

Positive Aspects of Being a Heterosexual Ally to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) People

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Research on heterosexual allies has focused on heterosexual identity development models and pathways to ally activism. The positive aspects or positive experiences of identifying as an ally to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identified individuals and communities have received little attention. Using an online survey of participants recruited from LGBT ally related social media, we collected open-ended responses to a question about the positive aspects of self-identifying as a heterosexual ally. A final analytic sample of 292 self-identified male and female heterosexual adults (age 18–71, $M = 33.47$, $SD = 13.32$) provided responses that generated 8 themes. Positive aspects of being a heterosexual ally were: (a) increased knowledge and awareness, (b) upholding values of justice, (c) beneficial individual relationships, (d) community belonging, (e) educating others, (f) being a role model, (g) using social privilege, and (h) speaking out and taking a stand. The findings suggest that being a heterosexual ally is rewarding and may enhance individual well-being. These findings provide information that may contribute to effective ally development efforts.

Allies are individuals who are members of a privileged social group who support and advocate for members of an oppressed group (Washington & Evans, 1991). Heterosexual allies may serve as advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities at multiple levels, from one-on-one interactions to high-profile social activism. Heterosexual allies are important to ending stigma and achieving equal rights for LGBT individuals.

The pervasive social stigma against LGBT identities has prompted research focusing on the (negative) attitudes of heterosexuals and the correlates of these (negative) attitudes (Herek, 2002, Herek, 2009; Norton & Herek, 2013). In turn, intervention studies have primarily focused on reducing these negative attitudes, most often through education and/or interpersonal contact with lesbian and gay people (see Bartoş, Berger, & Hegarty, 2014 for a review). Recent findings, however, suggest that positive attitudes, or allophilia, for LGBT people explain unique variance in ally related behaviors such as attending LGBT-related events

and participating in discussions about LGBT rights (Fingerhut, 2011). Thus, in addition to reducing prejudice, it is important to also focus on understanding and facilitating the positive attitudes, experiences, and outcomes of heterosexual allies.

Knowledge about people who self-identify as heterosexual allies is limited to a handful of studies (reviewed below). While this literature explores the process of ally development and the challenges of identifying as a heterosexual ally, it does not explicitly inquire about the positive experiences, feelings, and rewards that individuals associate with identifying as a heterosexual ally. In the current study, we specifically explored the perceptions of positive experiences and rewards that accompany identifying as a heterosexual ally.

The positive experiences of heterosexual allies may be conceptually linked to sources of well-being such as meaning, purpose, and social connection (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Understanding the contributions of heterosexual allies' positive experiences to their well-being also may contribute to more effective ally development training and ultimately may contribute to the larger goal of transforming social stigma and prejudice. Therefore, to begin to understand the possible role of the positive aspects and rewards of identifying as a heterosexual ally, we first sought to explicate these experiences.

Literature Review

Several qualitative studies have inquired about the motives of heterosexual allies. Most notably, Russell (2011) interviewed 127 active heterosexual allies over a period of 17 years about their

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motives for engaging in LGBT activism. Their often complex motivations for public activism on behalf of LGBT rights fell into two overarching categories: (a) the desire to act in alignment with their deeply held principles and values such as justice, civil rights, and religious/moral beliefs, and (b) their professional and personal experiences in their families, relationships, and communities.

The importance of acting in congruence with one's values was also highlighted in findings from an interview study of 12 heterosexual allies who were nominated by local LGBT community members (Duhigg, Rostosky, Gray, & Wimsatt, 2010). These allies were asked about past experiences and values that motivated their ally activism. These experiences included a meaningful friendship with an LGBT person and the recognition of privilege and oppression that was contradictory to their deeply held humanitarian values. These allies also reported that their activism led to new insights, self-awareness, and knowledge about their own sexual identity and the diversity of sexuality that exists within the LGBT community. In addition to some fears of rejection, guilt, and other negative emotions, half of these heterosexual allies reported that being an ally brought specific rewards including friendship and connections with others, a sense of belonging, positive feelings about themselves, and personal and professional recognition.

Several additional qualitative studies of heterosexual allies have focused on specific professional roles and contexts. For instance, Ryan, Broad, Walsh, and Nutter (2013) interviewed university staff and faculty members of an LGBTQ allies' organization. The 13 heterosexual-identified participants ascribed their motivation for participating in the group to their professional roles and responsibilities to support LGBTQ students. The authors noted that these narratives focused on identifying as a professional ally within an educational context, and not on the highly personal work of heterosexual identity development, its challenges, and its outcomes.

In two qualitative studies of psychologists (Asta & Vacha-Haase, 2013; Borgman, 2009), participants revealed that they were influenced to be allies as a result of their personal relationships with LGBT people. They were motivated to continue their ally development by mentors and role models who encouraged and reinforced their growth and development. In both of these studies, participants shared the challenges of resolving internal conflicts and negative emotions such as guilt.

Each of these studies also offered hints at positive aspects of being a "professional ally." In Asta and Vacha-Haase's (2013) telephone interviews with 14 counseling psychologists' in university counseling centers, participants noted that their experiences as allies increased their confidence as they advocated for LGBT people in the context of their work. In Borgman's (2009) interviews with 11 psychologists who identified as both Christians and heterosexual allies, participants revealed that resolving conflicts and successfully integrating these identities was accompanied by a sense of increased empathy and greater therapeutic effectiveness.

Other studies of heterosexual allies have sampled university students. For instance, DiStefano, Croteau, Anderson, Kampa-Kokesch, and Bullard (2000) analyzed the open-ended responses of 87 undergraduate, heterosexual student members of an LGBT network within a national student affairs professional organization. In addition to some difficult emotions, internal conflicts, and negative reactions from others in response to their ally related efforts, these students also described positive emotions including a

sense of pride. The authors conclude, among other things, that being an ally is, overall, a positive experience that is worthy of deeper understanding.

Two qualitative studies have analyzed students' written reflections about their involvement in LGBT ally training. In one study, 11 undergraduate honors students expressed their fears of "coming out" as allies, their desire for role models, and their lack of knowledge and skills. By the end of the course they felt empowered as allies with new knowledge and skills and a sense of connection. One student wrote, "Being an ally has affected my life for the better" (Ji, Du Bois, & Finnessy, 2009, p. 420). These students also noted the importance of receiving positive reinforcement for their learning and their efforts.

Likewise, in an analysis of written reflection papers at the end of a year-long course for 10 counseling graduate student research team members (Dillon et al., 2004), and in a survey of 46 heterosexual members of a gay-straight alliance (Goldstein & Davis, 2010), researchers found that students struggled with their fears of rejection from others who might assume they were gay or lesbian. Yet they valued the positive support they found within the group as they developed their ally identities.

Other qualitative studies of university students have similarly noted initial fears of rejection for identifying as a heterosexual ally and then growing confidence and feelings of connection. Specifically, Getz and Kirkley (2003, 2006) interviewed 20 participants who were trained to be ally educators in a Roman Catholic university setting. Fourteen of these participants were heterosexual and described their initial fears that others would assume they were gay or lesbian. Over the course of the training and involvement in educating others, they experienced positive feelings of growing confidence, connection, and engagement as self-identified allies.

In sum, the majority of studies of heterosexual allies have focused on motivations and challenges that accompany identifying as a heterosexual ally. However, the larger literature on the role of positive experiences and feelings suggests that articulating and understanding the positive aspects of identifying as a heterosexual ally may be important to a more complete understanding of developing and training allies and ending stigma and prejudice against LGBT people (see Gonzalez, Riggle, & Rostosky, 2014). The previous work reviewed above suggests that positive emotions, experiences, and rewards may be present in meaningful ways in the experiences of being a heterosexual ally. The purpose of this study was to build on this previous work by directly and specifically asking a nationally recruited sample of self-identified male or female heterosexual allies about their perceptions of the positive aspects of being an ally to LGBT individuals.

Method

Participant Recruitment and Sample Description

Announcements about the study were emailed and posted on online message boards of several national and regional LGBT and straight ally organizations. Individuals who were at least 18 years of age and who self-identified as a straight/heterosexual ally to LGBT individuals were invited to complete an online survey. The informed consent page stated that the purpose of the study was "to document the positives and strengths that individuals perceive they

have experienced as allies” and to better understand “the rewards of being a straight ally.” Recipients were also encouraged to forward the announcement about the study to other individuals who met the criteria and who might be interested in participating. All study procedures and materials were approved by the university institutional review board.

Survey data were submitted by 369 participants. We dropped from the final analytic sample 69 individuals who reported their sexual identity as other than “heterosexual/straight” and seven participants who did not provide a response to the open-ended question that could be coded. The final sample consisted of 292 self-identified heterosexual/straight participants.

Participants in the sample resided in 31 different U.S. states (two participants did not report their state of residence). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 71 ($M = 33.47$ years; $SD = 13.32$). Of the sample, 75% identified as female and 25% identified as male. The participants self-identified as European American/White (85%), Biracial/Multiracial (6%), African American/Black (3%), Hispanic/Latino/a/South American (2%), Asian American/Pacific American (2%), and Other (2%). The educational background of the sample was: high school diploma (1%); some college or technical school (22%); bachelor’s degree (19%); some post-baccalaureate or graduate work (20%); and advanced graduate degree (38%). The current relationship status of the sample was: married (38%), single (23%), in a committed relationship (20%), dating (7%), in a domestic partnership/cohabiting (7%), divorced/separated (3%), and other (2%). Participants self-reported their religious and/or spiritual beliefs as none (37%), other (22%), Protestant (18%), Catholic (14%), Jewish (8%), and Buddhist (1%).

Data Collection Instrument and Procedures

The online study began with an informed consent page that detailed the purpose of the study. Participants selected an acknowledgment button that indicated they were at least 18 years of age and had read and fully understood the informed consent form. In addition to the demographic information, participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended question in a text box:

Please tell us below what you think the positive things are about being an ALLY for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Please describe as many positive aspects as you think are important and in as much detail and with examples if you wish. We appreciate hearing your personal stories.

Data Analysis

The length of responses submitted by the participants varied from a single phrase or sentence to multiple paragraphs. These responses were systematically coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure the validity of our identified themes, we used a consensus-building process with three primary coders and an external auditor to finalize the thematic structure of the data. The primary coders consisted of one faculty member experienced in qualitative methods and two graduate students who received training in the methodology prior to beginning the coding process. The external auditor was an experienced qualitative researcher and faculty member. All coders had previous experience in research on LGBT and straight ally health and well-being.

Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) steps for conducting thematic analysis, the two primary coders began by individually reviewing a subset of the first 88 participant responses and developing a list of possible codes. The coders met and discussed their impressions and agreed on an initial set of codes. The coders then coded the first subset through careful reading of the participants’ responses. After this subset of data was coded separately, the two coders met to compare their findings. Discrepancies in codes were sent to the faculty coder for resolution. This coder reviewed all codes and gave feedback on the thematic structure, which resulted in a working set of codes. Eight themes were collaboratively determined to capture all of the codes. The two primary coders separately coded the remaining subset of data and recoded the first subset into the identified themes. After meeting to compare findings, discrepancies were sent to the faculty coder for review and resolution.

The external auditor then read the coded data and provided feedback and suggestions for revisions. Data coded into each theme were reviewed and discussed. Minor revisions were made in the coding of several responses. Data in each theme were read and evaluated by the external auditor and discrepancies in coding were discussed and reconciled until all four members of the research team reached consensus on the findings.

Results

The majority of participants ($N = 283$) identified at least one positive aspect of being an ally to LGBT individuals and a majority identified more than one. A total of 579 meaning units (Giorgi, 1985) from this dataset of participant responses were coded. Eight themes emerged from the data that represent the positive aspects of identifying as an ally: (a) increased knowledge and awareness, (b) upholding values of justice, (c) beneficial individual relationships, (d) community belonging, (e) educating others, (f) being a role model, (g) using social privilege, and, (h) speaking out and taking a stand.

The identified themes are interrelated. For instance, in many participants’ experience, individual relationships also provided a sense of belonging to the larger community, or participating in social activism accompanied a feeling of community belonging. Thus, many participants provided responses that included more than one theme. The percentage of participants who discussed each theme is listed in Table 1. The presentation of the eight themes is ordered to be consistent with the post hoc analysis of their alignment with the levels of the socioecological system (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Broadly considered, these themes can be grouped into three distinct, yet interrelated levels: (a) intrapersonal growth (increased knowledge and awareness and living according to one’s values); (b) interpersonal connection (beneficial interpersonal relationships and community belonging); and (c) community/societal contributions (educate others, be a role model, use one’s privilege, and speak out and take a stand). Each theme is illustrated below with direct quotes from participant survey responses.

Increased Knowledge and Awareness

Participants gained increased knowledge, experiences, and awareness from being a straight ally to LGBT individuals. A

Table 1. *Positive Aspects of Being a Heterosexual Ally to LGBT Individuals (N = 292)*

Themes	Characteristics	% Participants
Intrapersonal growth		
Increased knowledge and awareness	Learning new things about the self, others, culture, society, privilege, etc.	30
Upholding values	Pride and satisfaction in living by one's deeply held values of justice, morality, and equality	50
Interpersonal connection		
Beneficial relationships	Feeling connected; providing and receiving support from others.	54
Community belonging	Feeling a valued part of the LGBT community.	8
Community/societal contributions		
Educating others	Educating others about LGBT and minority issues	12
Being a role model	Serving as a role model for children as well as for other straight adults	6
Using social privilege	Actively using heterosexual privilege (and other privileged statuses) on behalf of LGBT equality	10
Speaking out and taking a stand	Acting publicly to advance social justice	27

Note. LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. 579 total meaning units were coded into themes. (Participants' responses may have included more than one theme).

28-year-old female from Florida summarized her experience as an ally:

I think that being an ally helps with perspective taking and empathy. I have always felt that I supported individuals to be confident in their sexuality, regardless of orientation, and I have always advocated for equal rights. But having friends who identify as LGBT has raised my awareness of some of the challenges they encounter, and thus has made me think more critically about politics and culture.

Some participants discussed more generally the benefit of increasing awareness of other cultures, identities, gender, and sexual fluidity. A 27-year-old male from Ohio stated, "Being an ally allows me to develop a relationship with people from all walks of life. This, in turn, makes [me] more aware of my own identity. Being an ally allows for a greater understanding [of] people different than myself."

Other participants made distinctions between gaining sexual or gender identity specific knowledge and more general knowledge about privilege, oppression, and minority rights. A 20-year-old male from Virginia commented:

I like being an ally because I am able to get different perspectives on the world. Being in the sociologically dominant groups (white, hetero male), I, and others, sometimes do not see hidden injustices or trends. Having someone you know who is directly affected by these things can open your eyes to what society is really like.

Similarly, other participants stated that being an ally gave them important knowledge and skills and the confidence to use them. For instance, a 44-year-old male from Connecticut wrote:

Being an ally for the LGBT community is the BEST training for dealing with, and existing in a functional pluralistic society. In short, it makes you a better citizen, prepares you for the challenges of ignorance (both your own and that found in others), and equips you with the ability to recognize prejudice wherever it may rear its ugly head.

Heterosexual ally participants valued the knowledge and awareness they gained. They specifically noted gains in knowledge about their own sexual identity development and greater awareness

of privilege and oppression, both in relation to the LGBT community and more broadly. These participants appreciated having a deeper understanding of their own privileged social identities in relation to members of oppressed groups.

Upholding Values of Justice

Participants expressed that being a heterosexual ally to LGBT individuals allows them to live in accordance with intrinsic values of justice, morality, and equality. A 30-year-old female noted:

This is such a strange question. The advantage of being an ally to LGBT people is that you can live your life normally without suffering from the cognitive dissonance associated with many negative viewpoints. Taking a positive view of everyone allows you to flourish and grow, and fosters spiritual and personal development in the community. What other option is there but to be an LGBT ally?

Other participants made similar statements that acting as an ally allows them to live according to their values. A 21-year-old female from Ohio wrote:

The positive thing about being an Ally is that you know you are doing the right thing. You know you are being accepting to all people and leaving behind discrimination and hate. It's about being a good person. The benefits are that you are doing a service to society by breaking free of the stigma associated with LGBT people and saying that you are NOT ok with discrimination.

Participants perceived that being an ally led to personal growth because they gained knowledge and self-awareness that allowed them to explore their values. For many allies, this process of learning and development seem to be a direct result of contact with LGBT individuals. Living in alignment with their deeply held values was a positive aspect of their identities as heterosexual allies.

Beneficial Individual Relationships

Participants benefited from supporting others and/or receiving support from others as a result of being a heterosexual ally. For

example, a 22-year-old female from Kentucky provided support to a friend during his coming-out process:

I feel that being an ALLY for the LGBT community is something that is important in opening me to other people's lifestyles and ideas about life and what we do in our community both in our town and across the nation. I come from a small town that is very religious and conservative, especially when it comes to the LGBT community. I only had one friend growing up who identified as such, and it was something he kept well under wraps in order to avoid familial consequences and trouble in school. I supported him when he did finally come out to his family, and while I could understand their hurt, I was more proud to be a part of helping my friend realize himself and start living as he felt most comfortable.

Heterosexual allies also received support in relationships with LGBT individuals. One participant, a 63-year-old female from Maryland reported,

As an ally, I open my life to experience new friendships, new ideas, diverse outlooks and opinions. I have an opportunity to meet many wonderful people that have touched my life. Each individual has unique gifts and talents that contribute to the quality of [my] life.

Thus, participants reported that, as allies, their lives were enriched by the relationships that they formed. They derived satisfaction from providing support to LGBT people. They also appreciated the support that they, in turn, received.

Community Belonging

Participants reported that being an ally helped them gain access to a new community. For example, a 20-year-old female from Illinois commented that as an ally, she is a member of the LGBT community. She noted that being a member of the LGBT community provided "a sense of collectiveness between everyone involved . . . a sanctuary for individuals of all sorts." A 33-year-old female from New York expressed difficulty with identifying as an ally because of her strong sense of belonging within the LGBT community:

Maybe I'm naive but I don't even really consider myself an ally, just a not-insane person. My husband and I are kind of like queer straight people—have been dubbed such by our many gay friends. So it doesn't feel like this other community that I'm allied with, it feels like a community that I'm part of.

For these participants, identifying as a heterosexual ally expanded their social connections and strengthened their interpersonal relationships, often giving them access to a diverse community to which they now belong. According to these allies, access to the LGBT community provided them with a sense of connection and belonging to a group of like-minded political and social activists.

Educating Others

Participants indicated that educating others about LGBT and minority issues is a positive aspect of being a heterosexual ally. A 26-year-old female from New York stated:

One of the positive things about being an ally is that I have the opportunity to serve as an advocate to other higher education profes-

sionals about the needs and ways to support the LGBTIAP population. Through being an ally I have been able to serve as a voice of reason when speaking to other administrators about how to support LGBT individuals and [by] helping to consult on how to build a more inclusive community.

Allies enjoyed being leaders and advocates on behalf of LGBT people. They discussed the rewards they experienced from serving as a resource to other heterosexual people who may be less advanced in their knowledge and awareness of LGBT issues. Through educating others, participants found satisfaction in impacting societal change one person at a time.

Being a Role Model

Participants commented that being a positive role model for children was a positive aspect of being a heterosexual ally. For example, a 21-year-old female from Texas responded,

I believe the positive thing about being an ally is . . . it teaches our children that people are people and you treat them how you would like to be treated, no matter who they are, what they look like.

Other participants noted that they were role models to other adults. A 43-year-old male from Ohio commented, "As a white, hetero male, who is very visible as an ally, I can serve as a role model for other hetero males." Participants found their own particular social identities gave them a specific role in influencing others to become allies. As role models for others, allies found satisfaction in using their voices and perspectives in ways that affirmed LGBT lives and supported the larger goal of equality for everyone.

Using Social Privilege

Participants commented on the rewards of using their heterosexual privilege in a positive way that fulfilled their responsibility as a member of a privileged group. A 27-year-old female from Connecticut said, "Being an ally is extremely important to me. I feel that it is my obligation (as a person in the majority) to stand up for those that are not being treated equally." The 43-year-old ally from Ohio, above, wrote that in addition to being a role model, "I can also challenge homophobia in ways that are more difficult for folks who identify as LGBTIQ." Similarly a 36-year-old female from Kentucky reported, "As an ally, I can use my voice, my power and my heterosexual privilege to speak out against injustice."

Participants noted that their heterosexual privilege gave them a sense of responsibility for their actions toward LGBT people and in relation to other heterosexual-identified people. They had a sense of awareness of the importance of using their heterosexual privilege to make LGBT people's lives better. Their unique role in working toward LGBT equality was a positive aspect of being a heterosexual ally.

Speaking Out and Taking a Stand

Participants stated that they benefited from engaging in ally activism by speaking out and taking a stand. These actions en-

hanced their sense of empowerment and efficacy. The 36-year old Kentucky ally above also wrote,

For many years I was supportive of gay rights but never spoke up because I didn't really feel like I had much to say as a heterosexual. But now, I really see it as a basic issue for human rights.

Similarly, a 32-year old male from Ohio shared:

When a college student, particularly a White male like myself, sees me stand up and question his language or actions, then the message is sent very clearly that that is not to be tolerated. Hopefully if my actions as an ally change the actions of those who are not supportive of the lifestyle, even one person, then I will have made the world a better place for my GLBT brothers and sisters. They should be afforded the same privileges that I have.

These participants used their heterosexual identities and privilege to publicly take a stand on behalf of LGBT equality and social justice. These opportunities to speak out and take a public stand were rewarding and satisfying. Participants communicated a sense of pride in asserting their solidarity with LGBT rights.

Other Responses

Finally, we note that 10 respondents provided responses that answered the open-ended question more globally or philosophically rather than specifically. Six of these participants made statements about people being "all the same." For example, a 66-year-old female from Kentucky wrote,

I believe LGBT people are the same as any others and I see no difference in the kind of attitudes I have about them as about anyone else. Some are wonderful; some are less wonderful. Therefore I believe what is important is to be loving to all people.

Similarly, an additional four participants stated that they do not focus on being an ally to LGBT individuals. For example, a 26-year-old male from Kentucky stated, "I don't go out of my way to ally myself with people simply because of their sexual preferences. I value all my friends and family for who they are, not by sexuality." These participants' responses were placed in an "other" category because the responses did not directly address the research question of interest and reflected more global values and experiences.

Discussion

The participants in this study perceived that their ally identity provided them with knowledge and awareness, satisfying interpersonal relationships and community belonging, and a sense of meaning and purpose as they actively contributed to social change. These positive themes are consistent with factors that have been found to be important to psychological well-being (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 2008). For example, personal growth is a component of psychological well-being. The participants in this study perceived that being a heterosexual ally fostered their personal growth in knowledge, awareness, and skills. Thus, participants perceived that being a heterosexual ally gave them opportunities to "be a better person" and to live according to their highest values. These experiences are consistent with models of eudaimonia, which focus on the content and process of a life well-lived (see Ryan et al., 2008).

Positive relations with others is another central factor in psychological well-being. The heterosexual allies in the current study noted that satisfying relationships with others and connection to the LGBT community were positive aspects of their ally identity and behavior. This finding is consistent with theoretical assumptions that relatedness is a basic human need (along with autonomy and competence) and that the satisfaction of these basic needs is prerequisite to personal growth and well-being (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The heterosexual allies in this study were also engaged in intentional efforts to change society in positive ways and found these efforts to be positive and fulfilling parts of their lives. These findings are consistent with cultivating psychological well-being through finding purpose in life, particularly in finding meaning by contributing to the greater good. This finding is consistent with conceptualizations of the links between eudaimonia and prosocial behavior (see Ryan et al., 2008).

Together these findings suggest that being a heterosexual ally to the LGBT community is accompanied by positive experiences that are consistent with the attainment of psychological well-being. Future research might build on the current study to test hypotheses about the relationship between being a heterosexual ally, eudaimonia, and well-being. Considering our findings in relation to models of eudaimonia suggests that being an ally may be one "way of living focused on what is intrinsically worthwhile to human beings" (Ryan et al., 2008, p. 147), which manifests in personal growth, deep relationships, and positive contributions to society.

Understanding the positive aspects of being a heterosexual ally may also be important to designing effective ally training programs. Previous research has reported that allies are motivated to be allies because of previous personal relationships with LGBT people and by their deeply held values regarding social justice and equality (Duhigg et al., 2010; Russell, 2011). The findings from the current study suggest that these factors also provide important intrinsic rewards that facilitate continued commitment to being allies. Ally training programs can build recognition of these intrinsic rewards into the training and thereby potentially increase effectiveness.

Our findings suggest that allies find it rewarding to be included in the LGBT community. Past research on ally experience has found that allies sometimes perceive that their efforts and involvement are not always welcome by members of the LGBT community. For example, Duhigg and colleagues (2010) found that allies were as likely to perceive negative reactions as well as positive reactions from the local LGBT community. In another study, 14 predoctoral psychology interns and psychologists perceived mixed messages about their ally work from the LGBT community (Asta & Vacha-Haase, 2013). Professionals who perceived positive messages from members of the LGBT community reported that encouragement and appreciation from LGBT individuals contributed to their continued ally work. However, other participants shared stories about negative reactions from LGBT individuals that caused them to question their ally identity and cease ally work (Asta & Vacha-Haase, 2013). These findings, together with our finding that community belonging is a positive aspect of being a heterosexual ally, suggest that heterosexual allies might benefit from training in the recognition of minority stress and how anticipated rejection from heterosexual-identified people might impact

LGBT community members' interactions with them. Practice in communicating effectively with LGBT community members might increase the positive and rewarding aspects of heterosexual allies' contributions.

Ally training programs might benefit from more focused ally-to-ally mentoring and role modeling. Previous qualitative studies have suggested that heterosexual individuals become allies when they interact with a role model or guide who teaches them the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need and when they receive positive feedback to increase their confidence about their ally work (Broido, 2000; DiStefano et al., 2000; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Ji et al., 2009; Washington & Evans, 1991). Our findings suggest that it is rewarding for heterosexual-identified allies to serve as role models for other heterosexual-identified people. Thus, heterosexual allies may be effective trainers of other heterosexual allies, teaching the skills and knowledge and providing the role modeling, encouragement, and reinforcement that potential allies need (Asta & Vacha-Haase, 2013). This type of mentoring may be intrinsically rewarding and may increase the likelihood of success in creating new allies. Using their own testimonials about the positive aspects of being a heterosexual ally may also be a very important part of the effective training that heterosexual allies can provide.

These suggestions depart significantly from the traditional focus on changing negative attitudes using prejudice-reduction interventions, such as panels of LGBT identified individuals, readings, or in-group/out-group exercises. Focusing on positive aspects of ally identity and behavior may supplement and enhance approaches to ally training that focus on increasing participants' understanding of privilege and oppression.

Most of the previous studies have used small samples of university students or staff (e.g., Asta & Vacha-Haase, 2013; Getz & Kirkley, 2003, 2006; Goldstein & Davis, 2010; Ji et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2013; Stotzer, 2009) or members of one local community (Duhigg et al., 2010). By using a brief online survey to collect open-ended responses, we were able to extend previous research by recruiting one of the largest samples to date of self-identified heterosexual allies from national organizations. Still, the participants in this sample were self-selected, limited to those with access to the Internet, and connected to organizations or other persons that received the announcement about the study. Given that the resulting sample is predominately female, Caucasian, and college educated, generalizing these results to other demographic groups should be done with caution. A more diverse sample of heterosexual allies may reveal additional positive aspects.

Other qualitative studies have noted that people who have oppressed identities are often motivated to work on behalf of equality for other oppressed groups whose identities they do not share (DiStefano et al., 2000). Future research should attempt to understand the experiences of allies of color, those with less education or economic resources, and allies from specific religious groups. Glenda Russell (personal communication, 2009) has noted that it is important for LGB-identified people to attend to their own ally development and to use whatever social privilege they hold to advocate for other communities that suffer stigma and discrimination. Future research studies on LGB allies and heterosexual allies to trans-identified communities and communities of color are needed.

Whereas it is important to continue to understand the challenges that allies experience and how they overcome those challenges, the findings from this study suggest that heterosexual allies to the LGBT community have positive experiences and perceive rewards that may enhance their well-being. Therefore, we suggest that future research efforts test the utility of incorporating the positive aspects of being a heterosexual ally into interventions with potential allies in educational settings, the workplace, and the community. Ally training may be enhanced by capitalizing on the positive aspects of being an ally, including increased knowledge and awareness, alignment with deeply held values about social justice and equality, and the intrinsic psychosocial rewards of satisfying relationships and community belonging. Providing allies with opportunities to educate others, be role models, use their privilege, and otherwise contribute are important to sustaining ally motivation and commitment to social change. These behaviors are also intrinsically rewarding and may contribute to individual well-being as well as social change.

Keywords: heterosexual allies; qualitative; lesbian; gay; bisexual; transgender

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