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### An Academic Course That Teaches Heterosexual Students to be Allies to LGBT Communities: A Qualitative Analysis

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## **An Academic Course That Teaches Heterosexual Students to be Allies to LGBT Communities: A Qualitative Analysis**

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*A theory of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) ally identity development integrated the following theories—multicultural counseling theory (MCT), self-concept formation theory (SCFT), and social identity theory (SIT)—to design a course to train heterosexual students to be allies to LGBT communities. Students participated in interviews and activities with LGBT persons, presented seminars on LGBT topics, and wrote papers about these experiences. An analysis of their reactions suggested that initially, students perceived themselves as lacking credibility to be allies. After interacting with LGBT communities, students gained the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they needed to be confident in supporting and advocating for LGBT persons.*

**KEYWORDS** *straight, heterosexual ally, identity development*

Allies are members of the dominant heterosexual social group who support and advocate for the oppressed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities (Broido, 2000; Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1995; Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995; Henquinet, Phibbs, & Skoglund, 2000; Washington & Evans, 1991). In this context, the term “ally” signifies a member from a dominant group that joins and unites with a member of the oppressed group because that dominant member understands and appreciates the struggles of the oppressed member (Washington & Evans, 1991). Allies are invaluable assets in

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the struggle for LGBT equality because they can serve many roles for LGBT communities (e.g., supporting LGBT individuals or advocating for their equal rights; c.f. Broido, 2000; Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1995; DiStefano, Croteau, Anderson, Kampa-Kokesch, & Bullard, 2000; Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995; Getz & Kirkley, 2003; Israel & Hackett, 2004; Jackson & Hardiman, 1992, as cited in Broido, 2000; Kocarek & Pelling, 2003; Pearson, 2003; Washington & Evans, 1991; Worthington, McCrary, & Howard, 1998). When more heterosexual persons act as allies to LGBT communities, it is more likely that LGBT equality will be the social norm.

The process of becoming an LGBT ally can be difficult because heterosexuals experience negative reactions from others when they openly defend LGBT persons (Broido, 2000; DiStefano et al., 2000). Although there are models of LGBT ally development (e.g., Broido, 2000; Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1995; Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995; Washington & Evans, 1991), there are few, if any, formal systems that train heterosexuals who want to be effective supporters and advocates for LGBT communities. To address this need, an LGBT ally course was created based on three theories—social identity theory (SIT), self-concept formation theory (SCFT), and multicultural theory (MCT)—that are all integrated into a theory of LGBT ally development. SIT describes how members identify themselves as part of a group (Burke, Owens, Serpe & Thoits, 2003; Burke & Tully, 1977; Schwartz, 2005; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). An identity is a set of internalized meanings that are applied to the self that predict how a person chooses to identify him- or herself to others (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). A person forms his or her identity according to how members of a social group perceive that person and if that person feels it is important to associate with that social group (Stryker, 1980). The quality of the interactions the person has with members within those social groups will determine the likelihood that the person will associate and eventually identify as a member of a social group. Once a person has identified with a social group, that person will behave in accordance with that acquired identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

An important component of SIT is the “identity hierarchy” (Burke, Owens, Serpe & Thoits, 2003; Burke & Tully, 1977; Schwartz, 2005; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Troiden, 1988). Each person has multiple identities. A person can identify him- or herself according to, but not limited to, his or her gender, family role, geographic location, profession, racial status, social role, or sexuality. These identities are arranged within a person as a hierarchy such that identities with more salience than other identities will be used by the person to identify him- or herself to the external world. A person’s actions, thoughts, emotions, and interpersonal experiences will be aligned with those identities that have a high ranking in the identity hierarchy.

Applying SIT to LGBT ally development is appealing because the theory describes how a person’s cognitive, affective, attitudinal, behavioral, and interpersonal domains predict if a person will decide to identify him- or

herself as an LGBT ally. A self-identified LGBT ally will likely act in such a way so that the person's actions are aligned with the thoughts and attitudes that are perceived to be associated with the LGBT ally identity.

Multicultural counseling theory and SCFT were used to build a framework for how heterosexuals could identify as LGBT allies. MCT states that members of a majority group need attitudes, knowledge, and skills to have effective interactions with members of ethnic minority groups (Arrendono, 1999; Arrendondo, Toporek, Brown, & Jones, 1996; Sue, Arrendondo & McDavis, 1992). In this context, knowledge consists of the LGBT topics that a person has learned, become aware of, or understands. Attitudes are comprised of the feelings and perceptions toward LGBT communities. Skills are the actions that indicate the level of sophistication of a person's LGBT knowledge and attitudes. A heterosexual person will need to acquire the relevant LGBT knowledge and attitudes to buttress his or her skills when interacting with LGBT persons. SCFT proposes behaviors or actions, more than thoughts or feelings, are the primary determinants of a person's self-concept or self-identity (Combs, 1962; Flay, Allred, & Ordway, 2001; Purkey, 1970; Purkey & Novak, 1984). (For this article, the term self-identity will be synonymous with the term self-concept.) When a heterosexual person acts as a supporter or advocate of LGBT communities, he or she will perceive that the LGBT ally identity is salient.

Self-concept formation theory and SIT both state the more often an LGBT ally receives positive feedback, the more likely that the LGBT identity will be internalized as having high salience within the person's identity hierarchy (Schwartz, 2005; Stryker & Burke, 2000), and that person will choose this identity as a means of identifying him- or herself in society.

This article describes an academic LGBT ally course that trains heterosexual students to become LGBT allies. The course activities were based on LGBT ally development theory, which integrates SIT, MCT, and SCFT. The lead author served as the course instructor. (The course syllabus is available upon request by contacting the lead author at [petji@uic.edu](mailto:petji@uic.edu).) Students were introduced to the course objectives and wrote a reaction paper to an article (Ji, 2004, 2007) about being an ally to LGBT communities. Weekly course lectures by the instructor included topics such as the coming-out process, religion and LGBT issues, LGBT issues in the workplace, and the gay marriage debate. Students were required to conduct one interview with an LGBT person or a person with an LGBT child, sibling, or relative. Students participated in one LGBT-themed activity, that is, one with an LGBT theme and where the participants were predominantly LGBT (e.g., attending a PFLAG [Parents, Friends of Lesbians and Gays] meeting or Safe Zone training). Students presented a seminar to the class on any LGBT topic, such as religion and LGBT issues, same-sex marriage debates, the U.S. military "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy, or on health issues affecting LGBT communities. For each activity and interview assignment, students were instructed to write a

two-page reaction paper. At the end of the course, students wrote a final paper about their reactions to the course.

A qualitative analysis was used to extract themes from the students' papers, with the aim of documenting the progression of the students as they became LGBT allies. The aim of this article is to determine if the extracted themes verify the LGBT ally identity development theory.

## METHOD

### Participants and Setting

The study took place at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The 11 participants in this study were full-time students enrolled in the honors college at the university and chose the LGBT ally course from a list of honors courses to fulfill an academic requirement. The students received academic credit (pass/no credit). Students met once a week, for 1 hour, for 16 weeks. Nine students self-identified as heterosexual females, one self-identified as heterosexual male, and one self-identified as a lesbian female. Nine students were Caucasian and two were Asian. All students were between the ages of 19 and 21.

### Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected from students' papers. In the eighth week of the one-semester course, students signed consent forms giving or not giving the instructor permission to use excerpts from their papers in a qualitative study of their reactions to the course. The students were informed that their consent form and their decision to participate would not be known to their instructor until after course grades had been turned in to the Honors College. All students consented to be a part of the qualitative study.

### The Research Team

The team consisted of the authors of this article. The first author is a Korean American heterosexual male, with a doctorate in counseling psychology. The second author is a doctoral-level graduate student in psychology, a White gay male; and the third author is a White gay male, with a doctorate in curriculum and instruction, and the director of the Office of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

### Data Analysis

Based on the qualitative methodology of similar studies (Croteau, Talbot, Lance, & Evans, 2002; Evans, 2002; Evans & Herriott, 2004), this study used

a qualitative approach that began with a set conceptual framework (the LGBT ally identity development theory) and then uncovered participants' experiences and perspectives within that conceptual framework. The goal of the study was to understand how the students experienced the LGBT ally course.

Student reaction papers were entered into the NVivo qualitative analysis software program, version 7 ([www.qsrinternational.com](http://www.qsrinternational.com); accessed January 2008). The sentences were the qualitative units, and they were transformed into clusters of meanings. The clusters were analyzed to make a textural description of the experience of participating in an LGBT ally training course (Cresswell, 1998).

The first two authors independently reviewed the papers and developed coding themes that reflected how the participants experienced the course. Team members reviewed the identified themes and came to a consensus on common themes. An organizational structure of themes was developed. The themes were evaluated to determine their internal consistency, logic, and clarity and to evaluate how well the data were captured. The researchers individually used the working set of themes to code the students' papers and identified blocks of text that represented each theme. They then reviewed the coding scheme and made final coding decisions by consensus. The third author, who had not been involved in the initial analyses, reviewed the themes. The final themes in the results section were arrived at by consensus. The students' remarks were edited for brevity.

## RESULTS

### Themes Extracted from the Students' Reactions at the Beginning of the Course

#### CREDIBILITY

An initial theme was an issue of questioned credibility. Despite having positive attitudes toward LGBT people, students perceived themselves as inadequate to be allies because they did not possess what they perceived to be the necessary or proper knowledge and skills.

(Dr. Ji) . . . questioned his qualifications and credibility as a straight ally because of his lack of knowledge; this is exactly where I am in my quest to be an ally.

I don't have all the skills to stand up for my LGBT friends.

Although I have offered support to gay friends, I have always felt that I may not be qualified or in the right place to be advocating for LGBT

rights ... I have worked on a small level and never felt I had enough confidence or knowledge to really support GBLT Communities.

#### INCONGRUENCY

There were many reasons why students said they could not identify as LGBT allies, perhaps the most prominent of which was that students thought their actions were incongruent with, or were not reflective of, their pro-LGBT attitudes.

I still want others to know that I support the LGBT community and my inability to demonstrate that frustrates me.

I have realized that being a silent ally is not being an ally at all. Just the thoughts will not help the members of the LGBT community.

Students remarked that when they were unable to respond to homophobic and discriminating remarks, they thought they were not acting as LGBT allies.

When I was in high school, I hated when anyone used the word "gay" for labeling something or someone as stupid. Hearing such terms always offended me and I would tell my friends not to say it, but I would not confront anyone else.

Before taking this course, I always just listened to I.R. [I.R. denotes that the identity of the person(s) was removed] quietly even though I felt uncomfortable hearing their negative opinions.

Students realized that they, too, engaged in homophobic statements that made it difficult for them to say that they were allies.

I remember my orientation day at UIC. Our group leaders attempted to show us that we should embrace the diversity that UIC has to offer and learn from it. Of course the crowd of incoming freshmen nodded in full agreement, but not even an hour later, I caught my peers and even myself saying, "That's gay" and other references to LGBT communities. At that point, I realized how difficult it really would be to get this negative connotation out of society. From then on I paid much more attention to those and other comments and focused on removing them from my vocabulary.

Students commented that the fear of making mistakes when interacting with LGBT persons kept them from acting as LGBT allies.

After others have “come out” to me, I never have known exactly how to support them. I am afraid I have made many mistakes.

However, despite their best intentions, allies also feel they make mistakes. I too feel that I have made mistakes.

Sometimes, I think I do not do enough because of my fear that I will say the wrong thing.

The theme of incongruency implied that students did not perceive themselves as having the credibility to identify as LGBT allies.

#### FEARS ASSOCIATED WITH COMING OUT AS ALLIES

Students realized that, like LGBT persons, they too struggled with their own “coming-out” process. They were afraid to come out as LGBT allies, because they too might be rejected, their peers might think that they were LGBT, or they would question their intentions.

I have realized that I have been afraid to “come out” as an ally, despite having gay and lesbian family members and friends.

Being an ally to the GBLT community does mean I risk being mislabeled as GBLT.

(Saying that I am an LGBT ally) means I risk that people will no longer find me moral or they will not view me as the same person as that they initially thought.

I always thought I would be ostracized by my peers and I was affected by the thought that they will not accept me if I came out as an LGBT ally.

Some students stated that not only would the heterosexual community question them for coming out as LGBT allies, but they were concerned that LGBT communities would not accept them because their motives for being LGBT allies might be perceived as insufficient.

I am worried about the reactions of the LGBT community (to my desire to be an LGBT ally). I believe that they might ostracize me for trying to be supportive. I worry that (the LGBT) community will not accept me as part of their group, because I do not have the same struggles as they do and I have not been ostracized because of my sexual orientation. I am worried that they may not think my motives are good enough to be an ally to their community.



## LACK OF INTERPERSONAL SUPPORT

Another reason that students found it difficult to identify as LGBT allies was a lack of support from their own family and friends. When these people made sexually prejudiced comments, the students felt they could not “come out” and say that they were LGBT allies.

My (I.R.) is homophobic. It is clear that my (I.R.) thinks homosexuality is very unnatural and immoral. I have heard them make negative comments whenever the media portrayed gay people. So I have never openly discussed LGBT issues with them.

## INABILITY TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT LGBT ISSUES

Because they could not identify whom to talk to about LGBT issues, students reported that they rarely, if at all, had sophisticated or extended conversations about LGBT issues with LGBT and heterosexual persons. As a result, students perceived themselves as having questions about LGBT issues, but no opportunity to address them.

I am straight. I have no LGBT family member. I have one gay friend and I rarely speak with him about LGBT issues.

In my family, we grew up in open environments. Yet, no one ever initiated a conversation about what does it mean to be gay.

Truthfully, I had never sat down and had an intellectual and deep conversation about my gay friend’s “coming out” ordeal or his stance on LGBT issues. (We only talked about) his relationships and current wardrobe.

I rarely have a “real” conversation with anyone from the LGBT community and I find myself having many unanswered questions about the issue.

## LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

Students reported that without opportunities and peers to explore LGBT issues, they lacked knowledge about LGBT issues. This deficiency prevented them from embarking on the first step to being competent allies: gaining knowledge.

When I was reviewing the list of Honors Seminar topics to choose from, the topic for this seminar—“Being an Ally to the LGBT Community”—caught my attention right away. I decided to enroll because I simply had no knowledge or experience regarding this issue. The topic seemed very foreign to me, so I wanted to learn more.

I realize that I too have an urge to do something more than accept my LGBT friends. At the same time, I am not fully knowledgeable of LGBT issues.

#### KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND SKILLS

There were many LGBT topics that students wanted to explore, such as the oppression of LGBT people, the gay marriage debate, AIDS, and other topics. They wanted knowledge to inform their attitudes toward LGBT issues and communities and to buttress their skills and abilities to discuss these issues or perform a specific task. For example, students wanted to learn how to assist an LGBT person with the coming-out process.

I am glad to be in this seminar. After others have “come out” to me, I never have known exactly how to support them. I wish to learn a better way of embracing them for who they are and help them feel accepted.

Another task students wanted to learn about was how to combat homophobia and sexual prejudices effectively.

I have gotten into arguments about LGBT issues, and I know that I need more knowledge to enlighten others who are ignorant of the real facts. I felt I took the wrong approach several times and I need a new tactic or perspective to educate others who continue to oppress, ignore, ridicule, and stereotype LGBT communities.

The reason I am an ally is to help the cause in anyway that I can without becoming a raging homosexuality pusher ... There are a lot of people out there that don't agree with me ... How do I tell them all that it is okay to be a part of the LGBT community? Should I get in their face and scream chants and words that might turn them off? I should hope not, but can people's morals and judgments change just by talking to them? Exposing people to LGBT issues in a way that is uncomfortable can be counterproductive and push people away from accepting LGBT persons ... I do not know the best ways to make people accept the fact that LGBT people are part of the world and they will not be going away.

Students expressed a strong interest in understanding why religious groups claimed that homosexuality was wrong. Students were unsure how to respond to someone who thought that homosexuality was a sin. Some students experienced their own internal conflicts between their religious faith and their pro-LGBT attitudes. Those students wondered if stating they were an LGBT ally would result in losing their connection with their religious group.

I was especially interested about the question that Dr. Ji raised, “*How would I respond if someone proclaimed me as fundamentally flawed based on religious text?*” (original emphasis). It is a question that I hope to answer. I am a person of Catholic background and have been brought up that way, yet I believe that everyone, including LGBT persons, deserves an equal chance at happiness.

Even today during my Bible study, students discussed homosexuality and the Bible. The generally held view among the group was that homosexuality was a sin just like lying or stealing, and that a gay person should not be judged or treated any differently from a Christian, who was also a sinner by nature. Instead of ostracizing LGBT people, religious communities should embrace them and love them as the same. If I had not read (Dr. Ji’s) articles, I would have felt very comfortable with this conclusion proposed by my fellow Christians, for I have heard it and accepted it many times before. However, this time, I felt uncertain about what I believed in. I faced some inner conflicts. If I believe that homosexuality is a sin, how can I still be an ally? What would an LGBT person think of me then? On the opposite, if I become a supporter/advocate for the LGBT community, how would my Christian friends view me? I hope to resolve these conflicts as I participate more in the course.

Students wanted to learn how to advocate effectively for LGBT equal rights, but they were daunted by the prospect of doing so. Students were not sure how to advocate for LGBT equal rights or remove anti-LGBT policies. Knowing that there were social forces against LGBT equal rights left students feeling uncertain if their advocacy efforts would have any impact.

For me, supporting LGBT communities was never difficult, but advocating for it was another story.

Wanting to help the cause for LGBT equality without knowing how to go about it can be frustrating.

... realizing that there are actually organizations against equal protections for LGBT persons makes me skeptical about bringing about success through this role.

I found the proposed role of advocacy quite daunting. While I fully support my gay friends and generally LGBT communities, the idea of influencing policies and lobbying the government seemed a bit too overwhelming. Surely, advocacy does not have to be only way allies can make change at the societal level.

## IDENTIFYING AS ALLIES AND ROLE MODELS

For students to develop into LGBT allies, they needed role models for guidance. Role models helped students identify and clarify their internal struggles about becoming LGBT allies.

When reading Ji's articles, I was glad to find myself identifying with what I read.

(Ji's) insight into his personal beliefs helped me learn about his thought processes and experience. Knowing that someone has such an in-depth understanding of being an ally gives me inspiration that I can be an active ally as well.

Students needed to share their concerns with role models. This process helped validate their anxiety, and they felt less isolated in their pursuit of becoming an LGBT ally.

It's a lot easier facing your fears about being an LGBT ally with someone else than alone.

I realized that other people also did not always know how to express their opinions about LGBT issues.

Role models were important because there was no standard method that students could follow to become an LGBT ally. Because students thought they had to be aware of so many LGBT topics and learn the many ways allies could support or advocate for the LGBT community, each student needed his or her own plan for becoming an ally. Role models guided each student in developing a plan that best fit him or her.

The question of what it entails to be an ally is entirely a matter of opinion. There are no rules and no guidelines to follow on the path to becoming a straight ally.

There is no set definition to what a straight ally should be or do, and it is the basis from which this course is set. One must choose their own path in being an ally to the LGBT community.

I am comforted by the author's acknowledgement that there are many ways to be an ally.

## INITIAL HOPES IN BECOMING LGBT ALLIES

After expressing their initial anxieties, students did express hope that they could explore this issue and become confident allies.

I do not expect to come out of this seminar a full-fledged straight ally, but I definitely see myself becoming more involved with the LGBT community and on my way to being an ally.

Throughout this seminar, I hope to gain more knowledge and experience in dealing with LGBT issues. Most importantly, I want to be able to say with confidence that I am an ally to the LGBT community.

I am happy to say that some changes have occurred already as I am beginning to ask questions I have never asked before.

### Themes Extracted From the Students Interview and Activity Papers

During the middle phase of the course, students completed the interview, activity, and seminar assignments. (No reaction papers to the seminars were assigned so no themes were extracted from them.) Students commented that they were looking forward to exploring LGBT topics at a sophisticated level. However, they also had apprehensions, including being anxious about asking potentially offensive questions during their interviews and having uncertainty about what it would be like to participate in the LGBT activities. It was important for students to have a safe person with whom they could explore their questions about LGBT communities.

I was excited to do an interview with someone from the LGBT community. I immediately thought of my close friend from grammar school. Her parents are lesbians and she has gone through many obstacles . . . I wanted to know why she decided to become involved (with LGBT communities) even though she knew of all the oppression and discrimination she would face.

For my interview, I talked with my lesbian neighbor. I chose her because I felt comfortable talking with her about how she viewed herself and what was it like to “come out” when she was younger. I never really talked to her about this before so I was a bit nervous about if the questions I wrote would be applicable or offensive.

I wanted to attend PRIDE at UIC (a GLBT student campus group) because I thought it would be a great opportunity to learn and support another organization . . . I was glad that our class enabled me to learn more about this group that I never knew existed.

Going into the Safe Zone Training I did not really know what to expect. I thought it would just reaffirm the beliefs I held of LGBT communities, but I was surprised to learn a few things I did not know and it made

me feel like there was more I could do to help my fellow LGBT persons achieve the basic rights that many of us have and take for granted.

#### NOT WANTING TO BE IDENTIFIED ONLY ACCORDING TO THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION

A common theme among the students' interviews was that they learned that lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons did not want their sexual orientation to envelop their overall identity.

Since so many people in the LGBT community are different from one another, he feels the term, homosexuality, does not determine his identity as a whole.

Another point that Dr. Finnessy [director of the Office of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the third author of this paper] made that had much impact on me was understanding the importance of de-emphasizing the word *sexuality* in *homosexuality*. Being gay does not mean that you are reduced to being just someone who is intimate with someone else of the same sex. This is another very obvious, yet very much overlooked point. This is what stops so many people from getting past their homophobia. I realized that any individual had unique opinions and perspectives that did not stem from homosexuality but his or her overall identity.

One statement (my interviewee) said that stuck in my mind was, "My sexuality is only one element of my whole identity. I do not want people to be consumed by the thought of me being gay when they meet me." His statement made me hope that people see sexuality as just one of many aspects of a person's life.

#### BEING OPEN ABOUT ONE'S LGBT IDENTITY

Students wondered how LGBT persons decided to tell others about their sexual or gender identities. The responses helped students appreciate the difficulty in deciding to be open about one's LGBT identity.

When I asked him how he viewed that being gay was a choice, he told me that it was "crap." He answered, "You choose whether or not to tell people, whether or not to repress it. You do not choose whether you are gay or not. You just are." This was a new concept for me. I had never thought that the issue was that LGBT persons actually had to choose whether to come out or not and not about the choice of being gay, and it made a lot of sense to me.

Even though she came out as a lesbian, I wondered if that meant she just told anyone and everyone about her sexuality . . . She considered her sexuality to be on a need to know basis, so she does not tell others if she knew that the person she was talking to might have a problem with it. She said there was one friend that she was scared of telling because she thought she would judge her, or think that she was attracted to her.

#### HOW HOMOPHOBIA AFFECTS LGBT PERSONS

During their interviews, students learned how sexual prejudice and homophobia affects LGBT persons. During the activities, students encountered negative social stigma about being gay. They realized what it must be like for an LGBT person to have to endure prejudicial and homophobic remarks.

I (listened to a radio show) and the topic for the show was “gaydar.” A waitress claimed she could tell who was gay with absolute accuracy and consistency. Some callers called in to criticize the waitress and anyone’s claim of knowing if someone was gay from how they look or act. The waitress became so defensive and attacked all the callers. Simply outraged at her rudeness, I realized that homophobia was still a part of our society. (I was) disappointed and further enraged by the rampant force of homophobia that I, as an ally, would have to confront and dispel.

She decided to form a gay-straight alliance at her high school. The school board wanted the students to hold a debate about this group. There were religious figures, parents, and other students who did not think there should be a gay club. She finally got the group, but she was harassed by fellow students. I could not believe that people were outright denying the helpfulness of the club.

Participating in the protest for gay marriage equality was fun and interesting, but it also taught me very valuable lessons. I observed the bystanders and was very much surprised that most of their reactions were negative or indifferent. I had hoped there would be more people with positive responses to the protest. I also became very aware of how it felt to have people react negatively to LGBT persons. I found this experience was a unique way of putting yourself in an LGBT person’s shoes. I never had anyone express negative attitudes to me for being heterosexual.

#### APPRECIATING THE STRUGGLE THAT LGBT PERSONS FACE

After hearing about the struggles LGBT persons face, students admired them for having to persevere over society’s perception of LGBT communities. The impact of this was that students developed their own courage to stand up for LGBT persons.

He told me that, yes, it was scary being in the closet. When he came out, it was because he knew who he was *and* was comfortable with other people knowing it. I asked him, "It took you four years to get to that point?" He answered, "Yeah. For some people, it takes a lifetime." It made me respect him as a person, and admire his strength in dealing with his struggles and having the courage to tell people who he was.

He felt like he was not being himself, and was not being completely honest to himself or the people around him. He described his feelings of holding it in as killing him and driving him insane. He came out because he could feel better about himself and get the feeling of holding an enormous secret in for so long off of his chest. His story made me think of how hard it was to hold something so important inside for so long. I could not imagine how hard this experience was for him and other gay individuals. If it takes a lot of resilience and willpower to declare who they are despite prevailing societal norms, I do not see why the government or the straight majority should have any power to stop them from doing so.

#### ACQUIRING SKILLS

The interactions with others helped students gain more skills they needed as allies. For example, students stated that they learned how to handle the "coming-out" process by listening to and learning from LGBT persons.

This interview has helped me to be a better listener and supporter for my gay friend. He is still going through tough times trying to tell his parents. As a friend and an ally, my responsibility is to support him and help him to be ready, and to be there for him after he comes out to his parents.

(at the PFLAG meeting), there was something else that stuck out in my mind and made me wish more parents were like this. Someone asked if any parent wished their son or daughter had come out to them first instead of being the last one to know. One couple said absolutely. They wished that they could have been there to support their son. They wished they could have talked with him about his first crushes and kisses like all other parents get to experience with their heterosexual children. These parents may have felt robbed, not because their children may never be able to marry or have children, but because they were not part of the most important time in their child's life. This was so amazing and heartwarming to me. This will be a story that I may tell again. It is about parents and friends who love their children unconditionally, the way it is supposed to be.

Students wanted to address homophobia and realized that having experiences with LGBT persons was an effective way to do so.



He believes that his parents never thought that this would happen to them, and if they had never had a gay son, they would have never accepted homosexuals. As he said this, a lot of it made sense and rang true in my mind. No one can force a non-gay supporter to change his or her mind just by presenting a pro-gay viewpoint. I believe that accepting gay persons starts with having experiences with LGBT persons. If allies could find a way to facilitate these experiences and present our views in a way so that straight people can reflect on their views, we will have succeeded.

Experience is an enormous part of acceptance. If more people talked with gay persons and shared views on different subjects, many people would have less problems with homosexuality. I thought that the interview was a wonderful way to further my understanding of LGBT communities.

Advocating for LGBT equality was a major skill category for students. Although students initially considered advocacy to be too daunting, they later realized that their advocacy could have an impact. Students learned that they did not need special talents or skills to advocate for LGBT equal rights and that being with other advocates built confidence in their advocacy skills.

Marching into the Chicago Marriage License Bureau while chanting and shaking our signs, I was somewhat uncomfortable. I was not used to making such loud noise as a group and attracting so much attention from the public, but by the time we started walking, I really got into the protest. I felt all the excitement and motivation in the air from all the participants. It made the public realize that there were real people opposing the ban on gay marriages. The protest gave me the opportunity to advocate for gay rights and it gave me a rewarding sense of purpose. I was part of an event that could have changed someone's perspective or attitude. I realized the importance for allies to actively support LGBT communities. I believe that when LGBT people see more straight allies, they will feel more empowered and encouraged.

#### VALIDATING THE STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF LGBT ISSUES

During the latter half of the semester, students started to receive validation that they did have ample knowledge of LGBT issues and could educate others on these issues.

The (Safe Zone) Power Point slides covered important topics, such as terminology and LGBT issues. The majority of the information was already discussed in (the ally) class. I was surprised and glad to find out that I was knowledgeable after all. One of my fears in being an ally was my lack of knowledge on gay topics. Seeing how much I knew, I felt relieved and reassured.

I named several organizations that fought for equal rights but she was not aware of the difficulties LGBT people faced. At that point I was in complete shock of her ignorance. I found myself describing the fight for LGBT rights. For me, this was the very first time that my interviewee, or anyone else, became interested in what I was saying about LGBT topics.

#### WHAT HETEROSEXUALS CAN DO AS ALLIES

An important realization for students was learning what LGBT persons wished straight persons could do as allies. Students realized that they did not have to do anything extraordinary to be recognized as allies and that by listening and understanding LGBT persons, educating others about LGBT issues, and attending LGBT activities, they were doing what they needed to do as allies. It was important for LGBT allies to make themselves known because knowing that heterosexuals did support LGBT equality had positive impacts on LGBT persons.

We discussed the importance of heterosexual allies. She said, “there could be more to support us.” We concluded that heterosexual allies should not think of themselves as being unable to support LGBT communities because having compassion for the LGBT communities is a way to be supportive.

When I asked him about being a heterosexual ally to the gay community, he emphasized the need for education and furthermore, simple support and acceptance. He recommended that heterosexuals attend the Gay Olympic Games (held in Chicago of 2006) or volunteer at the Center on Halsted (a gay-affirming community center in Chicago). His statements as a gay man were comforting to hear because I felt like I was on the right track toward being an LGBT ally because I have been engaging in all of the above-mentioned activities.

I asked him if he thought we as straight allies needed to do more for LGBT communities. He told me no. It does not matter if you show you care by being active or not; all that matters is that you are there and you understand. He said, “That is why coming out is so hard. People think that there is no one out there to understand, and listen, and say that it is okay. It is enough for straight people to just be there and listen.” He stated that it ultimately helps the gay community when straight people have positive views toward homosexuality. Do gays need allies? His answer was, “We need people to back us up. There needs to be more than one viewpoint on this LGBT issue to show that it is universal. You need different sources agreeing that there should be LGBT equality in order to justify it. You need more than just homosexuals saying that they deserve equal rights.”

## Themes Extracted From the Students' Reactions at the End of the Course

At the end of the course, most students were confident proclaiming themselves as LGBT allies. After the interviews, activities, and seminars, students thought they gained more knowledge about LGBT issues and received positive confirmation of their skills. Students expressed that they accomplished their goals as LGBT allies.

As I look back on this course, I can say that I feel more confident as an ally. For one, accomplishing all the goals I set in the beginning of the course makes me feel (well, yes) proud of myself . . . The knowledge I have gained from the course, the support I had from my classmates and the professor, and the experience I was able to gain from putting myself out into the LGBT community, have all made me more confident.

From being a defenseless friend of the gays and lesbians when I was in high school to becoming an ally of the LGBT community after taking this class, I can see a huge difference in the amount of knowledge and credibility that I have when speaking about the LGBT community. I am glad that I have learned so much about this topic, now I can feel credible about speaking about certain LGBT issues when the time is appropriate and hopefully help shape people minds into a more accepting manner of thinking. I did not really know what to expect when I chose this class but I can say that I am a different person because I did.

I would recommend this course to everyone regardless of their current attitudes and beliefs. Because I know that in the end, changes will occur for the better.

### DEFINING THE NEED TO BE AND HOW TO BECOME AN ALLY

Students had better explanations for why heterosexual persons should become LGBT allies based on the stories of struggles faced by LGBT persons. Students also felt they could articulate how to become an LGBT ally.

LGBT issues are not just "theirs." As a human being, I have a responsibility to support LGBT communities because the problems they face are about humanity, social justice and equality.

I have learned too much about the oppression that LGBT communities had to face. This oppression has led me to believe that they are not looking for sympathy, but looking for real help. This group needs allies and they need them now. They do not need me to stand up for the whole community, but they need someone who is willing to help their

cause. If we can all support the LGBT anti-oppression movement, then publicly, they will not be discriminated against.”

I have always supported my LGBT friends and family, but this class has let me see the progression of my path to being an ally, and this has taught me on many levels that being an ally has affected my life, for the better.

#### THE IMPACT OF LGBT KNOWLEDGE ON ATTITUDES

When students gained knowledge about LGBT topics, they clarified their attitudes toward LGBT communities and resolved their internal conflicts.

I believe the main reason for my negative attitudes in the past was lack of knowledge which led to ignorance. LGBT topics were never taught to me before. Learning about coming-out stages, different terms, discrimination in society, and other related topics formed new thoughts and beliefs within me.

My goal for this class was to come to a better understanding of why people reject how LGBT love one another and why people see LGBT communities as such a problem. This was a hard question to uncover and I have gotten a lot of insight into it. Being in this class, my experiences and interactions, clarified to me why such views were prevalent.

The conflict between Christianity and homosexuality was always in the back of my mind. I could never understand how a person can be both gay and Christian. My questions were answered as I researched and put together my seminar. I cannot stress enough the importance of knowledge as power. Although I am nowhere near being fully knowledgeable about LGBT topics, I have made progress so far, and I seek to continue this process in the future.

#### IMPROVEMENTS IN SKILLS

Students reported that they became better at supporting an LGBT person during his or her coming-out process, expressing themselves as LGBT allies, handling antigay arguments, and conversing about LGBT issues.

I have learned how to be more caring towards an LGBT person who might be scared in coming out or talking about him or herself because of the fear of not being accepted.

When my (I.R.) would use the Bible as a tool against LGBT people I could not say much to (I.R.) because I had no facts or references to use . . . Now I do.

I have learned so much about the topic, now I can feel credible about speaking about certain LGBT issues when the time is appropriate and hopefully help shape people's minds into being more accepting of LGBT persons.

The problem I had coming into your class was I did not know how to articulate my thoughts. I just wanted to let you know that your class helped me to be able to express my thoughts on LGBT issues in ways I could not before.

#### FEELING CONNECTED TO LGBT COMMUNITIES

A notable change was that students no longer experienced the LGBT community as being separate or distant from them. They felt comfortable interacting with LGBT individuals and discussing pertinent issues.

Being an ally was really important to me, but there were a few things that barred me from being an ally. I felt as if being an ally was too hard because I was not LGBT. I felt that they would not accept me as an ally. But when I did go to the LGBT activities, I was embraced. I became less scared and I learned to be part of LGBT groups without feeling like an outsider.

One major change I noticed was my ability to walk into UIC's GLBT office, and feel welcome and not as an outsider. The first time I went in, the staff greeted me and invited me to sit down—I did—but I still felt strange sitting in an office where I thought I did not belong. I have been back many times, and now I feel as comfortable as if I was walking into the financial aid office.

#### MOVING FROM A PASSIVE TO AN ACTIVE ROLE AS AN ALLY

Students stated they perceived themselves as being less passive and more active in addressing LGBT issues. When the students' perspectives shifted from thinking LGBT issues were irrelevant to them to realizing that LGBT issues did impact them, students realized that they, as allies, could address those issues.

I realized that this class has put the LGBT concerns on my front porch. I never really recognized the harassment that LGBT people faced and the harassment that goes on behind the backs of LGBT communities. I went

through my own situation where I felt (belittled just as) LGBT people were belittled.

Because being heterosexual is the social norm, I perceived any deviance from it to be weird and not normal. I knew homosexuals struggled to be accepted by others. The seriousness of such issues never impacted me directly, so I saw their issues to be theirs only. My passive, indifferent attitudes toward LGBT issues have changed since I began to learn about LGBT issues in class and when I participated in the LGBT activities.

Once I was part of the seminar I realized I was not going to be able to sit around and just half listen and observe, I was going to have to take part. There was work to be done, more than I expected. I thought I was going to be on a team but just sit on the bench. Sure I would be cheering for the team, but that would be as far as I would participate. I wondered why I was not expecting to take an active role. I think I was nervous and I was not ready to throw myself into LGBT communities because I was not really sure of the extent of my knowledge on LGBT issues. What I did not realize was that I did not need to know everything; all I needed was to know something. I thought I was walking into this seminar with open ears and mind, but realized that they are more open now than they have ever been. I got put in the game without knowing it and now I enjoy playing and being part of the team.

#### ALLY IDENTITY SOLIDIFIED

The ally identity development process can be best summed by this student's final paper. In this paper, the student admitted that she did not think that being an LGBT ally was a priority and that she lacked the means to have any impact on LGBT communities. As the student participated in course assignments, she became aware of how oppression impacted LGBT persons. She practiced her skills as an ally and the positive feedback she received solidified her perception that she could be an active supporter and advocate of LGBT communities.

I have always believed that fate will guide me in the right direction. I say this because chance has ultimately been the determining factor in choosing my honors activity for my whole UIC career. To tell the truth, had I known all of the honors seminar classes, I would most likely go through the list, see "Being an Ally to LGBT Communities" and never think of taking the class. The fact was that being an ally to LGBT communities was not a priority to me, and being an ally hardly ever played a significant role in my life. I am straight, and as far as I know 99% of my friends and family were as well. So once again to answer that infamous seminar question, "Why did you sign up for this class?" I really did not know I was signing up for this class, it was a requirement,

but here is another question that I feel has much more significance to me now and it is, "Why did you continue to take this course despite the unusual topic?" [Honors college students were required to take an honors course from a select list of courses. Some students took the LGBT ally course because it was the only one that fit their schedule.]

Walking out of the first day of class was interesting. In my mind was, "Do I really feel like doing all this work this semester? I hope I am not swamped." Though I had no initial interest in being an ally, I had always considered myself accepting of LGBT people. The general apathy I felt about the issues of LGBT communities stemmed primarily from my ignorance of the issues and also from the sense that there was nothing I could do as a straight ally for them. It was then that I overheard another student say something that suddenly averted my attention. That student did not want to take this class because of the uncomfortable topic. I was shocked and immediately intrigued. I tried to think of the reasons why the topic affected that student in that way. I decided I would take the course with the feeling that I would learn something valuable.

I changed very much since that week. Before, I hardly ever thought about LGBT issues, and I can honestly say I knew close to nothing of the severity of the problems they encounter in their lives. I learned that LGBT persons face prejudice such as what existed in the 1800s against blacks and women. To me, the arguments made against LGBT communities were simply ridiculous. Why would a person say that just because a man loves another man that he molests young boys as well, or just because the government will let two females marry, that next they will have to let people marry their dogs as well? I could not believe how childish the United States population could be. Are we not among the most educated countries in the world? As I learned more and more, I felt a growing need to speak out against the crimes of today's society against LGBT communities. I had been shaken out of my indifference, and I now knew what I could do for LGBT communities as an ally.

I have never lost this desire to do something, but I regret to say that it much easier in theory than in action. Although my actions do not always reflect my role as an ally, I believe that I am going in the right direction. I cannot say that I have assumed the role of an ally at every opportunity. I admit there are still times when I find myself taking on the role of the passive bystander once again, but one thing that has greatly changed is my confidence. When I do decide that it is the time for me to speak out, I have much to say, and I speak directly and confidently. Just the other day I informed my friend of the difference between transgender and transsexual after he ignorantly pointed out that they were the same thing. What made it better was that another friend who was in the room said, "Yeah, she knows what she's talking about." I was so happy that my friends could see me as a reliable resource of information for LGBT communities. Never before had anyone acknowledged my skills as an

ally, but this class gave me the knowledge and wisdom I needed to be confident and make a stand for the LGBT community.

## DISCUSSION

The qualitative analysis of the excerpts from the students' papers suggests that the components of the LGBT ally identity development theory were important for developing the confidence the students needed to identify as LGBT allies. The findings were consistent with past reports of how heterosexual persons become allies. The initial anxieties that students had were similar to Gelberg and Chojnacki (1995), who reported students felt their actions were incongruent with what they should do as allies. Consistent with other findings (e.g., Broido, 2000; DiStefano et al., 2000; Washington & Evans, 1991), students needed a guide to help them learn and implement the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they needed to become allies. The importance of role models in this process was similar to Gelberg & Chojnacki's (1995) and Getz & Kirkley's (2003) reports that the positive feedback students received for acting as LGBT allies helped them gain confidence as allies.

Students took different paths in becoming allies because each of them had their own questions they needed to explore before committing to the process. Some students needed to resolve concerns they had about religious issues and being gay. Others wondered about how to be an effective advocate for LGBT equal rights. The different content areas that students pursued suggested that they each had different conceptualizations of what it meant to be an LGBT ally. They needed to explore specific LGBT topics to satisfy their own vision of how they wanted to express themselves as allies.

As students explored different content areas, their narratives suggested that all of the components of multicultural counseling theory—knowledge, attitudes, and skills—interacted to build the ability of students to act as LGBT supporters and advocates. Students gained LGBT knowledge via their seminar presentations and course lectures and, as suggested by SCFT, they needed to practice demonstrating their knowledge during their interviews and activities. The writing tasks also helped them articulate their LGBT-related knowledge and attitudes. Students could write and talk about several experiences and offer their knowledge to substantiate the need for heterosexual persons to become LGBT allies.

The role of affect in this process was key. Initially students had many mixed emotions about becoming an ally, and anxiety and fear were present. It was important to state explicitly that the class was a safe place to explore these emotions so students could share their experiences of being isolated and unknowledgeable. This validation helped them realize that their concerns were normal, even expected, and that the assignments were meant to help them explore these concerns. Knowing that there was a plan for



becoming an ally may have helped students feel hopeful that they could resolve their mixed emotions.

A key experience that allowed students to identify as allies was receiving positive interpersonal feedback. Students needed confirmation from others, both LGBT and heterosexual persons, that they were indeed acting as allies. These experiences helped students realize the value of openly identifying as LGBT allies, and they could claim that being an LGBT ally was an important part of their overall identity—a premise of SIT. The findings supported the LGBT ally identity development theory in that becoming an ally was a holistic process that involved learning, exploring emotions, and positive interpersonal experiences.

### Limitations

The results are limited by sample selection. The class started with 15 students, yet only 11 remained. It is unknown why the four students dropped the class. In future classes, should students withdraw, it would be worthwhile to request permission to interview them and ask why they dropped out. Students who do not want to take the course should be encouraged to remain to see if their experiences are similar to those who wanted to stay from the outset.

The majority of the students were female. It is unknown how the gender imbalance contributed to the outcome. Given that masculinity issues influence how males are more likely to express negative attitudes toward LGBT persons, explorations of how the course impacts the development of male LGBT allies are needed.

Investigator bias may have affected the results. The lead author was the class instructor and analyzed the student narratives. For this reason, the second and third authors independently performed reliability checks for these themes. The presence of all themes was verified.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Suggestions for future research include using a pre- and posttest design to assess growth, using quantitative data, of the participants as LGBT allies. Assessments of LGBT knowledge, attitudes, and skills could be used to determine what students gained. Future studies should include students from different racial, socioeconomic, and gender backgrounds to enhance the external validity of the findings. Although difficult to implement, a randomized control group design would be ideal for comparing the experiences of students enrolled in the class to a control group. The design would help determine if the development of students in the class would differ from those

not in the class and if students could become LGBT allies on their own. Moreover, the design would reduce the likelihood that internal threats to validity, such as investigator bias or participant motivation, are rival explanations for the findings.

The study defined LGBT allies as heterosexuals who were not related to an LGBT family member. LGBT allies could also be defined in other ways, such as gays who are allies to the lesbian community, gays and lesbians who are allies to the bisexual community, and gays, lesbians, and bisexuals who are allies to the transgender community. The differences and similarities in developing allies within LGBT communities should be explored.

Being an ally to the transgender community would likely require a different skill set because transgender persons have concerns about gender identity and expression rather than sexual orientation. It is likely that heterosexual allies would need additional experiences with transgender individuals to be able to support and advocate for them.

Replicating the findings from this study is necessary to determine if the results are similar with different students. Students from different academic majors or in graduate standing might have different experiences. The course assignments would be the same, although the content of the interviews, activities, and seminars could be tailored to the specific needs of students in different disciplines.

The course was graded on a pass/fail scale, so no students received a letter grade. In order to receive a passing grade, students needed to complete all course requirements. They did not need to convert to LGBT allies to pass the course. Importantly, this adds credence to the sincerity of the students to become allies out of desire, not out of obligation. If necessary, criteria for assigning letter grades should be determined. Grades should not be assigned according to how the student conformed to desired attitudes toward LGBT communities; rather they should be assigned according to how well the student expresses his or her ideas. Clarity of expression is difficult to achieve, especially when writing about difficult LGBT topics. Students should receive grades according to their willingness to work toward clearly expressing their views as allies.

Replicating the study with different instructors would clarify if the course structure or the instructor had a greater impact on the students. According to SIT, while the course assignments are important, the quality of the feedback and guidance that the instructor provides to the students is important for ally identity development. The study should be replicated with a different heterosexual instructor, or an LGBT instructor. The qualifications of the instructor for this course are not set. It is likely that an instructor from another discipline and with different experiences with LGBT communities would have their own approach to the course. At a minimum, new instructors should complete the course assignments and gain the same experiences as the students. In all likelihood, it is not the credentials of the instructor that

are most important, but the willingness of the instructor to undergo the same journey as the students and share the anxiety, exploration, and fascination that are all part of becoming an LGBT ally.

While there is a basic definition of what is a heterosexual ally to LGBT communities, heterosexual persons have many ways to determine what it means to be an ally and how they can become one. No single theory or course can encompass all of the possible paths of becoming an ally, but one thing is clear, there are heterosexual students who want to become allies to LGBT communities. It is our hope that more academic courses are offered to give heterosexuals the chance to do just that.

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