



## Motives of Heterosexual Allies in Collective Action for Equality

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*The literature on collective action in support of equality without regard to sexual orientation or gender identity has emphasized the role of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists. Relatively little attention has been given to the role of members of the advantaged group, heterosexual allies who work for equality. This study presents data from an ongoing study of 127 allies who have been visibly active in these efforts in the United States. The findings suggest two major sets of ally motives: those rooted in fundamental principles (justice, civil rights, patriotism, religious beliefs, moral principles, and using privilege to positive ends) and those based on personal experiences or roles (professional roles, family relationships, valuing marriage, achieving closure on personal experiences, transforming guilt, and anger). The findings suggest that the concept of opinion-based groups holds promise for conceptualizing and mobilizing LGBT-ally collective action.*

Political debate and electoral contests about same-sex couples' access to marriage have garnered a great deal of attention in the United States over the past decade. At times, same-sex marriage is discussed as if it were a singular issue. In actuality, the contentious struggle around marriage is but one facet of a much larger sphere of collective action undertaken by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people—and heterosexual people allied with them—in the pursuit of political and social equality (Newman, 2010). Collective action on behalf of the rights of LGBT people has been underway in the United States for decades. Scholarship on collective action for LGBT equality has primarily

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emphasized the work of LGBT activists. Very limited attention has been paid to heterosexually identified activists who have worked on behalf of LGBT rights.

Nonetheless, given the contributions to collective action that can be made by supportive members of advantaged groups, it seems worthwhile to understand the place of what McCarthy and Zald (1976) referred to as “conscience constituents” in the process of collective action. The research presented here represents an effort to understand the motivational sets of members of an advantaged group—in this case, heterosexually identified individuals in the United States—who engage in collective action on behalf of equal rights regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. In the discourse associated with the theoretical frame of collective action, these individuals constitute a nonhomogeneous group that is advantaged relative to LGBT people as a group. In keeping with the popular discourse, this disparate group has been referred to as “heterosexual allies,” as “straight allies,” or—most frequently—simply as “allies.” This article will use language from these two discourses interchangeably.

The small body of research on heterosexual-ally activism has focused on two major threads: heterosexual identity development and pathways to and roles associated with ally activism. As this body of literature has evolved, it has expanded to include a broader range of participants, of methods, and of questions. Some key questions remain: how do people come to identify as allies, what motivates them to become active on behalf of LGBT rights, and what are the costs and rewards of doing so? The purpose of the present research project was to address these questions in depth with the aim of both clarifying the meaning and experience of ally identity and exploring the implications of such an understanding for the future of the LGBT-ally movement for equality.

This article discusses findings from a long-term interview project undertaken to understand the motivations, barriers, costs, and rewards associated with activism by heterosexual allies. Over the course of 17 years, I have interviewed 127 allies in a number of locations in the United States, from a wide variety of backgrounds, and involved in a range of roles as allies. These interviews have been conducted using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to develop some understanding of these activists. As the interviews have been conducted and analyzed on an ongoing basis, the findings have been compiled with an eye to the slowly developing research literature on heterosexual allies.

### **Prior Research**

The extant literature relevant to heterosexual activism emerges from several different streams. One thread focuses on processes by which members of advantaged groups develop an understanding of themselves as members of those groups and of the privilege associated with that membership. A good portion of this body of work has emerged in the context of actual social movements. Within

the domain of research focused specifically on heterosexuals, two major points of emphasis have occurred. The first concerns heterosexual identity development, and it addresses the need for what Bieschke (2002) has referred to as “a complex counter-discourse that would more effectively contradict heterosexual dominance and promote equity” (p. 576). The research in this area underscores the individual and social aspects of heterosexual identity development (e.g., Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002), and it posits that heterosexuals’ understandings of LGBT people are inevitably tied to their understandings of themselves as heterosexuals (Worthington, Dillon, & Becker-Smith, 2005). In a related vein, this literature suggests that heterosexuals’ awareness of the privilege associated with their sexual orientation constitutes one source of their engagement in LGBT-supportive behavior (e.g., Mohr, 2002).

Interestingly, much of the earliest research on heterosexual allies emerged in the context of student personnel and student development work. This literature began as efforts to describe how heterosexuals develop as allies, with the initial focus on allies who were career counselors (Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1995; Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995). A number of other authors extended descriptions of allies to other areas of college work (e.g., Croteau, Lark, Lidderdale, & Chung, 2005; Evans & Wall, 1991; Sanlo, 1998).

Other work has suggested textured analyses of various aspects of ally roles and collective action. Much of this literature concerns the topic of the current article, factors that contribute to the development of attitudes and behaviors consistent with being an ally. Most of the research in this area has been qualitative in nature. Vela-McConnell (1999) found that engagement in activism sometimes precedes the development of social consciousness about LGBT issues. Allies often came to know more about LGBT issues as a result of some initial activism, and this, in turn, can lead to a sense of personal responsibility.

Vernaglia (2000) explored the activism of 13 heterosexual parents active in PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), a national support, education, and advocacy organization. She identified two pathways to becoming an ally among her parent participants. The first emphasized acceptance and support of one’s nonheterosexual child. The second pathway was through broader engagement in social justice work of various kinds. Borshuk (2001) conducted interviews with eight out-group activists of various kinds (i.e., not only heterosexual allies). This research identified several motives for respondents’ activism: external attributions, including relationships and circumstances; dispositional attributions; personal experiences of having been marginalized; and some sense of moral or social responsibility.

Stotzer (2009) identified three key features in attitude formation among students whose scores on an attitude scale suggested support for LGB issues: early experiences that normalized nonheterosexual orientations, knowing LGB people in high school or college, and reactions of empathy to the struggles of LGB peers

or resistance to negative attitudes about LGB people. Duhigg, Rostosky, Gray, and Wimsatt (2010) conducted interviews with a community sample of 12 heterosexuals who had actively supported LGBT rights. They identified six domains contributing to ally development, four of which were facilitative experiences: the presence of an early role model, interpersonal relationships with LGBT people, an evolving understanding of privilege and oppression, and conflict between awareness of homophobia and values of justice and equality.

Fingerhut (in press) conducted quantitative research through an online survey of heterosexuals. He found three sets of predictors of ally activism: personal characteristics (including gender, education, and dispositional empathy), contact with LGBT individuals, and attitudes toward LGBT people.

This burgeoning area of research has begun to examine the factors that contribute to the development of an identity as a heterosexual ally and the roles of allies in the movement for equality. Still lacking is a full and nuanced understanding of the motivations and experiences of those who claim this identity. What paths lead people to join in this movement, and how do their motives reproduce, challenge, or broaden those found in the collective action research more broadly? The present study was designed to address these questions.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants for the present study were 127 heterosexually identified individuals who had been actively involved in working toward full social and political equality regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. Allies were selected based on visible work that they had already conducted on behalf of equality. They were identified through media reports of their activism or by movement activists, both in-group and out-group, who knew about the study. The choice of allies who had been publicly visible was based on two considerations. The first was related to questions about the congruence between expressed attitudes and actual behaviors (Hunter & Kim, 1993). The respondents' history of overt activism confirmed the match between their expressed attitudes and their enactment of those attitudes. The second consideration rested on the expectation that allies who had been visibly active would have had to think through and articulate the reasons for their activism in ways that less visible allies might not. They were, therefore, presumed to be in an optimal position for responding in some depth to interview questions.

The sample included allies who had worked in a wide variety of movement roles—some embedded in national, state, and local movement organizations, some connected to more ad hoc group efforts, and a few engaging in solo or dyadic work on behalf of LGBT equality. I approached allies in person, by phone, or through

e-mail to explain the study and to request their participation. All but one of the 128 individuals I invited to participate did so.

Beyond the criterion that respondents be visible allies, I made efforts to gather data from participants who differed from one another along a variety of demographic dimensions. Public activism occurs in many contexts, but the most visible tends to occur in contested settings. Therefore, many study participants were invited to participate based on their work in electoral campaigns or in other political conflicts (e.g., a community-wide conflict related to the creation of a school-based gay–straight alliance and a battle over legislative votes on same-sex marriage). For the same reason, allies in the sample tended to live in areas, including Colorado, Massachusetts, Oregon, and Utah, where issues related to LGBT equality were hotly contested during the course of the study.

About 60% of the study participants were female. This sex imbalance is consistent with data from numerous studies using a variety of indices that together suggest that women tend to be more accepting of LGBT people than are men (e.g., Kite, 1984). Interestingly, the breakdown by sex in this sample, which was based on visible activism, included a higher percentage of men (40.94%) than did Stotzer's (2009) sample of pro-LGBT college students, which was based on scores on Herek's Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men, Gay Men Subscale Short Form (23.6%).

The ages of those in the current sample ranged from 15 to 82 years old. The mean age of participants was 42 years. The distribution of ages was bimodal. Many participants were under 20 years of age ( $n = 24$ ) due to data collected in a school-district in Salt Lake City, Utah, where conflict following the establishment of a gay–straight alliance prompted the emergence of a striking number of heterosexual allies among local high school students. The other modal age group was in the 40–49-year age range ( $n = 26$ ). No obvious context-based reason was identified for the relatively large number of allies in this age range.

The sample included 82% White allies and 17.5% who identified as people of color. This latter group included allies who identified as African–American (5.5% of the total), Latino (4.6%), Asian–American (1.8%), American Indian (.92%), and biracial/multiracial (4.6%). When asked to identify their religious or spiritual affiliations, allies indicated a variety of preferences. Approximately one third of respondents ( $n = 43$ , 33.9%) indicated that they were not affiliated with a religion. Five additional allies (3.9%) reported that they had formerly been members of a religion, but no longer were (e.g., “ex-Catholic,” “ex-LDS,” “ex-Baptist”). The remaining respondents distributed religious preferences across 20 different categories. The format of this item on the demographic form did not offer mutually exclusive categories, but allowed participants to name their affiliations as they saw fit. In descending order, respondents endorsed the following religious identities: 23 (33.9% of the total) Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints or Mormon; 8 (6.3%) Jewish; five (3.9%) each Christian, Protestant, and United

Methodist; 4 each (3.14%) agnostic and Unitarian Universalist; 3 (2.4%) each Buddhist, Catholic, Humanist, Pagan, and United Church of Christ/Congregationalist; 2 (1.6%) Lutheran; and 1 (0.78% of the total) each of the following: atheist, Baptist, Church of Divine Science, Episcopalian, Greek Orthodox, Presbyterian, Quaker, and Unity.

### *Procedure*

All 127 respondents participated in interviews that lasted from 1 to 3 hours. Participants chose the location for their interviews. Most interviews took place in respondents' homes or places of employment. A number of younger respondents opted for interviews to take place at their schools, at the homes of friends, and in guest rooms or conference rooms of hotels. With the exception of nine allies, each respondent was interviewed in a single setting. The great majority of participants were interviewed singly. However, several married heterosexual couples opted to be interviewed together, and several of the youth allies opted to be interviewed in groups. Interviews with the respondents were either videotaped or audio taped. Two thirds were conducted by a single interviewer; one third were conducted with two interviewers.

### *Interview Format*

Two major questions framed the interviews. The first concerned the motives that influenced respondents to take active stands for LGBT rights. The second focused on how the allies saw homophobia and heterosexism from their perspectives as members of the advantaged group.

### *Informed Consent and Confidentiality*

All participants were fully informed about the nature and purposes of the study, and all signed informed consent agreements. The informed consent and confidentiality agreement used in this research departed from standard versions of such documents. Each participant could opt for full anonymity, for full disclosure, or for partial anonymity. In the last case, respondents identified specific parts of their interviews that they chose to keep private. Virtually all of the allies interviewed for this study were very publicly involved in ally work, and their aim in that work was the antithesis of anonymity.

### *Data Analysis*

Data from the interviews have been gathered and analyzed over the course of 17 years. Throughout this process, data analysis has been carried out in the

context of research teams composed of some mix of graduate students, postgraduate professionals, and me. Typically, teams have included researchers who identify as LGBT and researchers who identify as heterosexual. Each team has worked together a minimum of 1 year. In addition, a colleague, who was also a psychologist, agreed to serve as auditor for the data analysis. She read all interviews, reviewed the coding process, and offered suggestions for additional themes.

All teams have utilized consensus coding (Russell, 2000), reading data together and coming to a consensus about the meaning of different themes and their applicability to the interviews. I strove to understand the individual experiences of the respondents with as much clarity and depth as possible. I also adopted an interpretive stance (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Schwandt, 1994) in analyzing the data, working to grasp not only each individual respondent's perspective, but also the lessons that the themes expressed by individuals suggested for the role of heterosexual activists more generally.

## Results

As noted above, interviews addressed two foundational questions. The present article focuses on the study's first question: What motivates heterosexually identified individuals to take public stands on behalf of the rights of LGBT people?

Based partly on previous research on advantaged-group activists of various kinds (e.g., Belfrage, 1965; Fogelman, 1994; Jamison & Lunch, 1992; Rothschild, 1982), one might expect qualitative data on heterosexual allies to yield a typology of straightforward motives that gave rise to their commitment to activism. However, analysis of the data suggested a much more complex picture of the motivational sets of allies. This picture goes beyond a straightforward set of motives and encompasses multiple dimensions, all of which appear to influence allies' commitment and behavior. Rarely did a respondent's activism derive from a single motive. Instead, virtually all of these allies described some combination of motives that guided their work, either simultaneously or in sequence. In some cases, it was possible to assign a "most important" motive, but in most cases, it was not. Because of this and due to the interpretive nature of this work, the description of respondents' motives is presented qualitatively to highlight the range of motives, rather than quantitatively in terms of statistical frequencies. The following findings describing the motivations for activism among these allies offer, first, a differentiation of motives into two broad categories, followed by a more detailed discussion of motives within each category.

### Typology of Motives

Allies in this study collectively identified 12 distinct motives. These 12 motives, in turn, represented two general types: one set of motives was based on

**Table 1.** Common Motives of Heterosexual Allies

Motives based on fundamental principles	
Motive	Description of motive
Justice	Commitment to justice as basic value; explicit reference to justice as the basis for working on behalf of LGBT rights
Civil rights	Ally work is tied to an investment in civil rights; typically interested in many civil rights issues rather than focused solely on LGBT rights
Patriotism	Frames the struggle for LGBT equality in terms of basic American values
Religious beliefs	Religious beliefs and ideas form a basis for a stance on behalf of LGBT rights
Moral principles	Draws on basic moral principles (not related to specific religious beliefs) as basis for involvement in supporting LGBT rights
“Spending” privilege	Recognizes that being heterosexual brings certain forms of power and privilege and wants to use this advantage to work toward equalizing power
Motives based on personal roles, relationships, or experiences	
Motive	Description of motive
Professional roles	Involvement revolves around professional or related roles.
Family and other relationships	Ally work is rooted in personal relationship(s) with family members or other significant people
Sharing riches of marriage	A very positive view of marriage gives rise to wanting others to share the good things that marriage can bring
Getting closure on experiences	Working as an ally helps to resolve past experiences; these experiences may have occurred at personal or collective levels
Transforming guilt through action	A specific case of gaining closure: sense of guilt for a past deed or omission (which may or may not be related to LGBT issues) leads to a desire to work on behalf of LGBT rights
Anger	Individual is angry at inequality

fundamental principles, applied in this case to the particular issue of LGBT rights, and the other set of motives was rooted in personal experiences or roles that respondents brought to the issue. These two sets of motives are summarized in Table 1.

*Motives Based on Fundamental Principles*

Some allies straightforwardly invoked one or more of the six principles represented in this set of motives as they explained their commitment to pro-LGBT activism.

*Justice.* Allies who called upon the justice motive tended to name the principle with obvious ease. They viewed the social inequities that exist between heterosexuals and LGBT people as unjust, and this view prompted them to take action. One ally, who worked as an attorney, explained her behavior in these terms: “I think there’s a sense of justice to it; there’s a sense of being good people and doing the right things.”

*Civil rights.* The issue of civil rights has been a contentious one when applied to LGBT issues. Some people view any parallels between the civil rights movement for African–Americans and the movement for LGBT equality as problematic (e.g., Liptak, 2006). The theme of civil rights came up prominently within two groups of respondents. Both allies of color and professionals, particularly attorneys (of any racial/ethnic background) who had expertise and work experience in civil rights were especially likely to describe civil rights as a motivating force in their own activism. One White attorney who had successfully argued against Colorado’s anti-LGBT Amendment 2 before the U.S. Supreme Court explained the background of her involvement in LGBT rights in this way:

I’ve been involved in civil rights for years. One of the reasons I went to law school . . . in 1964 was that the civil rights movement was beginning then. And I had decided that I didn’t have much of a role in that unless I had some skills to bring to representing people or helping people with various civil rights problems.

*Patriotism.* Some allies invoked ideals associated with widely held views of American principles to explain their work as allies. In many cases, these observations reflected principles specifically drawn from the Constitution or from popular images of American ideals:

You don’t stand back and watch somebody else get picked on . . . That’s not American to me. And so part of being an American is standing up for other people when they’re having problems or they’re being oppressed.

In either case, allies who emphasized the motivational force of patriotism appeared to draw on what Schatz, Staub, and Levine (1999, p. 151) have referred to as constructive patriotism (“an attachment to country characterized by support for questioning and criticism and current group practices that are intended to result in positive change”) rather than on blind patriotism (“an attachment to country characterized by unquestioning positive evaluation, staunch allegiance, and intolerance of criticism”).

*Religious beliefs.* Religious affiliation and observance have long been associated with opposition to LGBT rights (Herek, 1987). Nonetheless, a number of allies in the present study specifically called upon their religious beliefs as the basis

for their pro-LGBT activism. One Methodist minister described the relationship between his faith and his activism in these terms:

It's an honor to be able to speak out for—for people's rights—for human rights, to declare for justice and to identify our faith, my faith, with the issue of justice. . . . It's central to the message of both Jesus and the Scriptures as a whole.

*Moral principles.* Some respondents made explicit connections between their activism and moral principles but did not indicate that these principles were attached to a particular faith. Their statements of morality exemplified the fact that morality is not the exclusive province of religion. The words of a civil rights attorney and teacher who had no formal religious affiliation are illustrative:

I'm certainly spiritual. And I do believe in a force that's in me. . . I would dishonor the force by not sticking my neck out and making myself. . . and those around me uncomfortable by working for what is right, by speaking for what is right.

*Spending heterosexual privilege.* The final motive rooted in basic principles is couched in Pharr's (1997) words exhorting members of privileged groups to spend their privilege well. In some cases, allies expressed the notion of spending heterosexual privilege in explicit terms, as when one male respondent said, "I . . . was a privileged White male. I didn't even have to think about anything except what I want." Allies who directly used the concept of privilege virtually always had an elaborated political analysis about oppression and the nature of advantaged groups vis-à-vis disadvantaged groups. Other allies used—and seemed to understand—the notion of privilege in less explicit ways. One minister, who had recently graduated from seminary, for example, described his role as the spokesperson for a group of students who were mostly lesbian, gay, and bisexual:

And while there's always risk in taking stands of any kind, my being married certainly reduced the risk of my being branded as gay and, therefore, unordainable, which is a condition in the Methodist Church right now. So some of those other [seminary students in the group] just couldn't come out like that without serious repercussions. Mine were not nearly as serious; at least, I don't think they would be.

### *Motives Rooted in Personal Experiences and Roles*

In contrast to motives that rest on long-standing fundamental principles applied to LGBT issues, the motives in this second set arise in the context of personal relationships and/or personal experiences.

*Professional roles.* A number of allies in the study came to their activism because someone invited them to bring their particular skills to a specific task. In many cases, these allies had not had notable prior contact with LGBT people or activism. Respondents who entered into LGBT activism because they were asked

to fill particular roles included attorneys, educators, researchers, members of the clergy, a public relations specialist, a PTA volunteer, psychologists, and others. The attorney who argued Colorado's Amendment 2 case before the U.S. Supreme Court was initially asked to help on the case because she had an impressive background as an appellate attorney arguing civil rights cases. However, she had no background, legal or otherwise, in LGBT rights.

Another ally in the study was asked to work in a statewide campaign to fight a referendum aimed at prohibiting antidiscrimination claims made by LGBT people. She had never engaged in issues around LGBT rights, though she had held leadership positions in campaigns related to issues of racism, anti-immigration efforts, and other social justice issues. She eventually used her expertise in a variety of capacities in state and national LGBT organizations.

*Family and other personal relationships.* Perhaps the most widely recognized type of straight ally is the parent (or other family member) of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person. At least some of this recognition is rooted in the emphasis that has been placed on the importance of the contact hypothesis in changing attitudes toward LGBT people and their rights (e.g., Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993). The visibility of a national organization, PFLAG, focused on allies who are parents or other family members, in combination with that organization's widespread network of local chapters, has also contributed to the emphasis on allies whose personal relationships are central to their activism (Broad, 2005; Broad, Alden, Berkowitz, & Ryan, 2008).

Allies who are aware of close LGBT relatives often appeared to have some important differences from other allies in the study. These differences are roughly equivalent to those cited by Vernaglia (2000) in her study of heterosexual parents in the LGBT rights movement. Her "parental loyalty" pathway is parallel to the motive relating to family relationships in the present study. Vernaglia's second pathway, that through the social justice activism, is more akin to the present study's category of activism rooted in fundamental principles, described in the first set of motives, above.

*Sharing the riches of marriage.* Some allies in this study emphasized the role of marriage in their own lives, the importance that they place on marriage, the happiness they derive from it, and their resulting desire to share it with others. The emphasis on marriage per se suggests the interplay between individual motives and specific elements in the social environment that come together to influence activism (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & van Dijk, 2009).

Rarely did allies specifically invoke their appreciation for marriage as the explicit reason for their activism. Rather, they were inclined to speak of the personal value of their own marriage and their sadness that others did not have access to that same valued experience. One respondent, a member of the Church

of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, for example, spoke of the importance that her religion places on the family. Later in the interview, she went on to say. “I can’t imagine having to go through life without a spouse, and I can’t imagine that anyone else should have to go through life without this gift that gives me such pleasure.”

*Gaining closure on past experiences.* Other allies described their activist behaviors as an opportunity to gain closure on two distinct levels: the personal and the collective. At the personal level, respondents viewed their pro-LGBT activism as the means for acknowledging and honoring some past experience. For example, one ally, a Presbyterian minister, had come to understand that her activism was influenced by her childhood experience with a lesbian couple who had provided a good deal of nurturance to her “when [her] own mother couldn’t.” She said of this couple, “They died before I could thank them. And maybe part of my concern for justice for homosexuals has to do with some unfinished thanking.”

Motives reflecting efforts to reach closure on past experiences may also occur at the collective level. The effort at resolving past collective experience was reported most frequently by Jewish respondents. One woman, in the wake of an anti-LGBT campaign and election, started a religious right watch group in her city. She described one of the reasons for this action:

I had grown up with the Holocaust feeling very present and with . . . constantly being told we could never forget. . . I’ve grown up with a kind of vigilance for. . . the vilification of people, and recognizing that kind of vilification was the first step toward—toward elimination. And I had never seen it before as overtly as I did in the campaign [against LGB rights].

*Transforming guilt through action.* This motive is a specific case of the prior motive, gaining closure on personal experiences. The decision to view a motive rooted in guilt as a distinct motive rather than as an example of the prior motive was predicated both on its frequency in the data set and on the fact that guilt has long been discussed as a specific motive for collective action (e.g., Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009). A straight teacher in a Salt Lake City high school described the value of guilt in motivating ally behavior. When asked why he had agreed to be the advisor of record for a newly formed and very controversial gay–straight alliance, this teacher related his own experience as a student at that same high school. During his time as a student, the school’s first two African–American students were admitted. He recalled watching and saying nothing as they were harassed to the point that they finally left the school. Years later, when LGBT students needed a faculty advisor to be allowed to form their gay–straight alliance, he saw it as an opportunity to revisit a “missed opportunity, where I could have made a difference.”

*Anger.* The final prominent motive among these allies was anger. Anger has been the focus of a good deal of theorizing and research on collective action (e.g., Iyer & Ryan, 2009; Stürmer & Simon, 2009; Thomas et al., 2009), albeit typically in regard to activism by members of disadvantaged groups rather than by supportive members of advantaged groups. Anger was not the sole motive for any ally, but it was not infrequent among the motives expressed by many of them. One youth leader described his reaction to hearing anti-LGBT terms used by the youth in his group as follows:

If there was anger in their voices, they got anger back from me. . . It's—it's just a very touchy subject with me. I just have seen too much—too much pain caused around that to allow it to go unchallenged.

These motives describe the breadth of reasons behind decisions to take stands on behalf of LGBT rights, but many variables influence whether and how these motives might be enacted in given contexts. These issues are beyond the scope of this article, but are discussed elsewhere (Russell, 2011).

## Discussion

The theory and research on collective action have long emphasized the role of disadvantaged groups in mobilizing for social change. Recent years have seen increasing, though still limited, attention to the role of members of advantaged groups who work toward such change (van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009). The present study of heterosexual activists working to promote equality regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity offers a picture of the complex motivational sets of these allies in the self-descriptions of 127 individuals. The findings from this study carry some important suggestions not only for conceptualizing collective action that includes heterosexual allies but also for mobilizing allies for participation in the movement for equality.

Of central importance in these findings are the potential gains that might ensue from adopting a different and more nuanced understanding of the relationship between LGBT people and heterosexual allies (and perhaps between other sets of disadvantaged and advantaged groups in society as well). In many respects, heterosexually identified activists in the LGBT movement have been treated as something of an “auxiliary”—well-meaning people, often with a close relationship to a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender individual, who are “helping” out the movement and who need guidance in how to provide that assistance. This characterization is consistent both with the images of allies drawn from the popular discourse in LGBT circles (Russell & Bohan, 2006a) and with the public images of allies described by participants in this study. This characterization, however, is quite at odds with many of the descriptions of actual motives offered by allies who

contributed to this study. Many of these allies, especially those who drew most heavily on principle-based motives, had their own deep-seated reasons for their activism.

At their foundation, many of these motives were not intrinsically related to associations with LGBT people, or even with LGBT issues specifically. Rather, they derive from world views that emphasize broad principles such as justice and civil rights, deep religious and moral stances, or particular expressions of patriotism and understandings of privilege. These allies engaged in pro-LGBT activism not to “help” a particular group of people, but to fulfill their own need to act upon those principles (see also Klar & Kessler, 2009). The principle-based motives of allies in this study were more consistent with the recent emphasis in the collective action literature on opinion-based activist groups (e.g., McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009; Wright, 2009) rather than on identity as members of an advantaged or disadvantaged group (Borshuk, 2001; Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Hopkins, & Levine, 2006). In contrast to the usual notions of identity politics and the corresponding traditional views of collective action, in opinion-based groups, collective action is seen as carried out by people, whether LGBT or heterosexual, who share common opinions and goals: “[P]eople form common cause with others by forming groups based on shared opinions, despite expectations that they should organize around social categories” (McGarty et al., 2009, p. 840). In this case, LGBT and heterosexual people form a single in-group constructed around shared understandings about the problems created by status differentials based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Importantly, the negative consequences of these hierarchical statuses can be seen to exist for heterosexuals as well as for LGBT people, thus allowing both groups to avoid activism that is rooted primarily in the problematic emotion of pity for the disadvantaged group (McGarty et al., 2009).

Conceptualizations of opinion-based groups also accommodate a greater variety of allies’ motives. Allies are viewed as having their own motives rather than motives defined solely in terms of their relationships to one or several individuals in the LGBT community. The notion of opinion-based groups has important implications for inviting and mobilizing heterosexuals to participate in activism on behalf of equal rights. This model for collective action is also consonant with findings from the present study indicating that allies may have one or multiple motives that prompt their engagement in activism. Bringing allies into the movement would of necessity be predicated on attention to the possible range of motives as well as on efforts to find optimal matches between allies’ specific motives (initially and over time) and available activist roles. Similarly, the rewards for participation differ widely among allies, and this, too, influences their participation and should guide decisions about their involvement. For some, this will mean a great deal of social contact with other allies and/or LGBT people; for others it will mean active confrontations with people in power; for others, it will mean a sense of satisfaction derived from knowing they have done the right thing regardless of the outcome.

Honoring allies' participation would also require sensitivity to the fact that the motives of many may not involve LGBT people in particular, but rather be aimed at furthering the cause of social justice, of which LGBT rights are one element. Yet, in the midst of this diversity of motives, one nearly constant theme was the importance of being asked. The inclusion of allies in the movement will require not only their willingness, but also the openness of LGBT people to ask, invite, and provide roles and opportunities for allies to join in this work.

The conceptualization of joint LGBT–ally collective action also heightens the potential for making constructive use of the differences in perspectives associated with differences in social identities and social positions in the world at large (Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009). Opinion-based groups can—and should—encourage participants to hold on to their original social identities while also embracing a new social identity based on shared values, as both identities provide important perspectives on the work to be done. The ability to hold dual group memberships allows for cooperative action while still capitalizing on the variety of perspectives that derive from differential social histories and statuses of LGBT people and heterosexuals (Russell, 2000).

In addition to the potential advantages to value-based LGBT-ally collective action, a possible disadvantage should be noted. This framework offers the possibility for genuine cooperation and collegiality between LGBT and heterosexual people. In the process, however, it could decentralize LGBT people within the movement for equal rights. Although this decentralization can be useful in facilitating collective action, it has the potential pitfall of reinstating unequal statuses based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Wright & Lubensky, 2008). That is, a fully cooperative LGBT–heterosexual partnership can only work if all members of the joint partnership keep an eye on the tendency for privilege to reassert itself, with LGBT people relegated to marginal roles. Both LGBT and heterosexual members of the partnership need to work against a hierarchical drift toward the reinstatement of dominant and subordinate statuses. Factors that could be helpful in mitigating against such drift include maintenance of initial social identities (in addition to the new collective-action group identity), direct and shared attention to privilege, efforts by LGBT members to develop an elaborated understanding of the potential for internalized oppression that might allow or support such a drift (Russell, 2000; Russell & Bohan, 2006b; Russell & Richards, 2003), and efforts by heterosexual members to develop an elaborated understanding of the potential for internalized privilege or dominance that might allow or support the same (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997).

The participants in the current study represented a purposive sample of heterosexual allies who engaged in collective action on behalf of LGBT rights in the United States. The allies in this study were selected because of the visibility of their activism in a variety of arenas, and their motives reflect some of the breadth of ally motives. Given the nature of the sample, the degree to which these motives

are generalizable to the larger population of allies in the United States or elsewhere is not known. However, the results provide an informative perspective on the rich variety of motives that lead heterosexuals to take such stands.

## Conclusion

Taken together, the results of this study underscore the importance of understanding the complexity of ally motives, of looking at those motives in the specific contexts in which they emerge, and of viewing allies as partners in efforts to secure equal rights without regard to sexual orientation or gender identity. These results stand in witness to the value of collective action that is rooted in some of human beings' best stirrings and that also acknowledges similarities and honors differences.

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