

Being a Heterosexual Ally to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Community: Reflections and Development

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SUMMARY. The author provides a narrative of his development as a heterosexual ally of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. The author uses those parts of his own experience that are consistent with components of existing ally identity development models to provide qualitative evidence regarding the validity of those models. The author goes on to discuss the role of affect components in ally identity development and the implications of these models for training non-LGBT allies to the LGBT community. doi:10.1300/J236v11n03_10 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

Years ago, when I decided I want to be an ally to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) community, I did not know where to start. My thinking in this area brings to mind an experience that a professor described in her commencement speech. Many students did not know what to do after college and asked the professor what they should do. She replied, "You start with what you know and you look forward to learning more about what you hope to know. Start there." This has become the mantra in my journey to become a heterosexual ally to the LGBT community.

Years later, I found ally identity development models based on people's narrative accounts of being a supporter or advocate. Some of the models are similar to my experience; others are not. What follows is the narrative account of my development as an ally in which I highlight portions that could serve as qualitative evidence of the validity of the various stages or components of the models. Afterwards, I glean important factors from my narrative that helped me advance through the various stages of ally development in the hope of formulating ideas for the training and development of others who wish to be allies to the LGBT community.

MODELS OF ALLY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

In a search of the extant literature, I reviewed the following ally identity development models: Broido (2000); Chojnacki and Gelberg (1995); DiStefano et al. (2000); Gelberg and Chojnacki (1995); Getz and Kirkley, (2003); Jackson and Hardiman (1982); Worthington, McCrary and Howard (1998); and Washington and Evans (1991). Those that best fit my experience were Gelberg and Chojenski (1995), Getz and Kirkley (2003) and DiStefano et al. (2000) because they describe the affective experience of being an ally. The other models, which fit me to a lesser degree, were those that are based on an ally's awareness of the oppression of the LGBT community. My position is that there are many different ways to be an ally.

Gelberg and Chojeski (1995) and Getz and Kirkley (2003) began by describing their motivation to be an ally. In both papers, the authors describe feeling anxiety because their internal pro-LGBT beliefs were incongruent with their external behaviors. I had a similar experience. I first wanted to be an ally because I was tired of being silent during situations where people talked about the LGBT community. Internally, I felt comfortable with my lesbian and gay friends and accepted LGBT persons. However, having LGBT friends did not help me feel comfortable about talking with LGBT persons about their concerns and realities. I recall several occasions when I fell silent and wished I could have said more.

For example, I remember riding in a car with a gay couple and one of the partners talked about how his family struggled to accept him. I was silent, wanting to say something to show my understanding, but unable to do so. I remember, at a wedding, I heard other persons continually make jokes about a gay man and I could not respond. I remember trying to be supportive when a classmate, “came out” and told me he was gay. I remember others who said that there had to be a biological cause to being gay because no one would intentionally choose to be gay. I remember agreeing with my friend that it was difficult to know how to respond to a man when he says he has difficulty telling his family that he is gay. I remember talking to a Christian person who accepted gay men only because she “loved the sinner and hated the sin.” I remember inadvertently discovering that my friend was a lesbian and I did not know how to respond.

During those times, I remember being passive and silent. I expressed general acceptance, but I always felt disappointed in how I handled those experiences. I just did not know what to say when a person made jokes about gay men or if a lesbian or gay person “came out” to me. My silence made me anxious. If, internally, I felt comfortable being around gay men and lesbians, and I had lesbian and gay friends, when I had the chance to say something meaningful whenever others talked about being gay, why did I become silent? I was tired of being silent and wanted to do something about it.

Gelberg and Chojeski (1995) and Getz and Kirkley (2003) report experiencing “ambivalence” and a “fear of the unknown.” In those early stages, an ally feels anxious because she does not know what is expected of her. An ally may fear how LGBT and non-LGBT persons will react to him or her. Initially, I feared that I would not be a “credible” ally. I felt that I was less “qualified” to be an ally compared to friends who had LGBT siblings. My friends were “credible” allies because they

knew what it was like when their family member “came out” as gay or lesbian. I did not have these experiences, so how could I relate?

Would others describe me as an ally to the LGBT community? I had to answer “no.” Honestly, I felt that it was not enough for me to say I had LGBT friends, that I accepted LGBT persons or that I was against the oppression of the LGBT community. I was uncomfortable because I felt that I was too passive; I needed to do more.

However, if I wanted to “do more,” what would I do? At the University of Missouri, I viewed my counseling psychology professors and mentors as multi-culturally competent. What evidence did I need to back my claim that I was an ally? Should I read more literature about the LGBT community? Should I take every opportunity to strike down LGBT jokes? Should I speak out and fight legislation that discriminates against LGBT individuals? How should I respond if someone used the Bible as “evidence” that being gay was fundamentally wrong? Who could show me what to do?

Gelberg and Chojeski (1995) felt isolated because there were no role models to guide them. I had the same experience. I did not know any other allies, so I turned to my LGBT internship counselors at the University of Illinois at Chicago. My internship had three wonderful staff therapists who encouraged me, listened to me, and validated my concerns about being an ally. I approached them and said, “This is what I want to do. I want to be a credible, confident, ally to the LGBT community. I do not know where to start. I do not know what it means to be an ally.” All three welcomed me. It was actually refreshing for them to hear that a heterosexual, Korean male wanted to come forward and do more for the LGBT community.

Several models describe how allies explore their fears and anxiety (Gelberg and Chojeski, 1995; Getz and Kirkley, 2003; DiStefano et al., 2000; Washington and Evans, 1991). I too had to explore my self-doubts and ineffable anxiety. I talked to my internship therapists about my need to be “credible.” They asked why did I want to be credible? With their help, I peeled back the layers of that need to find I had a fear of being labeled a hypocrite. Although I had positive attitudes towards the LGBT community, I feared others might label me homophobic if I inadvertently used LGBT stereotypes or demonstrated antihomosexual attitudes. Like Gelberg and Chojeski (1995), I was concerned that my “initial errors, unintentional homophobia, or misinformation” (p. 269) might enervate my LGBT relationships. I could only explore and resolve my fear with the support of my internship therapists.

I also felt that I had to be credible because others might question my motives. Sometimes, allies encounter less than positive reactions from non-LGBT persons who may even question an ally's sexual identity (Broido, 2000; Distefano et al., 2000; Getz and Kirkley, 2003; Washington and Evans, 1991). I wanted to be an ally so I could have an active voice during my interactions with LGBT persons. I feared I could not think of a way to respond to questions about my motives.

As I thought about this fear, I became angry; I was not sure why until I read Becker (1998). He states that when someone asks a person "why" he or she is who he or she is, the very question forces the person to conjure up a profound, intellectual explanation that explains him or herself to the satisfaction of the interrogator. A problem in conjuring up a response to a "why" questions is that such exigent questions require a "good" answer, one that makes sense and is defensible. The criterion for a "good" answer is that it must conform to a motive that concurs with "acceptable" social norms. Thus, according to Becker's formulation, although I might want to be an ally because I want to improve my interactions with LGBT persons and because the LGBT community deserves fair justice and equal treatment, for some, those reasons may not be good enough. For some, perhaps the only acceptable reason I (or anyone else) can give for being an advocate is that I have a family member who is LGBT or that I am gay.

I realized then that I lived in fear of proclaiming who I wanted to be. I wanted to be an ally and I was afraid of coming out as ONE. I became angry that I was timid about wanting to be who I wanted to be. I was angry that there was a possibility that others might ridicule my motives. I was angry that I had to justify my reason to be an ally. Rather than retreating in fear, I could fight against this fear.

In retrospect, I realize that my fears and anxiety were related to homophobia and oppression. Most models describe how allies become aware of homophobia and the oppression of the LGBT community (Broido, 2000; Chojnacki and Gelberg, 1995; Getz and Kirkley, 2003; Jackson and Hardiman, 1982; Washington and Evans, 1991; Worthington, McCrary and Howard, 1991). Croteau et al. (2002) described how people acknowledged their own experiences of oppression so they can understand how persons from other oppressed statuses experienced oppression. Gradually, I realized if homophobia and oppression did not exist, I would not be fearful or anxious about being an ally. This realization was an important step because I thought that my status as a heterosexual Korean male meant that I could not truly relate to the LGBT

community. However, I could relate to the LGBT community because as an ally, I too am likely to encounter oppression and homophobia.

I also realized that oppression and homophobia affects everyone. I talked with an internship therapist who said her son was accosted because others thought he was gay. The therapist realized that anybody could be a target of hate because someone will justify his or her hatred for another person. As an ally, I was not speaking out about the rights of one group; everyone should be respected; nobody should be subjected to the misguided perceptions of others.

Gelberg and Chojnacik (1995) and Getz and Kirkley (2003), after exploring their own anxieties and becoming conversant about homophobia and oppression, developed confidence as allies. Gradually I developed confidence as well. I was energized to explore because I felt I had a starting point. Instead of being timid about being a beginner, I felt comfortable about being an “expert” on the early stages of becoming an ally. My goal was to have an active voice about the concerns and realities of being an ally and of the LGBT community.

Even though I thought of myself as an ally, I still felt powerless about discussing the concerns and realities that LGBT persons face. I still did not know how to support LGBT persons if they decided to “come out” to me, if they were anxious if their families and friends would accept their LGBT identity, or if they talked about the detrimental effects of homophobia. Ally development models emphasize that allies need to acquire knowledge about the experiences, concerns, and realities of the LGBT community. I needed to enter a knowledge stage.

To gain knowledge, I wanted to be a part of a group that was involved with the LGBT community. The logical place to start was a local chapter of the national organization, Parents and Friends for Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG). The PFLAG meeting was illuminating. I met an old friend and found out that after all these years he was gay. We have maintained our friendship ever since. Members were happy to see a heterosexual man participating in PFLAG. The meeting also altered my assumption that everyone at PFLAG was comfortable with his or her LGBT loved ones. Some have fully embraced their gay or lesbian family member while others still struggled to accept. However, PFLAG provided a space for everyone to feel comfortable and talk openly about their experiences in being a family member or a friend of a LGBT loved one.

As I listened to their stories, I became familiar with the experiences of LGBT persons, the coming out process, and the experience of family members when they first received the news that their loved one was LGBT. I discovered a key reason to be an ally. Allies can

support non-LGBT persons, family members and friends, who feel isolated because they carry a secret: someone they know and love is gay. For example, one mother said her daughter confided that she was a lesbian. However, the daughter was unsure if she could tell the other members of her family. Only the mother knew her daughter's secret. Consequently, when the mother came to a PFLAG meeting she could not tell family members where she went because she did not want to expose her daughter's secret. A father described how difficult it was for him to hear his fellow co-workers joke about "homosexuals." He could not risk saying he was offended because he was afraid of the potential backlash if he disclosed he had a gay son. Listening to these stories, I realized that being an ally is not just about accepting LGBT persons. One can support parents, family members, and other non-LGBT persons who feel isolated because their secrets cannot be shared due to homophobia, discrimination, and oppression. In a homophobic society, it is not enough to accept passively LGBT persons; allies need to express openly their support so everyone can be free to either say they are LGBT or that they know someone who is.

The later stages of Gelberg and Chojnacki (1995) and Getz and Kirkley's (2003) models describe how allies engage in pro-LGBT activities. I finally felt comfortable interacting with LGBT persons and their families and friends because I felt conversant in the experiences and realities of the LGBT community. I was no longer silent. During my internship, I decided to construct an outreach event titled, "Being an Ally to the LGBT Community." I presented it at the University of Illinois at Chicago as part of their LGBT Pride week.

The aim of the event was to demonstrate that allies did more than voice support for the LGBT community. They can support LGBT persons who are coming out, support the family and friends of LGBT persons, and non-LGBT persons who struggle with homophobia or oppression. By accessing supportive resources and interacting with the LGBT community, one can develop pro-LGBT skills and form an ally identity. Based on these experiences, I came up with a list of thirteen reasons why it was important for non-LGBT persons to support the LGBT community:

It is important to be an ally because:

1. Allies can help other persons stop the oppression of LGBT persons.
2. Some non-LGBT persons may have communicated to an LGBT person that his or her sexual identity is deviant, inappropriate, or

transitional. Allies, however, can embrace and value an LGBT person's sexual identity.

3. Allies can dispel the myths and misconceptions of the LGBT community that are held by the majority of society.
4. Allies can help non-LGBT persons positively resolve their biases and discomfort with LGBT persons.
5. An LGBT person might feel excluded from other parts of society if the LGBT community is the only community that accepts him or her. Allies from all parts of society can help LGBT persons feel acceptance.
6. When everyone, not just the LGBT community, accepts and includes LGBT persons, LGBT persons have an easier time accepting their identities.
7. Sometimes, the LGBT community may not express acceptance towards an LGBT person. In these cases, an LGBT person can rely on allies for safety and support.
8. Allies can provide hope to an LGBT person that non-LGBT persons will accept his or her sexual identity when the LGBT person is ready to come out" to his or her families and friends.
9. Allies can support an LGBT person if his or her own family or friends do not accept or support him or her.
10. The friends and family members of LGBT persons, who are searching for support, may need to come out to allies.
11. Persons who want to come out as allies need the support of other allies.
12. Allies can make every setting (e.g., a workplace, school, or social group) safe for LGBT persons and their family and friends to come out.
13. It is simply the right thing to do.¹

The response to this outreach event was astounding. Many non-LGBT persons used it as a first opportunity to come out as an ally to the LGBT community. Many LGBT persons attended because they were glad to see heterosexual persons presenting pro-LGBT programs. I received an enormous thank you from the LGBT outreach center at the university. The program helped solidify my identity as an ally. I was no longer alone and I was relieved to share my struggles with others. We realized that to be a true supporter meant remaining curious about our ally identities, being honest about ourselves, acknowledging what we knew about our experiences with the LGBT community, and deciding how we wanted to be of help.

All of the ally models previously cited list action as a final stage. This involves open advocacy for the LGBT community. I was finally able to reach this stage. After my experience in PFLAG and the outreach event, I marched in my first Chicago Gay Pride Parade. The experience was wonderful. Our PFLAG section received the loudest cheers. Proud parents held up signs: "Our children free at last" or "God blessed me with a gay son." I walked arm in arm with a gay man and crowds cheered our embrace. Each time I march in the parade, I have mixed emotions. While I have made progress, I have always felt that I have not done enough. I felt a need to combat my own complacency by continually trying to be a better ally.

At that point, I felt comfortable in a supportive role. I felt I could support an LGBT person's concerns and realities if he or she decided to come out. I also felt I could offer support to the families and friends of LGBT persons and interact with the LGBT persons and converse with them about our experiences with homophobia, oppression, and heterosexual privilege. I decided to take on another role: advocacy. In January of 2005, I joined the members of PFLAG and Equality Illinois, a pro-LGBT political organization, to convince Illinois State senators to vote in favor of and to pass Illinois Senate Bill 3186, which prohibited the discrimination against sexual minorities.

The experience taught me that there was much to learn about advocating for the LGBT community. I witnessed how PFLAG parents tirelessly waited outside politicians' offices to persuade them to vote for this senate bill so that their LGBT sons and daughters would be protected from discrimination. I remember my shock that my state senator planned to vote against the bill because she did not know much about the issue and how it affected her constituents. I remember another senator, initially unsure how he would vote, saying he would vote for the bill because a PFLAG parent single-handedly convinced him that Illinois needed to join the growing list of states that prohibit the discrimination of sexual minorities. I remember during a subcommittee senate hearing, how members of a religious group tried to persuade senators to vote against the bill by condemning gay men and portraying them as engaging in acts of moral turpitude. Political advocacy was a completely new experience for me. As an ally, I did not have the skills to engage in this arena. I find myself back at the beginning. Fortunately, for me, I have role models who will help me build my advocacy skills so I can help eventually rid society of institutionalized homophobia.

AFFECT IN ALLY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

One component of the models with which I could consistently identify were those that fit my affective experience as an ally (Gelberg and Chojnaci, 1995; Getz and Kirkely, 2003). I could see how my affect progressed from initial anxiety and fear, to anger about defending my motives, to feeling content about being an ally.

I had difficulty aligning my experience with all of the models' content components, such as oppression, homophobia, or heterosexual privilege. Most of the models described how allies become aware of oppression or homophobia in a linear fashion. At first, as an ally, I did not perceive that my emotional reactions were imbued with homophobia and oppression. I experienced those topics as distant social forces and not germane to my intra- and interpersonal motivations. Later, I realized how those social forces were impediments to my ally identity. I did not feel my awareness of homophobia or oppression did not progress in a linear fashion; rather, I continually revisited those topics as I saw how they were related to the affective component of my ally identity.

Another reason I resonated with the affect component of the models is that I had strong emotional reactions about being an ally within my intra and inter-personal spheres. Models that addressed how allies operated at a macro-level were not as salient because I simply was not ready to be an ally at that level until my intra- and interpersonal struggles were resolved. If I had to track my struggles: (1) I started with my internal distress over the incongruency between my internal pro-gay beliefs and my external behaviors that communicated silent acceptance; (2) then I observed my interpersonal relationships where I was concerned that others might think I was gay because I was supportive of gay rights; and (3) I then proceeded to macro-level activities such as witnessing groups using homophobia to persuade political figures to impede pro-gay legislation. After attending to my intra- and inter-personal spheres, ally models based on content, such as oppression or homophobia, were helpful to me because I envisioned how I could advocate at a macro-level for the LGBT community.

Based on the models and my experience, I believe have two roles: support and advocacy. I saw myself in more of a supportive role because my initial motivation for being an ally was to have meaningful interactions with my LGBT friends and make my external behaviors congruent with my internal beliefs. I am just beginning to develop the advocate component of my identity. The roles are not mutually exclusive; both

are related because oppression and homophobia can shape one's experience as a supporter or an advocate.

Perhaps the reason why I did not initially pursue being an ally as an advocate was that I simply was not ready to discuss forbidden topics like oppression, homophobia, or heterosexism. My confidence in discussing those topics was compromised by my concern that an unintentional statement might indict me as prejudiced. Furthermore, I imagined the prospect of combating an intransigent society's immutable views of the LGBT community at the macro level as a Herculean task. I could only discuss those topics with other allies who could listen and validate my concerns. I first had to see how these topics were germane to me at the intra- and interpersonal level before I could venture into how I could address these issues at a macro-level.

As I thought about being an advocate, I was not sure if I had the personality for it. My initial image of the advocate role was someone who engaged in political lobbying, wrote letters to key government figures, and tried to change social norms. I equivocated on whether or not I wanted to engage in those activities. In addition, I was not sure if I could withstand the backlash. I remember watching a PLFAG mom get into a heated confrontation with an antigay religious group at PRIDE parade. Watching how members of that group taunted and vilified the mother was unbearable. The experience was like watching two mountain rams collide. I was thankful that this PFLAG mom was on our side. I remember thinking to myself, "Could I do that? I am not like that mother." My answer was "no," but that does not mean I could still advocate for LGBT causes in my own way.

I would argue that advocacy development has its own unique starting point. After my first foray into advocacy, I felt I was back at the beginning, learning how to talk to politicians about pro-LGBT legislation or witnessing how to address conservative religious groups who condemn the LGBT community. As in the case of being an ally in the supportive role, becoming an ally in the advocate role may call for a separate model with its own beginning, middle, and end.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING

Allies are not born; they are trained. As I reflected on my own development, the important factors that helped me move from one stage to another were (a) access to supportive relationships, (b) contact, and (c) practice opportunities. When I presented my outreach event, non-LGBT

persons attended because they wanted to come out as and to learn what they could do to become allies.

My therapist training has taught me that a client can explore concerns only within the context of an established supportive relationship (Gelso and Carter, 1990; Kivlighan, 1995; Bordin, 1992; Horvath and Greenberg, 1991). Potential allies need a supportive relationship to explore questions, concerns, or anxieties about the process and to explore difficult subjects like homophobia and oppression. Nascent allies are trying new behaviors and ways of thinking and being. They are unlikely to get it right the first time and need supportive relationships to establish a positive emotional base from which to explore the difficulties of being an ally.

Contact with others is an important factor (Gelberg and Chojnacik, 1995; Getz and Kirkley, 2003) for those who want to acquire knowledge and skills by learning from and listening to the stories of LGBT persons, their friends and families, and other allies. Allies also need opportunities to practice their skills (Gelman and Chomski, 1997). One's confidence grows when there are opportunities to build skills and receive positive feedback (Combs, 1962; Purkey, 1970; Purkey and Novak, 1984). Experienced allies need to advertise that they are open to anyone who wants to join them. Potential allies need to choose which model best fits their development and enlist the support of other allies to guide their development. There are many ways to be an ally; my way is just one possibility.

NOTE

1. As I was reviewing the first twelve responses, I suddenly realized that I forgot a crucial piece: discrimination and oppressing others is inherently wrong. Everyone should not have to live with the feeling that others hate or exclude him or her.

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