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Allies and the LGBTQ+ Community

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Abstract

This research looks into what is to be an ally to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trangender, Queer+ (LGBTQ+) community at the University of Wisconsin-Stout (UW-Stout). It will provide insight into what an ally is and how individuals can work to become an ally to the LGBTQ+ community. At UW-Stout, there exists many strong organizations focused on allies and the LGBTQ+ community. This research delves into what the LGBTQ+ community expects of the allies of these organizations. Qualitative data was collected from a focus group held at the Qube, which is the LGBTQ+ resource center at UW-Stout. These participants were voluntary attendees recruited through public advertising. They provided their experiences of when they felt supported in their identities and what they believe allies are. In it's findings, this research will show that the status of an ally to the LGBTQ+ community is something that is given to non-community members by the community through their efforts of respecting queer spaces, acceptance and normalization, education and self-sufficiency, and active engagement in social issues. This paper further outlines how individuals can take on this role and become an ally to the LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: ally, LGBTQ+, community, Qube

Introduction

UW-Stout is a diverse campus that supports the many identities that it's students represent. In recognizing different identities students have, the campus provides specific resources to students who identify within the LGBTQ+ community, such as the LGBTQ program coordinated by Julie Miller, the Qube (LGBTQ+ student resource center), and the Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) (student run organization). While these resources provide an opportunity for members to express themselves and influence the community, at times they generate conflict between the community and non-community members. This may even occur between the community and those who work to be allies of the community. This research provides insight into what is expected of allies by analyzing stories of community members through a voluntary focus group. One of the key features of being an ally was found to be taking on the role of an ally by respecting queer spaces, accep-

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tance and normalization, education and self-sufficiency, and active engagement in social issues. This will help those looking to be an ally have a greater understanding of why these attributes are being expected and will help have the skills to allow for a multicultural society.

Literature Review

Much of the literature in relation to the LGBTQ+ community seems to be focused on an awareness of the individual's identity as a member within the community and specifically the impacts this identity has on relationships with parents (Savin-Williams, Dubé, 1998. D' Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005). These studies pulled out the positive and negative impacts that such awareness had on the community members. Studies also focused on the awareness in social institutions such as a Catholic college and how to maintain and influence a community at large (Love, 1998). These studies provide knowledge of how awareness and conflict are important in creating a better environment for LGBTQ+ community members.

Beyond the awareness of the community, there is importance in how society is perceiving and integrating such individuals. Generally society appears to perpetuate ideas of heteronormativity (Solebello, Elliott, 2011). This is the belief that all individuals should be assumed heterosexual unless explicitly identified otherwise. This creates an environment that forces individuals to take on an acceptable role in society and molds their every day interactions in manners beyond their control (Rich, 1980). Even after being represented as other, society appears to be influenced by a novelty effect that makes examples of non-heterosexuality appear to stand out more. This occurs even when examples are used as frequently or less frequently than heterosexual examples (Ripley, Anderson, McCormack, Rockett, 2012). These challenges to integrating and representing the community to society at large provide allies a basis of what they must surmount.

Other research shows the benefits individuals receive for being an ally to the LGBTQ+ community (Rostosky, Black, Riggle, & Rosenkrantz, 2015). This gives incentive to non-community members to actively seek out opportunities to be an ally as they can in turn document value with such actions. This in turn may help counter negative mental health differences as seen in community members (Ueno, 2010). Finally, research into what an ally training program is helps provide clarity to those seeking out to be an ally in their community (Woodford, Kolb, Durocher-Radeka, & Javier, 2014). These sources show benefits to those looking to be an ally and can clarify the avenues of education an ally can take.

The previous literature helps show the importance of awareness of the community, how it is being perceived and integrated, and benefits to those interacting with and those within the community. It is lacking specifically what the community is looking for in those who support it. While un-

derstanding how and what is ongoing is important to find points of change, directly researching what the community is looking for will create a strong starting point for positively impacting it. This research will work to fill this lack of representation of community expectations and provide those looking to be an ally of the community such a starting point. It will also give a platform for the stories within the community of when they have felt supported by allies and in turn can lead to the construction of better ally programs, social efforts, and peer integration.

Theoretical Overview

This paper will utilize role theory and ideas of solidarity and social integration to understand the data collected. Role theory is how individuals who occupy particular social positions are expected to behave, and how they expect others to behave (Ritzer, 2007). For the purpose of this research, it is the idea of how an individual is taking on the role of an LGBTQ+ ally. This is the idea that to fulfill and be identified as an ally, individuals must perform certain actions such as taking on education, support roles, or activism for the LGBTQ+ community. Solidarity is the perceived or realized organization of individuals for group survival, interests, or purposes. This was further expanded by Emile Durkheim into the ideas of two types of solidarity, mechanical and organic. Mechanical solidarity is the idea of individuals of same interests such as a small community, religious group, or, as in this research, the LGBTQ+ community at UW-Stout. Organic solidarity is the idea of many individuals interacting, which can be seen more in a capitalist society where individuals participate outside of their mechanical groups. This creates exposure to many different ideas and perceptions about topics such as in this research when allies and the LGBTQ+ community interact. In our society we function heavily within organic solidarity, and this often creates conflict as different ideas and perceptions lead to different ideals of how society should function. The final idea is that of social integration. It is the interrelation of elements in a social system, traditionally actors or members of a system. This was expanded to the realm of an individual's actions or communications. This helps to understand the ultimate goal of the community to be a connected part of the social system around it. (Ritzer, 2007) More specific research has expanded into queer spaces and the necessity of their own areas of mechanical solidarity. Heteronormativity, as mentioned above, enforces scripts of how a person should act in accordance to sexual orientation. When distinguished as outside of these scripts, members of the LGBTQ+ community are oppressed in society as a minority group. This oppression forces them to act in ways to survive in society and limits their own understanding of their identity as they cannot fully work to collaborate with heterosexual individuals (Rich, 1980).

Methods

This research was conducted through qualitative research methods. The data was recorded from a research focus group conducted on campus in the Qube at UW-Stout. This focus group was coordinated with the Qube staff and the researcher. This was originally planned as a brown bag discussion format where participants would voluntarily attend the Qube to discuss a topic after a basic outline of information was provided. With such a format, participants would be able to provide their insight into what an ally is to the community, and it would be made up of participants who actively attend such events that represent actively involved community members. Also with the Qube as the center of community activity on campus, it would be a strong base of the active community's view.
The first scheduled group was canceled due to concerns with closing the Qube for the group. The group was then rescheduled and advertised as a research focus group for an hour time period after the Qube's general operating hours were over. The advertising consisted of a flyer that was posted within and nearby the Qube that outlined what the research project was, the intended participant pool of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, and the researcher's contact information. The focus group was also announced at the general meeting of the UW-Stout GSA and was posted on the Qube's social media Facebook page the week of the group. These advertisements were used to reach active members of the community to provide their insight about allies. The group's goal to represent the LGBTQ+ identifying members and the commitment involved was made clear.

The focus group was conducted over an hour long time period. It was held in the back lounge of the Qube which provided a secluded environment that was traditionally used for such discussions. The first half of the group consisted of outlining the research, all related materials, and obtaining consent from the participants. Then the participants were asked about their demographics and involvement within the community at UW-Stout. These were recorded through jotted notes and were used to build rapport amongst the participants. All the data recorded was done using pseudonyms chosen by the participants. The second half of the focus group was audio recorded and focused on the questions relating to how the participants received support in relation to their identities within the community. Notes were also taken during this time to highlight specific emphasis points along with timestamps and speaker's names to provide clarity during transcription of the recording. Throughout the group, participants were fully aware that data collection was occurring and clearly notified when audio recording was in use. The questions during this time provided open ended opportunities for the participants to share their experiences. Following the focus group, the recording was then transcribed by the researcher to be coded for themes and specific quotes.

This process collected a strong dialogue amongst participants, but was limited in that only gender non-conforming and female self-identified participants were present. One advantage to this process was, as a member of the community at UW-Stout, the researcher had previous knowledge and explanations of the identities given along with other terminology used within the community. This allowed the participants to focus more on sharing their experiences without the needed time or interruption of providing baseline education to understand their dialogue. Also, with the size of the community at UW-Stout, the researcher and participants had previously known of each other. This previously established rapport helped the participants feel more comfortable with the group and allowed them the safety to share their experiences. This did not seem to affect the research as the roles of the project were clearly defined at the start of the focus group. This may have allowed for deeper inspection into topics as the researcher could pick up on ambiguous terminology that is used within the LGBTQ+ community and varies by definition of each member.

Results

The focus group contained four main qualities of how those who want to be allies of the LGBTQ+ community should act. They include (1) the idea of respecting queer spaces, (2) acceptance, and normalization of the community, (3) education and self-sufficiency on the part of those looking to be an ally, and (4) the practice of active engagement in social issues around the community. These qualities provide a baseline for the expectations of how to take on the role of being an ally. This research also shows the emphasis of taking on the role of being an ally. Based on the data collected in this research, one cannot claim or self-identify as an ally without taking on the expectations of such a role and showing them to the community. Following this acceptance of the role and action associated with it, the community should then identify these individuals as allies.
Respecting Queer Spaces

The idea of a space that is one's own embodies the mechanical solidarity that Durkheim discusses. This area provides people of similar experiences and ideas the space to share amongst themselves for safety and reassurance. As a member of the community, individuals have to worry about marginalization and oppression within society at large, but within spaces designated as their own, they have the safety to process their experiences and work to deal with their own identities. This can be seen through Bernadette's account of when they felt most supported regarding their gender expression during the Midwest Bisexual, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Ally College Conference (MBLGTACC), "….when I was at MBLGTACC….it was so good…. felt super supported and super validated by that, just seeing that representation…." Janice shared similar sentiments of safety, "I feel like I can really let my guard down when I'm surrounded by other queer people."

This, in turn can be understood by those looking to be an ally in the sense of respecting such spaces. In order to be an ally, non-community members must recognize that "it's not about you," (Janice) as an ally, but it's about the community they are looking to support and help in such spaces. Rich elaborates on this topic, arguing that individuals with these identities need autonomous spaces, rather than extensions of existing social institutions, in order to fully develop their own existence (Rich, 1980). With the oppression of a heteronormative society, members of the LGBTQ+ community must either assimilate for safety or distinguish themselves as others for authenticity. Without the safe spaces, their ability to create an existence as defined by themselves is limited. Astrid shares the severity to which members of the LGBTQ+ community feels oppression, "It like, diminishes the real severity of coming out. People literally could get murdered, there are people who have situations like that." Within these safe spaces, LGBTQ+ community members can share and process their experiences into an understanding of what they feel in their community and how they want to make up their existence from these areas.

Acceptance and Normalization

Every day individuals who identify outside the community have validation in their existence through media, education, and other information sources. As Jankins highlights, "and everybody already assumes that you're straight. Heteronormativity, suuucks." As already highlighted in the literature, the idea that everyone is straight until proven otherwise is draining on the community. Individuals in the community want to be recognized as who they are. As provided in theory, they want to be integrated into society. This requires the social acceptance that there are sexual identities beyond heterosexuality. After this acceptance occurs, there was an overwhelming idea of normalizing non-heterosexual identities and relationships.

> *"Yeah, like when I see an ally that's like, 'I'm here to support you.'*
> *I'm like 'Oh Jesus Christ, here we go, like what are we doing,'*
> *but then like when it's people who are just like there for you and you're there for*
> *them and it's just cohesion and they just happen to be straight and it's like 'Oh*
> *okay, whatever.'"*
> *—Bernadette*

The above quote sums up much of this idea of normalization and acceptance. The community isn't looking for special treatment or the idea of their sexuality to be exotic to non-community members. They are looking to be treated as their heterosexual peers with the acceptance that their sexuality or gender expression is different. In such, those who are looking to be allies should recognize where they are acting in ways to accept and validate the community and avoid behaviors that create this sense of novelty or exoticism. Jankins

explains how this looks, "I have classmates that don't make it a big deal, they react to me talking about my girlfriend as if I were talking about a boyfriend, I think that makes a good ally, you know like oh that's your life and let me just tell you about mine and I'm as equally as respective of that. It doesn't take much."

Education and Self-Sufficiency

As members of a non-traditional identity, those within the community experience much of their understanding of their identities through their own education and research in sources such as other community members, libraries, the internet, and LGBTQ+ resource spaces. As a result, these individuals have already put much effort into understanding their own experiences and may have traumatic experiences associated with this learning and understanding. As those who are looking to become allies begin, they may find it easy to simply ask community members to explain and answer every question they have, but this is taxing on the community members, especially when these questions may be taken as a hegemonic representation of a large community. As Janice states, "We're not all encyclopedias and not one queer person can represent every single queer person, like especially even at Stout." Astrid also shares these sentiments in multiple ways, "We're all, we all don't need to be teachers, we can't all be teachers, not everyone has the ability to be a teacher." These examples highlight the need for those looking to be allies to search for information in the proper places. This also extends beyond queer spaces into other areas of oppression such as ability, race, and socioeconomic status. Members of the community may be a great source for information about local areas, such as being directed to the Qube or the LGBTQ program coordinator at UW-Stout, but in broader contexts accessing public sources on their own provides the community members with validation in their experiences when being asked for them, rather than being used for a quick information source. As Janice explains, "like that they're not just in it because they know you, that they're in it because you know they care." Bernadette shows appreciation for even the simplest steps of self-sufficiency, "and thank you for Googling it and not asking me." These steps also lead into the next idea of active engagement.

Active Engagement

The final and highly defining quality presented about being an ally was the level of engagement and action taken by an individual. This idea about allies garnered the most passionate responses from the participants. They emphasized that an ally doesn't just passively coexist by the community, but that an ally takes action to help the community. "I want you to advocate for our rights and then not expect anything in return" (Janice). The difference between the portion of the population who is indifferent about the

community and those who are allies are the actions they take in working to end the oppression and marginalization of the community in society. Another way of explaining this is the idea that the LGBTQ+ community is an umbrella term and all those identities within it are being hit by the rain of oppression. "[A]llies aren't necessarily in the umbrella, but they are helping hold it up. The rain of oppression, yeah." (Janice) This is the way of distinguishing those who are indifferent to the community won't be affected by the rain of oppression, but also aren't causing it, while those who are allies will working through the rain and try to help the community out.

Conclusion

This research helps to further the understanding of what an ally is as identified by the LGBTQ+ community at UW-Stout. Specifically how being an ally is a role within society and relating to the LGBTQ+ community. In taking on this role there are assumed expectations and responsibilities to the community, specifically respecting queer spaces, acceptance and normalization, self-sufficient education, and active engagement. On campus at UW-Stout, individuals who are looking to become allies can take this role by educating themselves through on campus resources such as the Qube, GSA, and courses focused around gender and sexuality. They can then use this knowledge to be more inclusive and accepting to the community and also take the knowledge to try and create social change in their own ways to advocate for and support the community. Also, they can respect the exclusive spaces on campus that provide safety for the community as it grows to become integrated into society. While this research helps draw in views from what the community is expecting of allies, it doesn't provide insight into what those who are working to be allies are providing. This one-sided view needs a counter view of what allies believe they are doing to help the community to see where expectations and actions are lining up and to find what is disconnected. Further research into what is being provided will help create a more thorough understanding of the LGBTQ+ community and its integration into society.

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