practices of cisgender heterosexuals who either currently or historically engaged in varied degrees and forms of LGBT activism. Ultimately, we borrow from feminist sociologist Charis Thompson's (2005) influential work on "ontological choreography" to theorize our allies' "identity choreography" that they describe in their interviews. Whereas Thompson's ethnographic work foregrounds the coming together of knowledges and concepts from discreet ontological orders to create parents in assisted reproduction technology (ART) clinics, our notion of identity choreography emphasizes how the allies in our study drew upon concepts and experiences from diverse areas of their social worlds, life histories, political philosophies, emotions, and current events to literally make up what being an ally is.

Heterosexuals, LGBT Politics, and Collective Identities

Collective Identity Formation

The multidisciplinary literature on identity development broadly and political or "collective" identities specifically is pertinent to the study of how heterosexuals become engaged in LGBT-focused activism, because campaigns and organizations such as IGB and PFLAG are highly politicized social movements organized by and around people who heterogeneously identify as committed to social transformation. We are influenced by queer theories and various critical, poststructural approaches in conceptualizing identities as unstable, multidimensional, historically contingent, and shaped by *discourses*, which are always framed by unequal relations of power (Butler 1993; Foucault 1978). Symbolic interactionism complements a queer theoretical frame, because interactionism foregrounds the dynamic nature of identity and the contingency of meaning-making in social interaction (Bernstein 1997; Gamson 1995; Goffman 1959; Stein and Plummer 1994). From this perspective, identities—such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer[1]—are not essential elements of the self (Arseneau et al. 2013) but the consequence of social interactions that create inequalities among social actors and that happen within the context of broader social forces (e.g., racism, heterosexism, classism, etc.) (Goffman 1959, 1963).

Accordingly, a robust and growing literature in psychology and sociology investigates (a) how members of stigmatized or marginalized groups cultivate critical consciousness and resistance strategies (Bernstein 1997, 2002; Gamson 1995; Moon 2012; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Swank and Fahs 2012, 2013) and (b) how members of dominant groups become politicized around their privilege, such as feminist men (Messner 1997) and White antiracists (Segrest 1994; Tatum 1994). Gamson (1995) and Ghaziani (2011), for example, have studied the tensions immanent to collective LGBT identities that simultaneously and contradictorily (a) necessitate a degree of entitativity (i.e., "groupiness") as LGBT people in solidarity and (b) embrace a drive to blur and deconstruct group categories. Their work on LGBT politics has also illuminated how LGBT activism is distinct from other forms of social activism in which an established collective identity (e.g., women) is assumed to exist before the advent of the social movement (e.g., feminism). In LGBT politics, collective identities and social movements are conceptualized as co-constitutive; the meanings, content, and boundaries of "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual," and "transgender" are produced within and through LGBT social movements. From this perspective, straight allies—whom are sometimes included in the acronym LGBTQA (Schulman 2013)—are likewise created by the social movements in which they participate.

[1] We use the term "queer" here in an inclusive sense. It can function both as a radical rejection of heteronormativity (e.g., queer theory) or as an umbrella category to describe any sexual or gender identity that would generally be regarded as a non-heteronormative and/or gender nonconforming.

Becoming an Ally

Much scholarship on members of dominant social groups who become politicized around their privilege has focused on the social psychological origins of these phenomena, particularly the attitudinal and emotional antecedents of ally identities and activism. At the core of this work is the question: what motivates someone to become an ally? For example, some scholars have explored White people's social, affective, and cognitive responses to confronting racism and the consequences of racial inequality (Helms 1990; Helms and Carter 1993; Spanierman et al. 2012), including feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety, depression, and anger (Kordesh et al. 2013; Spanierman et al. 2008; Spanierman and Heppner 2004). Research on White allies tends to support the idea that some degree of White guilt is necessary to catalyze empathy with racial minorities and to critically examine unearned and unfair privileges (Case 2012). Nonetheless, psychologists have also questioned the efficacy of White guilt and other forms of negative, self-conscious affect (Tangney and Dearing 2002) to catalyze meaningful social transformation; because guilt retains a focus on the self, they argue guilt may ultimately re-center the experiences of the dominant social group (Iyer et al. 2003; Swim and Miller 1999). Because White guilt is nevertheless positively correlated with antiracist attitudes generally (Spanierman and Heppner 2004), some negative feelings may be a critical element of attitude transformation but may not engender ally identity formation or actual activism on behalf of racial minorities.

In the context of straight ally development, on the other hand, the emotional antecedents of collective identity formation and LGBT activism may be even more ambiguous. For example, Fingerhut (2011) found that empathy did not predict straight ally activism, in contrast to the findings of Spanierman et al. (2009) about White antiracism (see also Spanierman, Beard, & Todd 2012; Todd, Spanierman, & Aber 2010). Asta and Vacha-Haase (2013) likewise reported in their qualitative study of straight counselors' involvement in LGBT activism that allies were strongly influenced by others' responses to their ally work, as opposed to feelings of empathy toward sexual minorities. "Recognition and appreciation" of their ally work was influential, and most of their participants also believed that advocacy was a major component of being an ally. Their work suggests that being a straight ally is about *doing*, not simply *being*, and may be tied more to proactive behaviors as opposed to affective responses to heterosexism. Stotzer (2009), however, found three key features in the development of positive attitudes toward sexual minorities among heterosexual college students: early childhood experiences, meeting LGB peers in high school and college, and experiences of empathy (in the face of peer's struggles or others' expression of hatred). Likewise, among a sample of 127 self-identified straight allies, Russell (2011) found two sets of motives: (1) fundamental principles of social justice, civil rights, religious beliefs, and morals and (2) personal experiences. Within these broad categories, respondents reported heterogeneous motivations; Russell concluded that no straightforward set of motives influences allyship. Nonetheless, and somewhat in contrast with Asta and Vacha-Haase's (2013) findings, most motivation appeared to come from broad principles and beliefs, such as religious and moral stances, rather than from interactions with LGBT people or issues.

Swank and Fahs's line of research in this domain further illustrates key features of the production of young activists—including the centrality of identity work and management—but their studies (Fahs and Swank 2013; Swank and Fahs 2012, 2013) have focused primarily on how and why LGBT people do LGBT activism. Nonetheless, their findings are pertinent because of how they generally challenge the idea that class is a primary determinant of political activism (i.e., the notion that middle- and upper-class individuals are more likely to possess to LGBT-affirmative attitudes). Across multiple sites and diverse samples, their work underscores the multidimensionality of motivators and predictors of activism, though many questions remain about what kinds of experiences trigger heterosexuals' motivation to become involved in LGBT activism.

Recently, Jones et al. (2014) developed a scale called the Ally Identity Measure (AIM) for use in quantitative survey research on allies. They found that the 19 items in their scale (e.g., "I am aware of the sexual minority rights movement in the United States, and its role in increasing equality for sexual minority groups.") reflected a three-factor structure of knowledge and skills, openness and support, and oppression awareness. Their work illuminates salient ideas about being an ally, but future work with the AIM may elucidate how and why these allies developed the attitudes and behaviors reflected in items such as "I have taken a public stand on important issues facing sexual minority people."

Contemporary Heterosexualities

The motivations of straight allies may be partially due to shifting social attitudes toward homosexuality in many aspects of social life both in the USA and abroad, including sports, education, and politics (Kosciw et al. 2012; McCormack 2012). Montgomery and Stewart (2012) studied generational differences in endorsement of heteronormativity among women involved in lesbian and gay rights activism and found that the younger cohorts of women demonstrated significantly lower scores on measures of heteronormative attitudes than the oldest cohort. Their findings reflect a broader cultural consensus that youth care less about SO differences and are less homophobic than their parents; prominent athlete allies such as Ben Cohen and Hudson Taylor reinforce these notions (MSNBC 2011). However, popular culture presents conflicting evidence about the declining social significance of

heterosexism: the preponderance of ally discourse and beliefs that youth are less invested in heteronormativity than older generations has coincided with a moral panic about pervasive bullying and an "epidemic" of queer youth suicide (Grzanka and Mann 2014; Pascoe 2013; Waidzunas 2012). Meanwhile, evidence suggests that homophobia remains a central part of gender socialization among youth (Pascoe 2007, 2013).

Moreover, much mass-mediated discourse on LGBT allies is inextricable from the discourse on queer youth suicide that has proliferated since at least 2010 with the ascension of IGB and media coverage of several gay (or presumed to be gay) youth. Sociologists have long treated suicide as a social, ethical problem, rather than a strictly individual, psychological problem (Wray et al. 2011). Waidzunas (2012), for example, has recently used philosopher Ian Hacking's (1986, 2004) concept of "dynamic nominalism" to explore how recitation of bogus statistics on the rates of queer youth suicide in the news media had the effect of "making up" the category of "gay youth" and its concomitant public health crisis: "gay youth suicide."[2] Cover (2012a, b) has charted the discourse on queer youth suicide and found that sexual identity formation, sexual shame, and discrepancies in community belonging/exclusion are implicated in media coverage as the social factors that contribute to queer youth suicide and distinguish the "resilient" from those at-risk for suicide. He claims that the underlying relationship between heteronormativity, mental health, and depression is frequently excluded in journalism coverage of queer youth suicide. Likewise, Grzanka and Mann (2014) analyzed IGB videos in particular and argued that these videos are directed toward the production of "homonormative" subjects, in which homonormativity denotes neoliberal sexual politics that embrace the rhetoric of "equality" and "multiculturalism" while reinvesting in racist, classist, neocolonialist, and heterosexist versions of citizenship and personhood (Ahmed 2012; Duggan 2003; Elliott 2014; Ferguson 2012; Melamed 2011). Theirs and other queer theorists' work on IGB (Puar 2012; Nyong'o 2010) motivates us to think seriously about the potential pitfalls of suicide prevention activism that idealizes particular versions of what mental health and happiness look like (Ahmed 2010; Halberstam 2011). What might straight ally activism inadvertently reinforce, and what role might allies play in shoring up homonormative discourse in contemporary LGBT politics?

[2] Waidzunas (2012), Cover (2012a, b), Grzanka and Mann (2014), Puar (2012), and others have highlighted how this discourse often deploys the terms "gay," "queer," and "LGBT" concurrently when paired with "youth suicide."

Contentious Allies

As the term "ally" itself has pervaded discourse on social movement politics in recent years (Schulman 2013), diverse criticism of allies has circulated widely among leftist, progressive, and radical activists on Twitter, Tumblr, and other social media platforms. How individuals construct their ally identities and engage in LGBT activism may be shaped by the context of ally critique in media culture. These criticisms are sometimes organized around particular axes of identity—such as gender identity (Khan 2013), race (Golash-Boza 2013), SO (Moylan 2013), etc.—but are also often criticisms of ally politics more broadly and sometimes articulate intersectional themes that deny the compartmentalization of identities and systems of oppression (Crunk Feminist Collective 2013; Maza 2013; McKenzie 2013). Some critics assert that much of what passes for allyship is empty signifiers, such as changing one's Facebook profile to a red and pink Human Rights Campaign (HRC) logo in support of gay marriage. Gladwell (2010) described the use of these empty signifiers as "weak tie" associations and suggested that such social media sites do not actually lead to much social change, and Moylan (2013) wrote a widely distributed blog entry in which he called such efforts "the equivalent of wearing green on St. Patrick's Day…." Others have argued that being an "ally" is inherently problematic, because ally identities are rooted in the dominant group members' perspectives (McKenzie 2013). Ally politics and particular allies are often criticized for enjoying the political privileges of having socially celebrated "awareness" without any of the risks of actual social marginality or the responsibility of actually transforming social relations (c.f., Ahmed 2006, 2012; Grzanka and Maher 2012). Others highlight that many allies are resistant to criticism and may feel that they are beyond reproach because they have honorably chosen to position themselves in solidarity with stigmatized groups (Maza 2013). Though these issues affect many contemporary forms of ally identities and social movements, the mainstreaming and commodification of LGBT rights discourses in the USA have corresponded with an uptick in criticism of LGBT allies whose "passive activism" (Moylan 2013) may be defined by general support for same-sex marriage, watching Ellen DeGeneres's daytime talk show, and consuming gay-themed media, such as *Ru Paul's Drag Race* (c.f., Duggan 2003).

Statement of Research Questions

Accordingly, though existing research on straight allies offers an initial empirically informed sketch of straight people's participation in LGBT advocacy, important questions remain regarding the motivations, goals, and affective dimensions of straight LGBT activists so that we can better understand the process of becoming and being an ally in the contemporary USA. Our critical review of the extant literature led us to pose

the following three clusters of questions, which we adjusted throughout the data collection and analysis procedures (Corbin and Strauss 2008): (1) What drives straight individuals to get involved in LGBT activism or pro-LGBT campaigns such as IGB? Specifically, what is the connection between getting involved and identifying as a "straight ally"? (2) What is the emotional experience of being involved in LGBT activism (e.g., IGB) as a straight person? What does it feel like to participate as a straight, cisgender person in an LGBT activist organization, particularly when LGBT individuals challenge one's ally identity? And finally, (3) what do these straight individuals believe is meaningful about getting involved in LGBT activist organizations? Do they conceptualize their activist work as possessing the power to impact lives, shape society, or change institutions? Cutting across all questions was an overarching concern about allies' sense of their own agency in constructing what constitutes a straight ally.

Method

Recruitment and Interviews

We used in-depth interviews to (a) allow our participants' experiences to drive our inquiry into the social construction of straight allies and (b) so as to not superimpose previously established ideas about collective identity, social movements, and the emotional antecedents of political activism onto our participants by way of a quantitative survey. Specifically, we took a feminist grounded theory (GT) approach (Clarke 2005; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Fassinger 2005), which mandates that researchers enter the situation of inquiry with questions as opposed to hypotheses based on prior research and that those questions be modified throughout the research process as the data reflexively informs the project. We found potential interviewees by watching IGB videos on YouTube (youtube.com) and on the IGB website (itgetsbetter.org). First, we compiled a list of video-makers who identified as straight in their IGB video or video description posted on YouTube or the IGB website; we then asked 70 individuals to participate via YouTube message or email and offered $50 compensation. This process yielded a response rate of less than 10 %.

Because we recruited so few respondents via YouTube, we reached out to LGBT and ally organizations (e.g., LGBT resource centers at colleges and universities throughout the USA). We incorporated the following language into our recruitment letter: "We are seeking to interview straight-identified individuals who have made an 'It Gets Better' video or who have participated in suicide prevention activism in some way." Throughout the recruitment process, we were surprised by how our respondents perceived themselves as appropriate for our study based on their experiences, as many of them replied with descriptions of involvement in LGBT advocacy groups on their college campuses, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, and few offered descriptions of involvement with IGB or suicide prevention campaigns. We decided that this was important to our study, as we believed it could potentially speak to how participants conceptualized their individual work and contributions to the LGBT movement including but not limited to suicide prevention activism. In this way, our focus on interviewing individuals involved in IGB exclusively shifted to include individuals who might fit a broad conceptualization of a "straight ally." Ultimately, we interviewed 16 individuals over 6 months in 2013 using Skype; each interview followed a semi-structured set of questions and lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour and was conducted by the second or third author. Six of these 16 individuals were IGB video-makers, recruited via our initial letter, while the rest were respondents to the broader criteria in our second letter (see Table 1). Three of these six video-makers were ultimately not used in data analysis because they identified as not heterosexual during their interview.

Participants

The 13 self-identified straight allies ranged from 18 to 71 years old and comprise a heterogeneous sample; for example, they represent many regions of the USA, including the Midwest, South, Southwest, Southeast, Northeast, Pacific Northwest, California, and Texas (Table 1). Each was given a pseudonym to protect the confidentiality of their responses. Eleven of the 13 participants were either recent graduates of a college or university or were currently enrolled as undergraduate or graduate students. However, of the 13 participants, only one identified as a man; throughout the recruitment process, we found that we received many more responses from women than men. We did not ask participants to identify themselves racially or ethnically during the interviews. Informed by our GT approach, we decided it would be more meaningful to discover whether or how participants referred to their race. We were especially cognizant of not wanting to impose a superficial racial difference lens to our data analysis, particularly in light of recent discourse in American popular culture that relies upon a racist logic to suggest that Whites are less disposed to homophobia than people of color, namely African Americans and Latinos (Wilds Lawson 2009).

Data Analysis and Theory Construction

We transcribed the interviews using HyperTRANSCRIBE 1.6 software (Hesse-Biber et al. 2013b). We took a modified, team-based GT approach to data analysis, drawing

Table 1 Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Location(s) raised; current location	Relationship status; sexual orientation	Education status
Michelle	F	23	Chicago, IL; Ithaca, NY; Austin, TX	Single; straight	College graduate
Marie	F	18	Chicago; Redlands, CA	Single; "mostly straight"	Current undergrad
Erica	F	19	Tacoma, WA; Redlands CA	Dating; straight	Current undergrad
Becky	F	31	Kansas; Missouri	Married; straight	High school graduate
Angela	F	19	Arizona; California	In relationship; straight	Current undergrad
Tony	M	18	Santa Rosa, CA; Redlands, CA	Single; straight	Undergraduate
Nancy	F	40	Houston, TX; NY, NY; Knoxville, TN	Married; straight	Current grad student
Emily	F	23	New Mexico; Chicago, IL	Married; straight	Current grad student
Stephanie	F	20	Riverside, CA; Redlands, CA	In relationship; straight	Current undergrad
Claire	F	18	California, Redlands, CA	Single, straight	Current undergrad
Kate	F	31	Connecticut; New York, NY	In relationship, straight	College graduate
Maggie	F	18	Kiev, Ukraine; Iowa	Single, straight	Current undergrad
Alexa	F	71	Arizona; Oregon	Married, straight	High school graduate
Mean age		25			
Median age		19			

on both Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Fassinger's (2005) recommendations. The second and third authors—one cisgender man, one cisgender woman, both of whom identify as straight allies—open-coded the transcribed interviews using HyperRESEARCH 3.5.2 (Hesse-Biber et al. 2013a), and the first author (a queer, cisgender man) audited transcriptions, code lists, and coded interviews. We kept detailed annotations of the 27 codes that emerged in the data and then collapsed these into a smaller group of 15 codes that provided meaningful conclusions about our interviewees' experiences and ideas. In weekly, 2-hour team meetings, we discussed codes and used axial coding strategies to find consistencies and contradictions among codes, ultimately reducing the code list to three codes in the interest of generating theory with explanatory power across the dataset. To facilitate data analysis, we also used Clarke's (2005) situational analysis method to map out the positions taken up by the social actors in our study to find key areas of controversy and discursive activity—including silences—in our data (see Table 2). Finally, two expert external auditors from clinical psychology/women's studies and counseling psychology provided feedback on our initial conclusions.

We then compared our codes to extant sexuality literature on identity construction detailed above and incorporated additional literature that reflected other salient interactionist tenets of meaning-making and identity construction (Clarke 2005). Specifically, we were drawn to Thompson's (2005) concept of ontological choreography to read across our participants' elaborations of how they became allies. Thompson describes similar meaning-making practices in her ethnographic work on parents who (are attempting to) achieve pregnancy through advanced technoscientific reproductive technologies (i.e., ART). A key insight of her work is that ART produces parents as well as children. She found that parents negotiated—rather than passively absorbed—authoritative knowledge about ART and genetics, effectively creating new forms of knowledge based on technoscience and their lived experiences of trying to become parents and create families vis-a-vis nontraditional means. Thompson defines "ontological choreography" as how "what might appear to be an undifferentiated hybrid mess is actually a deftly balanced coming together of things that are generally considered parts of different ontological orders" (p. 8). In what we ultimately read as an analogous though not identical phenomenon, our participants' understandings of their own participation in contemporary LGBT activism reflect how such activism both produces collective LGBT and ally identities. In the context of our interviews, we see our participants making meaning about "allies" through the dynamic coordination of emotional, political, and life-historical dimensions of contemporary sexual politics. In our discussion below, we detail how the creation of these collective identities reflects a form of meaning-making we call "identity choreography." Whereas one might normally view systemic inequalities (e.g., heterosexism), social identities (e.g., SO and religious identity), science and morality (e.g., beliefs about the nature of race, gender, and sexuality), affect (e.g., love, despair, happiness), institutional settings (e.g., college, non-profit advocacy groups), and global mass media and technology (e.g., IGB, YouTube, news media, celebrity culture) as constituting disparate elements of social life (i.e., part of the self, part of society, part of knowledge), our participants drew upon their experiences in all of these registers

Table 2 Positional map

Why Does Homophobia Persist?	Religious & Not Accepting	Avoidance of LGBT Topics & Not Accepting	Religious & Accepting	Avoidance of LGBT Topics & Accepting Or Patriarchal & Accepting	Accepting
Religious Morality	+	+		+ +	+
Family Values	+	+		+	+ +
Lack of Experience with LGBT people	+		+		+
Fear					+ +
Ignorance/Lack of Education	+		+		+ + + +

Style of Upbringing

The table illustrates the relationship between how a participant described their family upbringing ("style of upbringing") and what the participant believed to be the root cause of homophobia ("Why does homophobia persist?"). Participants' own language was used to construct positions and labels. Some participants mentioned more than one cause of homophobia (*Y*-axis items), and these views are reflected with multiple + symbols. However, each participant only fits into one of the style of upbringing categories (*X*-axis items). "Avoidance of LGBT topics and accepting" and "patriarchal and accepting" each represent only one respondent, so we grouped these upbringing styles together on the *X*-axis

of human activity to manufacture their understandings of "straight ally."

Findings

We identified three interdependent axes of our data that correspond to our research questions: (a) *origins* of an ally or how an individual's upbringing and values influence their identification as and conception of a straight ally, (b) *affect* or emotional experiences of being an ally, and (c) *efficacy* of straight ally activism or an ally's perception of their own political efficacy in relation to the efficacy of the broader LGBT equality movement.

Origins

Our participants frequently reflected on being raised in either liberal-agnostic or conservative-religious families, offering insight into the ways in which childhood experiences can shape (a) allies' eventual participation in LGBT activism, (b) their notions of homophobia, and (c) how they construct their own identities as straight allies. Like Russell (2011), we found that early developmental experiences, family upbringing, and religious, political, and/or educational conditioning from an early age were not particularly meaningful in terms of explaining why one becomes a straight ally (i.e., there was no central theme/story shared by our participants). However, these same factors did play a large role in determining how they conceptualized the ally identity.

Upbringing Stephanie, a 20-year-old studying at a university in California, described her early conceptions of "gay people" that she adopted from her family and her church:

> I was pretty against [gay people and gay culture.] I didn't really have an open mind at all. I was taught what I was taught and I thought it was right and…all these people were wrong…and then I came to college and I just met so many people that were awesome people…. So I had this huge, I don't know, transition period…my whole first year of college. I mean it didn't really take that long. But, I don't know, I kind of just realized that I didn't want to judge people any more.

Stephanie had a kind of epiphany while away from her parents, friends, and church; she met "awesome people" who played a role in shifting her views. Stephanie elaborated that "…my first friend I met [at college] was gay, and so I was like, 'he doesn't seem too bad!'" Her negative evaluation of sexual minorities did not appear to change because of her education per se but rather because of her experiences with LGBT people in college.

Kate, a 31-year-old working in advertising in New York City, also discussed her family's religious conservatism. Though Kate's parents' views of LGBT people closely resemble that of Stephanie's parents, Kate

perceived her own family's intolerance much differently than Stephanie. "I think growing up Jehovah's Witness triggered [my interest in gay rights]," Kate noted, "because I always felt like, you know, it was just wrong—the way that they were teaching us to be [and how] to view homosexuality—I just…knew that [it] wasn't right." While Kate and Stephanie both grew up among conservative Christians with homophobic beliefs, they differ in terms of how much they initially conformed to these beliefs. Stephanie needed positive interaction with gay individuals for her to begin questioning her upbringing, but Kate discusses never quite "buying in" to the things she was taught: "[There's] that line in the scripture that says a man should not lie with man, but then there's stuff in the scripture that says you shouldn't eat shellfish and all types of other things, and they just ignore that...."

In stark contrast, Tony, an 18-year-old college student from California, attributes his current political views and his identity as a straight ally directly to his liberal upbringing:

> I definitely thank my parents a lot for my openness with [my LGBT activism]…I was not raised like, "this is gay and this is straight…." [My parents] just tried to teach me that…everything was okay, and that's something that I really liked and took to heart—it's that I don't try to treat anyone any worse or better than the other, I just try to treat it all as normal…I can sort of remember that I knew that my uncle Paul lived in San Francisco with his partner who was uncle Roger, and I never really questioned that that much, and at some point I guess I realized: "Oh wait, I have gay uncles."

Within our study, participants did not share the same or even similar backgrounds; we perceived no trend (in terms of parenting and religion) among our participants that suggests a particular kind of upbringing was antecedent to their LGBT political activism.

Homophobia The diverse upbringings and religious backgrounds among our interviewees reflect their equally multifarious framings of homophobia and, more specifically, the strategies and policies these allies believe are needed to combat social inequality (Table 2). Out of our 13 interviewees, five strongly advocated that "religion" is what drives homophobia in our society. In contrast, 6 of our 13 participants attributed homophobia to "ignorance" or "no education," while two of them emphasized that the ignorance is "willful." In addition to religion and ignorance, several allies also cited "family" and inherited family values as a cause of hatred toward LGBT people in society. As Tony put it:

> A lot of people…don't really understand the idea of a man loving another man or a woman loving another woman. They never really learn that that's a thing that could really happen, and it's hard to learn that later on in life…I think [we need] a more in-depth level of education…more needs to be done to educate the people who are against it about why gay people are here and why they're not going to be going away.

Tony cites a lack of information and exposure as the reason for homophobia in the USA and proposes an idea of what could potentially be done to spur social change and influence individuals' beliefs. Kate, in contrast, says religion is the source of homophobia: "[The problem is] this extremely literal interpretation of The Bible…I think [religion is] the thing that people stand behind the most in order to get their point across and talk about how [homosexuality is] so bad and it's so ungodly." When asked about what could possibly be done to reach religious extremists, Kate responded, "I think there's a lot of people who are so crazily anti-gay that they don't even like to speak to people who are gay… straight allies… can reach people who would otherwise be closed off…it's just strength in numbers, I think that's the biggest thing to me—[making people see] that it's not a gay issue, it's a civil rights issue." Kate's beliefs about homophobia inform her belief in straight allies' role in social transformation.

Relationships The majority of participants said that specific experiences and relationships with LGBT individuals—independent of their upbringing—motivated their involvement in LGBT activism and politics. Becky, a 31-year-old hairdresser in Missouri, attributed her motivation to make an IGB video to "several people. My sister, for one. She went through a rough time—she identified as a lesbian, but she doesn't anymore—but I kept thinking about her and the things she had to deal with, and I have several friends who are gay." Angela, a 19-year-old undergraduate studying in California, was not entirely sure that she would have been as involved in LGBT activism without having relationships with LGBT people, "Just because, I feel like once you know those people personally…you start to understand their lives and understand why this is important to them, and it starts to become a bigger deal. I mean, I think I would have been in Pride Alliance [without knowing any queer people]…maybe. It's so hard to tell! I don't know!" Finally, Kate described the disturbing experience of her best friend coming out as gay to his Jehovah's Witness family: "For it to go so horribly, um, was really, really upsetting…Certainly having this guy as one of my closest friends pushed me even closer to having these really strong viewpoints." While Kate's motivation for joining LGBT activism seems to have been influenced by both her family's religious upbringing and her relationship with her gay friend, she echoes Becky, Angela, and others in our study who all attribute their interest in LGBT activism and politics to their encounters with queer people.

In contrast, several participants explained that they would still have been allies even without building interpersonal relationships with LGBT people. Though she now identifies as straight, Emily, a 23-year-old graduate student from the Southwest who now resides in Chicago, explained that she felt less certain of her sexuality in her younger years, which influences her activism today. Erica, a 19-year-old student in California, said that both her education on "equality" and meeting queer friends inspired her to become a Safe Space-trained community assistant at her university so that she could signal to LGBT and "questioning" members of the university community that she is a supportive ally: "I'm studying Women and Gender studies, so I'm really into equality and a lot of my queer friends that I've met at college…seeing them be involved, [made me feel] like I wanted to be more involved and not because I'm straight, but just for the greater good of equality." Claire, an 18-year-old undergraduate student in California, emphasized that notions of equality prompted her involvement in high school. "I've always felt like everyone should be equal. Even without that influence [of knowing LGBT individuals]…even without it, I feel like I would feel the same way," she said. Michelle, a 23-year old graduate student in New York City, explained:

> I've always been really outspoken about sex …I always really loved talking about things like Planned Parenthood when I was in high school. I really learned how much as like, a straight person, I had so much more freedom to do that and so much space to occupy to do that. I got really interested in how that can be expanded for everyone.

Michelle, Claire, and Erica's experiences are similar in terms of how their activism is motivated by interest in the political and social issues surrounding LGBT equality, which is consistent with Russell's (2011) findings that broad, general principles about social justice and civil rights were often motivational factors for allies. Though all three of them explained that they have LGBT-identified friends and/or family, these three related that they still would have been compelled to pursue LGBT activism in some form even without those relationships.

Suicide Additionally, five of our participants cited queer youth suicide as a driving factor in their activism; three also created an IGB video, and one worked with The Trevor Project. Kate said, "when I heard about this rash of suicides and how it was becoming almost like a trend of these kids who were becoming so hopeless to kill themselves, I was really upset about it and started doing some research to figure out ways to get involved." She believes that the media's expansive coverage of queer youth suicide motivated her and others' involvement with IGB. Likewise, Alexa, a 71-year old grandmother living in Oregon, discussed how the rampant news coverage of queer youth suicide influenced her to become more involved than ever: "[I was] reading the [Facebook] news feed, and a young boy had committed suicide, and [the person who posted the article had] wrote the word, 'Sigh,' and that word—sigh—just transferred itself right across the ether, and just went right to my heart…and I said to myself, 'I need to learn more about this because it's not right, this is an 11-year- old boy.'" Alexa's comment reinforces other scholars' claims (Cover 2012b; Waidzunas 2012) that youth suicide, in particular, compels a unique form of sympathy. Alexa did not necessarily get involved to enact social, structural (e.g., legal) change for queer people; rather, she appears interested in doing something to help young people facing such intense marginalization that they would consider and/or commit suicide. Tony said, "I've had a number of friends who have been suicidal in the past, for any number of reasons.…I really like that there's something out there [where]…regular people…who don't even [know] who you are…want you to keep going and keep living." Accordingly, queer youth suicide—in everyday life and/or as represented in the media—played a determining role in the cultivation of some of our participants' ally identities.

Affect

In contrast to research on antiracism that supports the notion that White guilt is a necessary factor in catalyzing activism for racial justice (e.g., Case 2012), our participants' statements did not suggest that feelings of guilt were either present or influential in their lives. Instead, most detailed life experiences and close, emotional connections with LGBT-identified individuals as more relevant factors in determining the level of their own LGBT activism. Consonant with Asta and Vacha-Haase's (2013) findings, positive feedback from academic advisors, parents, and even strangers on online social media networks allowed our participants to feel comfortable and even vindicated via their actions and achievements within the LGBT political sphere, while receiving negative or challenging feedback prompted feelings of frustration and inadequacy as an ally. Maza (2013) suggests that many allies are resistant to criticism, feeling beyond reproach because they have honorably chosen to position themselves in solidarity with stigmatized groups.

Praise and Criticism While reflecting upon the praise he had received from queer-identified peers, Tony said, "I've started to feel…like I'm doing something a bit more than just me… and I kind of like that feeling…after being involved it actually makes me want to go out and find more ways to help." To Tony, positive feedback makes him feel good, and he wants to seek out other ways to feel accomplished. However, some participants cited critical feedback as a reason for feeling

frustrated with various forms of LGBT activism. Claire described feelings of inadequacy and failure when her LGBT-identified peers highlighted her limitations as an ally: "You're trying to give support, but sometimes they don't support you! Like, they don't think you see their views, but you do," adding, "I feel like I *do* get it, and I understand their struggle, and then they'll be like, 'You can't understand. You'll never understand…' [and] I feel really bad. I feel more…like I failed, even though they told me that I'm not capable of doing it. I feel that there needs to be something else that I can do, but I don't know [what it is]." For Claire, her identity as a straight ally was complicated by criticism on the basis of her lived experiences as a straight, cisgender woman. She and other allies in our study were faced with the difference between sexual identity and knowledge of LGBT issues, as well as the ways that heterosexuality sometimes undermines their ally identities. Claire, for example, expressed how disheartened she is whenever her "help" is turned away, saying she feels like she has "failed." Although she feels that she is equipped with the knowledge to adequately empathize with some of her queer peers' personal issues with their identities, Claire's heterosexuality places frustrating limitations on her potential to enact change as an activist. In other words, queer activists are able to use their embodied experiences of marginalization and knowledge to do the work of social transformation; however, straight activists are limited to their knowledge and experience of privilege and may accordingly not always have a place in the conversation. Despite feeling empowered by their knowledge, some of our participants struggled with the fear of being accused of being an interloper by members of the very community they were trying to aid.

The "Straight Closet" Many allies expressed exasperation with their families'—and, more specifically, their parents'—reactions to their newfound political and social alignment with queer communities and organizations. When we asked about participants' "outness" with regard to their political and social identities, many admitted that they did not disclose their LGBT activism to their families. For example, Maggie, an 18-year-old student living in Iowa, admitted, "It was really hard for me to start getting involved because my parents, for a while, thought I was gay…because I was involved in so many things." She went on to say that it was difficult for her parents to understand her involvement at first and that she sometimes does not "feel comfortable talking about [her involvement] or being open about it at all." Likewise, Stephanie told us, "My parents are super conservative…. I don't really keep it a secret from them. They definitely know what I'm doing, but I guess I try not to shove it in their face because I know it doesn't make them happy." Participants frequently cited their friends' and relatives' heterosexist attitudes and values which by and large starkly opposed interviewees' own attitudes as a reason for their hesitation in being too public about their activism. In discussing how she shared news of her involvement on Facebook and other social media networks, Becky commented, "I definitely got some eye rolls …. I guess the people who really know me thought me [making an IGB video] was kind of silly or unnecessary or like asking for attention or something and they teased me a little bit." In Becky's case, pressure to not discuss or disclose her activism may have come both from straight social media contacts who thought IGB was "silly" and from LGBT friends who thought her efforts on behalf of queer people were "unnecessary."

We interviewed some allies who integrated themselves into political organizations and youth activism projects when opportunities for showcasing their "progressive" political awareness were easily attainable, only to extricate themselves temporarily from such communities when threatened with a loss of social capital or when faced with criticism from their families and friends (Bourdieu 1990). For example, Angela stated:

> I mean, it's not that I wouldn't tell [my conservative uncle] about it…He knows that I work in the Women's Center and he knows what I do on campus. But I don't think that I would ever go in-depth… the things that I'm talking to you about are the things that I would talk to my friends about…I don't know [if] I would go that in-depth [with my uncle]…we have different political views and…different views for society.

Angela's reflection illustrates how some straight allies in our study deliberately avoid confrontational conversations with both peers and elders if (a) they suspect that they would have to strongly defend their viewpoints, or (b) they might be labeled queer because of their association with queer people. On the other hand, these same straight allies state how much more comfortable they feel discussing precisely the same topics with like-minded individuals and friends. Marie describes the limits of her activism: "My dad's side of the family…[are] not very accepting people…if it comes up in conversation…I wouldn't go and be like, 'Hi, I'm in Pride and I support gay rights.' That's not a lecture I need." Marie's aversion to receiving a "lecture" illustrates a case where allies may opt to self-censor or even hide their politics. In identifying herself as a straight ally, Marie signified her commitment to LGBT equality; nonetheless, political commitments and behavior appear to be distinct and, sometimes, mutually exclusive.

Erica noted that her attendance at meetings for an on-campus gay rights student organization (of which she had been an official member of since her freshman year) was rare because of fear of potentially being perceived as gay: "I don't think it's like a, 'I don't want to go,'" she said. "Well, I guess a little bit of it—I've definitely thought about this before—is the fear of people thinking that I

am queer. Like, thinking that maybe I am a lesbian or something… because hands down, a lot of the people that do go to the meeting—a lot of my friends that do go to the meeting—they are queer…[though] no one ever has [suspected me]," Erica qualified. No one has identified her as queer, but Erica chooses to limit her attendance at group meetings out of fear of being observed as someone who is *actually* queer. Maggie likewise echoed Erica's fears of being judged by others in public: "There are people that I don't know, certain people that I meet [who] are very against gay marriage and gay rights and stuff," said Maggie, "so when I'm around them, I don't feel comfortable talking about [my activism] or being open about it at all, so I don't mention it to them…that's the one time I'm not very public about it."

Erica and Maggie illustrate how straight allies may fade in and out of activism—in addition to their identity as a straight ally—during different times and within different settings. When vulnerable to reproach by others, a straight ally can be tempted to distance themselves from certain experiences, relationships, and advocacy—removing this aspect of their political identity like a mask (Goffman 1959) for fear of proximal stigma (Goffman 1963). This is done in order to avoid being perceived as queer, which could potentially result in alienation from straight peers, colleagues, and family members and perhaps force allies to sacrifice certain social privileges that come from identifying as a *heteronormative* heterosexual. In this sense, doing allyship is antithetical to heteronormativity, thus putting the straight ally at risk of losing straight privilege. Many of our seemed to make decisions based upon this risk, suggesting that straight privilege superseded their behavioral commitment to allyship (though not necessarily their personal beliefs in LGBT rights). Notably, when discussing their ally identification and activism, none of our participants spoke specifically about recognizing their own straight privilege and the risks of losing that privilege based on their perceived levels of ally commitment or activism.

Efficacy

In terms of political change in the USA, five participants believed progress was happening at a steady rate, while four participants declared that progress was occurring slowly, and two said that progress was actually accelerating. One participant made a case for why the LGBT movement was currently at a standstill, and another related that they were not able to discern whether or not progress was in fact being made at all. Our participants generally agree that progress is being made toward LGBT equality, despite differing opinions about (a) the comparability of race, gender, and SO, (b) "passive" versus "active" advocacy, and (c) celebrities in LGBT activism.

Sometimes Equal, Always Separate "New laws are getting passed all the time now, and the country is obviously moving toward [equality]," Becky noted. "Just historically speaking, if you look at the way African Americans were granted rights in this country, or even women—getting the right to vote—I think there's always going to be some kind of fallout…things seem to be accelerating, eventually it'll just happen," she said. Becky equates the inevitable success of the gay and lesbian movement to the success of the African American Civil Rights movement and the US women's suffrage movement, reflecting the essentialist beliefs that many of our participants exhibited in likening being gay to the immutability of race and gender and conflating transgender identity with SO. From this perspective, queer individuals' identities are analogous to race and gender insomuch as all three categories: (a) are static rather than fluid, (b) come from biological rather than from socially constructed origins, and (c) exist independent of each other or other dimensions of identity.

In contrast, Emily mentioned race when answering our questions about the political efficacy of certain advocacy projects but distinguishes the ontology of SO from other dimensions of identity. "As far as progress, I think we're doing really great," she said, "I don't think it's slowing down…[because], like, you're talking to your sister and all of a sudden, oh, they're gay now…can you still be prejudiced? A lot of people don't have that luxury…the minorities, I mean. You can't be like, 'Oh! My cousin's black, and I never knew!' That's why racism can go on forever." Emily says that because anyone can come out of the closet, the challenges faced by sexual minorities can easily affect any person or family in a way that is distinct from race and class. From this logic, because individuals of all races can potentially have continually changing sexual identities, sexual minorities can recruit greater numbers of allies more easily than racially driven political or social advocacy groups. This is because (in terms of Emily's beliefs) all human beings have an SO and, thus, individuals of all races can find themselves negatively affected by heteronormative attitudes or "antigay" policies. From Emily's perspective, anyone, regardless of class or race, can suddenly find themselves personally invested in the political push for equality. While Becky appears to make sense of SO and other dimensions of identity through an essentialist lens by likening sexuality to race, Emily acknowledges the unique nature of the LGBT movement that is derived from the fluid nature of SO (as opposed to her strictly essentialist rendering of race). Notably, only Becky and Emily referenced race in relation to LGBT rights and activism.

Active Versus Passive Activism When we asked about how involved an individual must be in order to be effective as a straight ally, respondents offered insight into how they evaluate their own and others' activism. Marie adamantly maintained that, in order to be a straight ally, one must be

continually *active*, i.e., that an individual's activism must stretch beyond just verbally claiming to support LGBT rights: "To be considered an ally you have to be doing work. You can still support the cause and be like, 'I am pro-equal rights and I am pro-everything else,' but you're not necessarily an ally. I consider the term ally to be more like, 'I am part of the movement and part of the cause and I am straight.'" In contrast, Erica, who first heard the term "straight ally" during the Safe Space training at her university, said, "I think you can call yourself a straight ally [without being involved]. Like, 'I'm straight and pro-this and pro-that.' Just as long as you're kind of respectful and understanding of everything…I think that's when you can call yourself an ally." However, she went on to note that allies need training and knowledge: "In order to have the cardstock 'R' [symbol] that we put on our [dorm room] door [signifying that we are trained Safe Space Allies]…you definitely should be trained and you should know what…each of the words [pansexual, asexual, bisexual, etcetera] mean." Marie's emphasis on active ally work suggests that simply understanding terms and respecting LGBT people are not allyship. Erica's definition of allyship as knowledge and acceptance, alternatively, may represent a more passive—though still acceptable to Erica—model of being a straight ally. Marie went on to say, "The main problem…[is] people who are purposefully staying with their own view and not being willing to consider another viewpoint." Marie's view of what it means to be an ally contrasts with Erica's insomuch as Marie possesses a greater sense of urgency for straight activists to become involved and work actively with LGBT advocacy organizations for political and social change, while Erica appears to focus more on attitudes/beliefs rather than behaviors/action in her description of straight allies' responsibilities and obligations. Collectively, their responses delineate different boundaries of the term "ally" but share a focus on "the work," even if some do not believe that doing "the work" is necessary. In other words, to some participants, the social impact of allyship matters less than believing in LGBT equality.

Celebrity Status: Who Can Be Involved? Extending from our discussion of passive versus active activism, our participants offered differing opinions regarding the efficacy of celebrity involvement in LGBT politics, which some attributed to the mainstreaming of LGBT politics and an increase of media discourse about queer youth suicide. "Since Obama came out, a lot more celebrities came out talking about gay rights, " said Kate, "and I think that…people see their idols or they see people that they look up to talking about it, and then they want to align themselves with their same lifestyle or their life." Kate associates the rise in awareness of LGBT issues among straight people to celebrities' direct involvement or participation in LGBT advocacy campaigns. To her, some individuals may be more inclined to become allies once a celebrity or public figure that they admire has done so first. Emily noted, "[Celebrities] have a lot of influence, I'm glad that they are doing something positive. That's why I thought it was okay for straight famous people [to make IGB videos] because I just thought, 'Oh, they're straight but people care about what they think, and I'm not a famous person.'"

Emily expressed initial hesitation to make an IGB video because of her sexual identity. "I guess I just kind of felt like [the LGBT] community sort of had a little bit of an ownership of the IGB thing and I thought that [it was for] famous people [and] people who were just speaking from their own experiences…I think…if I had made [a video], people would be like, 'Well, what do you know about it?'" Emily notes a difference between her position as a straight person in LGBT politics versus a straight celebrity's place in LGBT politics. She feels that people would be more interested in what a famous person has to say, just based on celebrity. As such, it seems that celebrity status or public profile may be another way to distinguish between who can or should participate in LGBT activism. Emily's comments are meaningful in that they illustrate how a range of symbolic material—politics of emotion (Ahmed 2004), knowledge of popular culture, and lived experiences of SO and inequality—all worked together to influence Emily's perception of what she was "allowed" to do as a straight person involved in LGBT activism.

Discussion

We found that—contrary to mass media discourse on queer youth suicide that resembles a moral panic (Fahs, Dudy, & Stage 2013; Grzanka and Mann 2014)—our participants had multifarious relationships with and awareness of IGB and queer suicide prevention activism; suicide was not the cornerstone of straight ally activism among respondents in our sample. In this sense, our participants reflected the idea that being an ally is less a pre-scripted role to be taken on and more of a nascent identity formation crosscut by generation/age, religion, and social class, among other intersecting dimensions of difference (Cole 2009; Goffman 1959; Shields 2008). Furthermore, they asserted that their ally identities were constantly negotiated in the context of heterosexism as a pervasive social system, whether or not this negotiation involved rejecting homophobic religious backgrounds or fearing being identified as gay because of association with pro-LGBT groups. Though no singular definition of straight ally emerged from our interviews, participants volunteered ideas about the differences between being or identifying as an ally and actually doing activist work, suggesting that perhaps vernacular discourse conflates straight allies with LGBT activism. Their responses have potential implications for how we conceptualize and implement pro-LGBT consciousness-raising initiatives and programs designed to

cultivate LGBT-affirmative attitudes among heterosexuals from diverse backgrounds and subject positions (Miles et al. 2014).

Identity Choreography

Our findings offer insight into our initial research questions, but they also pointed us in new directions. Specifically, GT analysis led us to consider not only the social and political dimensions of being a straight ally but also the epistemic and ontological elements of actively defining the identity which one is claiming. Participants' descriptions of the emotional dimensions of becoming allies and creating a place for themselves in LGBT politics emerged as a locus of insight in our research. Our data illuminates the internal conflict some straight allies grappled with as they worked to develop and maintain their ally identities. For example, some interviewees who had grown up in conservative households expressed feelings of reservation when asked whether or not they discussed their involvement in LGBT organizations with family, while others described harboring fears that their peers will suspect them of being queer simply for participating in such communities. Several respondents discussed situations in which they wavered between explicitly identifying as allies and working to downplay or minimize their identities as allies; in this sense, many participants wore the identity of straight ally like a mask that could be donned in situations that would yield social capital for the individual and removed under circumstances when the individual is threatened by criticism or chastisement (Goffman 1959). This finding suggests that an individual's upbringing may be less of a factor in predicting whether or not they will become a straight ally, but upbringing may otherwise work to influence the type of straight ally an individual becomes.

Our participants' statements about the political efficacy of straight allies further evidence such a theory. Though all of our interviewees were comfortable identifying as an ally, almost all of them provided different interpretations of what precisely that meant. The most prominent concept our participants' referred to was the idea of what we term "passive" versus "active" activism. Passive activism describes the social practices of straight allies who do not engage in formal LGBT advocacy campaigns or organizations. Rather, such passive allies conceptualized their ally identities around certain moral standards of respect and empathy toward LGBT individuals, as opposed to organized social action. Active activism, on the other hand, refers to the practices of those individuals who were heavily involved in LGBT politics—often participating in two or more pro-LGBT political and social movements—and was associated with purposeful and organized efforts to bring about social transformation. These distinctions were important to both kinds of allies, because they served as normative metrics by which allies characterized their commitment to LGBT equality. Nonetheless, they all embraced the label "straight ally" despite differing levels of personal involvement and conceptions of what constitutes an ally.

As we considered the narratives that emerged in our interviews, Thompson's (2005) ontological choreography inspired us to consider how the dynamic construction of straight allyship represented a form of identity choreography that was both deeply affective and intricately intentional. Thompson indicates that ontological choreography is essentially susceptible to failure; in other words, it does not always work. Likewise, according to our interviewees, the creation and maintenance of ally identities is tenuous insomuch as allies may disagree on their respective statuses as allies and may face threats to their identities from friends, family members, and from popular discourse on LGBT politics. Our interviews revealed participants reflecting on how they define, use, and generally make sense of their identities; we interpret their meaning-making as choreographic (in Thompson's use of the term), because these diverse social actors do this choreography to "get on with the task at hand" (Thompson 2005, p. 8): become (good) straight allies and be recognized as such. Whereas ontological choreography is (a) anchored in the integration of meanings and knowledge from otherwise discreet ontological orders, (b) is inextricably linked to technoscience, and (c) is a theory derived from an ethnographic setting, we offer identity choreography as way to think through (1) how individuals integrate meanings and knowledge from otherwise discreet social orders, (2) how those meanings are anchored in personal, self-reflexive narratives about identity, and (3) are fundamentally rooted in social movement politics. Notably, in both Thompson's work and our own, choreography does not result in an ossified, shared definition of otherwise contested concepts; on the contrary, ontological and identity choreography open up possibilities for individuals to make space for themselves amid already ongoing discourses—in this case, LGBT social movements. Our participants used a range of symbolic and even technological (e.g., the Internet and YouTube) material to produce their own individual understandings of allyship that fit with their worldviews, including their explanations of where homophobia comes from, what about their background influenced their involvement in activism, and why straight, cisgender people matter in the fight for LGBT rights. This cognitive-affective work coalesces in the production of straight allyship as a legible (if not finite) identity that can be taken up and evaluated—as more or less effective, active, or passive.

Our participants paint a multidimensional portrait of the entire emotional journey of a straight ally, but their comments consistently indicated that being an ally feels rewarding when received positively by the LGBT community and other allies. On the other hand, ally work feels frustrating and fruitless when received negatively by LGBT individuals or homonegative peers and family members. Several allies described that when their views and activism are challenged,

they are willing to fight for their beliefs and be forthright about their identification as a straight ally. However, some participants actively avoided situations where their activism might be challenged or disregarded; some even expressed concern with being considered queer. Moreover, we found that positive feedback and positive affects were essential to participants' maintenance of their identity as a straight ally. Consonant with neoliberal ideologies that privilege individual behaviors over structural forces (Duggan 2003; Ahmed 2012; Elliott 2014), our participants generally focused on theirs and others' actions rather than the structural dimensions of heterosexism, such as straight privilege, which was a meaningful site of silence in our data (Clarke 2005). In addition, our participants collectively offered a relatively harmonious view of the efficacy of their participation in LGBT activism; they agreed that straight allies are absolutely necessary for change and can contribute to the LGBT community in unique and consequential ways, including helping to change the perspectives of other straight people and easing a queer person's coming out experience by embodying an sympathetic and supportive straight person. No participant said that straight allies are unnecessary or ineffective within LGBT advocacy communities or that their own work might be meaningless; rather, all of our participants said that straight allies are indispensable, because they play a decisive role in furthering the aims of LGBT activist projects.

Limitations and Implications

Several limitations of the present study are worth noting. We were unable to recruit many participants who made IGB videos, and not all of our participants engaged in suicide prevention activism, so our study is unable to draw conclusions about the connection between ally activism and the politics of suicide, broadly, and IGB, particularly. Nonetheless, the wide variety of our allies' experiences reflects prior findings (e.g., Fingerhut 2011) and helps us to theorize "straight ally" as a broad and mutable collective identity. A sample in which all participants have been actively involved in the same program, organization, or campaign could perhaps present different viewpoints than the allies involved in our study, particularly in the areas of recognition and appreciation (Asta and Vacha-Haase 2013) or the perceived efficacy of specific campaigns and movements. Twelve of our 13 participants were women, whereas a more gender-diverse sample would have allowed us to more directly engage with the potential gendered nature of ally identities in terms of both hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Though we purposefully did not ask participants to identify their race, future research should could develop research questions about the racial dynamics of allyship and directly investigate the intersections of race/racism and sexuality/heterosexism in ally politics, particularly around the intertwined concepts of homonormativity and neoliberalism (Duggan 2003; Elliot 2014). Finally, the interview format itself may produce particular forms of impression management that are likely different in more organic settings observable through PO and other ethnographic methods. An important question for future research is whether our participants would do this identity choreography in their everyday lives, as opposed to the artificially constructed interview setting (Valocchi 2005). For example, how are their beliefs about the nature of SO deployed in everyday interactions that reinforce or undermine their identities as both straight people and as allies?

Nevertheless, identity choreography is a potent framing device for understanding the work that these social actors do to "make up" ally identities (Thompson 2005; Hacking 1986). Hacking's scholarship on looping effects and dynamic nominalism highlights that once identities or kinds of personhood have been made up, they may appear to calcify but are constantly subject to transformation. Just as the category of the homosexual both appears constant since its inception and is subject to scientific, political, and moral revision (Foucault 1978; Terry 1999), the meanings of heterosexuality remain plural and in flux (Katz 2007). From this perspective, the identity choreography of straight allies is a deeply historical phenomenon and should be both revisited and studied longitudinally. We have no reason to suspect that what makes (up) an ally will fossilize while the landscape of sexual and gender politics in the USA and worldwide continues to transform. The identity may retain political saliency, be fully coopted by neoliberal diversity rhetoric, or something else entirely; ally politics accordingly afford LGBT activists of all kinds the opportunity to choreograph future iterations of straight ally training, educational interventions, organizational agendas, and institutional priorities. Privilege—the unearned and unfair advantages of being a dominant social group member—was not, for example, a theme in our interviews, despite the focus on social inequality that framed all of our conversations. This does not mean that our participants are not aware of privilege, but foregrounding straight privilege—in addition to knowledge about LGBT people and issues—in ally training and education (e.g., Safe Space, Gay-Straight Alliances) might redirect attention away from neoliberal discourse on identity politics and choice-making and toward the structural dynamics that engender and constrict those choices.

Our allies were confident that cisgender heterosexuals are essential to achieving LGBT equality, but many were uncomfortable with the conflicts that arise when members of marginalized groups challenge the politics, intentions, language, and actions of members of privileged groups. We do not suggest that knowledge of LGBT issues (e.g., history, terminology, etc.) is unimportant, but these allies' experiences remind us that managing the conflict and discomfort that comes from difficult dialogues about privilege and inequality is equally important in crafting efficacious coalitions across social

identity groups. Our findings underscore the importance of intergroup dialogue and other group interventions that involve students, teachers, and community members who may not be obvious candidates for allyship (Dessel 2010), because our participants did not share political profiles of backgrounds that would suggest a single path toward LGBT activism (c.f., Miles et al. 2014). Just as LGBT advocacy and consciousness raising have emphasized the diversity of experiences within the categories represented by L, G, B, and T, our participants remind us that the A (for ally) should not be rendered monolithic or singular in either form or content (Schulman 2013). Recent discourse on social media that we highlighted above makes it clear that some of the most pressing issues facing equality movements come from within activist communities themselves. Straight allies will continue to play an important role in LGBT activism, but educators, community organizers, and institutional leaders will influence whether that role is a productive or strictly contentious one.

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