A COMPULSORY ALLIANCE: GENDER AND PRIVILEGE IN A HIGH SCHOOL GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE

A dissertation presented

by

Amie Elizabeth Levesque

to

The Department of Sociology and Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of

Sociology

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
April, 2014
A COMPULSORY ALLIANCE: GENDER AND PRIVILEGE IN A HIGH SCHOOL GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE

by

Amie Elizabeth Levesque

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology
in the Graduate School of Social Sciences and Humanities of
Northeastern University
April, 2014
Abstract

This dissertation reflects a 14 month research project utilizing ethnographic field methods, including participant observations and one-on-one interviews with youths at a large urban high school west of the Mississippi River (Park High School). In this project, I explored the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQQ) youths and their straight identifying allies to uncover the meanings they assign to being a straight ally in a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), a queer friendly space. I discovered three key themes: First, the straight ally is constructed within a context of power and privilege, or what I conceptualize as the compulsory alliance. Both LGBTQQ youths and their straight allies view allies as necessary for the power of the overall club. In terms of the compulsory alliance, like compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980), heterosexual allies are rendered largely invisible in the GSA. They are allowed unconditional access to all GSA activities, without understanding the significance of their participation. The second theme I uncovered is a discourse of ally criticism, whereby largely lesbian and queer identifying girls criticized straight ally participation. Some ally critics may value the role of the straight ally as a supporter who brings legitimacy to the group, while others reject the GSA because straight ally participation taints the space as “unsafe.” Finally, I uncovered highly gendered relationships within the GSA. Specifically, straight boys rarely attended meetings, while straight girls and gay boys were vocal participants in the meetings. I argue that the ways in which straight ally girls participated in the GSA contributed to a marginalization of queer-identified girls. My overall findings challenge current practices of GSAs that unconditionally invite straight allies, who embody straight privilege into queer-friendly spaces. Thus, I argue that we need to rethink the ways in which we construct the
straight ally, and consider a post-ally discourse where students are allowed and encouraged to create queer-only clubs within schools.
# Table of Contents

Abstract 3

Table of Contents 5

Acknowledgements 8

Chapter One: Introduction 12
   Organization of this dissertation 17
   A Note on Acronyms 20

Chapter Two: From Elimination to Necessity: Gay Teachers, Adult Allies, and High School GSAs in Historical and Current Contexts 22
   The Campaign Against Gay Teachers 23
   LGBTQQ Youth and the Emergence of Gay-Straight Alliances 26
   The GSA as a ‘Safe Space’ 29
   GSAs Under Attack 31
   The Inclusion of Straight Allies 35
   The Park High School Gay-Straight Alliance 37
   Conclusion 42

Chapter Three: Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks 44
   Gender and Heterosexual Privilege 44
   Sexualities as Social Constructions 46
   Children, Schools, and Sexuality 50
The Meanings of ‘Ally’ for the Straight Ally Critics | 131
Straight Allies and the Positioning of LGBTQQ Youths as others | 134
Criticizing the Ally Discourse | 135
Allies and the Safe Space | 139
Discussion: LGBTQ Allies for Straight People? | 141

Chapter Seven: “I’ve always wanted a gay family member!”: Gendered Allies | 145
And Alliances in a High School GSA
Why Straight Girls Joined the GSA and Straight Boys Didn’t | 147
The Unique Case of Holden | 152
Gendered Responses to Assault and Harassment: The Cases of
Stella and Kate | 153
Discussion: LGBTQ Allies for Straight People? | 161

Chapter Eight: Conclusion: Rethinking the Straight Ally | 165
Limitations | 167
Future Considerations | 170

Appendix A | 175

Appendix B | 177

References | 182
Acknowledgments

Like many who have written dissertations before me, particularly those who embark on the tumultuously rewarding experience of ethnographic research with children, I’ve emerged at the completion of this project with the unconditional love and support of so many inspirational family members, friends, and mentors, for without each of you, I could not have risen to this accomplishment.

To all of my academic mentors, you continued to push my thinking in directions I was afraid to go. To Jennifer Karas, my first sociology professor, and the reason I changed majors to move into sociology. You’ve become more than a professor to me, but more importantly, you’ve become a friend, and a mentor—a strong woman whom I admire more than you know. To Audrey Sprenger, I would have never pursued my PhD if not for you. I so deeply admired your views of the world, and of the discipline, and you were an integral part of shaping my dream. To David Shneer, who has been a teacher, a friend, and a mentor to me since I was an undergraduate history major trying to make sense of Trotskyism in America, thank you for always challenging me and believing in me, and most importantly, for always making time for me when I gave you such short notice. To Wini Breines, the reason I chose Northeastern University as my home for graduate school, it was such an honor to work with you. Your brilliance in all you’ve done for feminism and social change will forever inspire me. To CJ Pascoe, it was your first article on Jocks and Gender that resonated more with me than anything I’d read about masculinity and boys, and I’m forever grateful that you gave me the gift of your time when so many others were asking for your attention too. I’ve learned so much from you. To Danny Faber, I can never
thank you enough for being there for me, whether it was noon or midnight. You helped guide me through some of my hardest moments in this process, and I couldn’t have gotten this far without you. To Gordana Rabrenovic, thank you for always being a constant and calming source of inspiration. You’ve always made me feel like all will be OK, and I needed that more than you may know. To Hava Gordon, I am so indebted to your constant support, brilliant mind, constructive criticism, and for just believing (at times more than I did), that I would get to this moment. I can never thank you enough for helping me out of the fog of my latest thinking and encouraging me to believe in what I was doing. You’ve given me so much confidence. And finally, to Alan Klein. I remember being so nervous to ask you to chair my committee, because I wanted to be one of the best grad students you’d ever worked with. I may not be, but know that I tried so damn hard. You pushed me to follow my data at times that I felt so hopeless and confused, and after those conversations I was so inspired to keep going. You have such a gift of calming anxiety when I was unable to do it myself, while challenging me to push a little further to get where I needed to be. From you, I’ve gained a tremendous knowledge of ethnography, and I will always take that wisdom with me in any field project.

To my closest friends, Amy Hughes, Ali Walton, Emily Williams, and Laura Grassi, your support and encouragement means the world to me. You and your families have become our families, as each of you was there for my children when I couldn’t be. You anticipated my needs before I could even recognize them myself, and that is the greatest gift you could give someone going through this process. I truly enjoyed each of our wine nights when we laughed, cried, and just shared together. Those times and your friendships gave me perspective to see why I was doing this to begin with. Your love and kindness lifted me out of some of my darkest moments in this process, and I am forever indebted to you.
To my colleagues in the sociology department at Northeastern, Sean Brown and Leandra Smollin, thank you for being there for me when I needed some guidance through this often confusing process.

This project would not be complete if it weren’t for the young people and the teachers who entrusted me with their knowledge, feelings, emotions, and allowed me access to a space that wasn’t my own. Each of you is so incredibly brave and I am so inspired by all you are doing to change the world.

To my family, who loves me unconditionally: My grandfather, Bertrand, my aunts Lisa, Diane, Danica, Barbara, Chris, Kristen; my uncles, Gaetan, Richard, David, Roger, Robert; and to my cousins: Kevin, Jason, RJ, Dean, Sonya, Nicole, Katelyn, Jonathan, Evelyn, Brandon, Emily, and Damon, thank you for all of your love and support. Your notes and texts brightened my days and reminded me that I was stronger than I believed. I love you all tremendously. To my sister Jenna, and my brother Joshua, thank you for being so incredibly supportive and real with me. I appreciate you both for all that you are. To my parents, thank you for all of your help with the children while I was working day and night to complete this project. To my mother-in-law Michelle, thank you for being such a positive light in all of our lives. You’ve been like another mother to me, and I’m forever grateful for all you’ve done for me and our family.

In the process of researching for this project, I lost two of the most important people in my life, my Uncle Nelson, and my Grandmother, Melina. I never imagined I would come to this moment without both of them by my side. Nobody was prouder of all I’ve become than they were, and this accomplishment feels a little less without them here to celebrate. I know that their love and pride in me has guided so much of this journey to completing my PhD.
To my sweet beautiful children, Melina and Nelson, all of this is for you. I hope I have set the best example of a strong and independent woman, and of a mommy you can always admire. Every minute I was away from you both; I missed you tremendously. But know I did it all to be the best mommy for you—to show you that you can accomplish anything even when you doubt yourself, and even when it all seems impossible. I love you both to the moon and back times infinity.

And finally, to my husband Mark, my best friend. You’ve been there with me since this was only a pipedream, and here we are celebrating it together, 11 years later. We make an amazing team, and I could not have done this without your strength, love, and guidance. Thank you for standing by me when I was driving myself crazy and struggling to make sense of it all. I know it must have felt impossible to live with me at those moments when I felt like I was doing nothing well. Words cannot accurately express how grateful I am that I found you to be with me and our children. I’m such a lucky girl. I love you tremendously!
Chapter One

Introduction

I arrived at Park High School on a cool autumn morning in 2012, thirty minutes before the first warning bell, to help the GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) students set up for “Coming Out Day,” a day recognized nationally by GSAs as a celebration of LGBTQQ people coming out of the “closet,” a space of oppression and invisibility and publically acknowledging their sexual orientation or transgender identity. When I arrived, Dorian was already in the front lobby of the school where she set up a table, draped with a rainbow flag. Mr. Cruz came to the table carrying several sheets of white stickers he printed and labeled with various phrases that read: “I’m Straight but Not Narrow;” “I’m Free to Be Me;” “Closets are for Clothes;” and “Hate is Not a Family Value.” More sheets of stickers were intentionally left blank for students and staff to write their own Coming Out Day declaration. Shortly after Mr. Cruz, Dorian, and I set up the table with stickers, markers, and brief handouts describing the purpose of Coming Out Day, Sean, Sadie, Lucas, and Alexandria arrived to help promote the GSA table. The GSA members stood around the table greeting students and offering stickers as they swarmed into the school between 7:00 and 7:20 that morning. I positioned myself behind students so as to not get in their way of connecting with their peers moving at a feverish pace once they entered the school. Over
the table and behind the students, Mr. Cruz ran a video collage on a flat-screen television of famous gays and lesbians; among them: Anderson Cooper and Sally Ride. Dorian and Romy both wrote, “I’m a Lesbian” on their stickers. Alexandria wore a sticker labeled “I Heart Girls,” with the heart symbol before “girls.” A young female teacher came to the table and took a “Straight but Not Narrow” sticker and thanked the students for “making Park a better place.”

As the morning rituals of acknowledging and passing friends in the foyer, and teachers telling students to remove their hats, began to fade when students proceeded to their first classes, a male teacher appearing to be in his early 60’s approached the GSA table with curiosity. Sadie, wearing a self-written sticker stating “I’m an Ally,” noticed the teacher. She told him it was “Coming Out Day” and offered him a sticker. The white-haired man loudly proclaimed, “But I’m not coming out!” Sadie responded calmly, letting him know that many stickers were available for everyone to wear, and that the purpose of Coming Out Day was for him to support his students who were LGBTQ. The teacher interrupted Sadie as he walked away and over his shoulder in a dismissive tone said, “Trust me, I support my students. Just ask them.” Sadie, without saying a word, looked at me with her eyebrows raised in confusion and annoyance. When I later interviewed Sadie about her role in Coming out Day, she shared, “I did feel…that was the only time I ever felt judged about GSA by teachers.” When I clarified that she felt judged in being a member of the GSA, she replied, “Right…not necessarily badly, but not in a great way either. Not like, ‘Oh, that’s wonderful that she does that.’ I felt like they were saying like, ‘Oh is she gay?’ Or something like that.”

Sadie’s experience as a straight identified ally in the Park GSA on Coming Out Day colored her ideas about what it means to be an ally where participating in this GSA-sponsored event didn’t bring the expected gratification of praise from teachers for supporting her gay
friends, but instead brought her the discomfort of others assuming she wasn’t straight, when she carefully and deliberately tried to convey her non-LGBTQQ identity through her sticker wearing. What then, did it mean for Sadie to be a straight ally on Coming Out Day?

High School Gay-Straight Alliances are student-led organizations or extracurricular clubs in which Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQQ) young people may attend with straight allies. Typically, they are spaces where students gather to discuss issues of homophobia, anti-gay bullying, promote awareness of LGBTQQ issues (like on Coming Out Day), share personal experiences of coming out of the closet, and simply, to socialize with peers. The establishment of and growth in the number of GSAs in the United States, seems to symbolize, albeit in a limited way, a growing tolerance of LGBTQQ young people and acknowledgement of the challenges they face in schools both in terms of their rights as citizens in educational institutions and as young people who deserve full social equality in those spaces.

Recent research on Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) often focuses on college GSAs and the positive impact on the overall wellbeing of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQQ) community in these settings (Stotzer 2009). The few existing studies of high school GSAs suggest that the presence of a GSA within the school may limit the prevalence of anti-gay bullying (Kosciw 2008; Kosciw 2012; Miceli 2005; Walls 2010), and creates a safe and empowering space for LGBTQQ youth and their straight allies to share ideas, support, and stories without judgment (Fetner 2012; Lee 2002; Miceli 2005; Walls 2010). Generally, these studies find that LGBTQQ group members depend on the active participation of straight allies to make LGBTQQ issues visible and activism successful (Miceli 2005; Walls 2010). However, such research usually neglects to investigate the everyday social interactions
between and among group members and their adult-teacher club sponsors to uncover the deeper meanings both students and teachers assign to being a straight ally. Straight allies inherently possess unearned heterosexual privilege: power and freedoms in society not ascribed to LGBTQQ people, and previous research fails to investigate how GSAs may actually reinforce this privilege, relegating it invisible (Kehily 2000; Rich 1986; Richardson 1996; Rochlin 1985). I opened with this epigraph of Sadie’s experience on Coming Out Day as an illustration of the complexities that exist when one claims to be a straight ally, but is unsure of what that means for herself, and for those with whom she interacts. An apparent act of kindness revealed many layers of meaning systems that warrant deeper exploration, particularly when that kindness may obscure larger structures of inequality and privilege.

This dissertation examines interactions between and among GSA participants, including students and their teacher sponsors, and explores the ways in which GSA members think about and construct meanings of allies and the GSA as a safe space at weekly club meetings and in one-on-one in-depth interviews. I explore the ways in which LGBTQQ GSA participants think about straight allies to understand how these interactions may shape their experiences within and perceptions about the club in complex ways, and this dissertation analyzes those social processes.

In this dissertation, I discuss three key arguments that emerged from my data. My findings suggest that the presence of straight allies carries two significant consequences. First, for many LGBTQQ students who favor the inclusion of straight allies in the GSA meetings (pro-allies), straight allies represent a legitimacy of the group. For these students, allies give the group strength in numbers and social clout within the larger school community, a sentiment highlighted in current research on GSAs (Miceli 2005). They view allies as supporters who
greatly and positively contribute to the shaping of the GSA as a safe space. Allies themselves identify as protectors of the LGBTQQ youth in their GSA. Without allies, pro-ally LGBTQQ students and their straight peers feel that the LGBTQQ youth alone would not have the same level of power to combat oppression. On the other hand, for some students, whom I identify as ally critics, ally participation in the GSA is unnecessary and even offensive. For this group of students, the presence of allies creates tension by undermining the needs of the LGBTQQ students and diminishing the sense of the GSA as a safe space. Ally attendance often deters these students from going to meetings. Findings reveal that in both groups, allies often represent a reinforcement of heterosexual privilege, though students and teacher sponsors rarely recognized nor examined this power. I build upon Adrienne Rich’s theory of compulsory heterosexuality (1980) to conceptualize this ally power as the compulsory alliance, a practice that, like compulsory heterosexuality, is invisible, taken-for-granted, and even pushed onto LGBTQQ students within the gay-straight alliance at Park High School.

My third key finding focuses on the gendered behavior and relationships with the GSA at Park, in which I argue that the straight ally identity is indeed a gendered one, embodied largely by straight girls with good intentions to be supportive of their peers. However, my findings suggest that their presence in the GSA alienates some of the queer-identified girls, and this was supported by the reluctance of straight ally girls to advocate for lesbian girls while they publicly supported gay identifying boys. I draw on literature about gender inequality and girls’ relationships to suggest that straight girls may be supporting their gay male friends because of the pervasive inequality that they face in their daily lives at both macro institutional and at micro levels of peer interactions.
This dissertation is organized to begin with an historical context in which I situate the emergence of gay-straight alliances in schools. Although the story of gay-straight alliances is informed by a larger history of the gay and lesbian liberation movements, and the queer identity movements, my focus for the discussion in chapter two is the development of the GSA away from the support group model of encouraging youths through the tribulations of a queer identity to the current practices of youth-led and straight-ally-inclusive social and activist organizations in schools. I briefly highlight the evolution of the elimination of gay and lesbian teachers from public schools to their emergence as adult ally sponsors of these student organizations. I then bring in the Park High School GSA to demonstrate its relevance to the larger GSA histories and activities in schools by providing a glimpse into its daily workings.

In chapter three, I discuss the relevant literature that informs my research. Specifically, I consulted literature on gender and sexuality to illuminate the ways in which gender inequality and heterosexual privilege exists in the GSA. I also look at schools as socializing institutions, their roles in policing sexuality and protecting students from harm, and themselves as caretakers of children. As a distant, but ever present body over the Park GSA, social processes within the GSA raise larger questions about its connections to school procedures and responsibilities. Finally, I review the research on GSAs to get a sense of the contemporary discourse of the effects of these clubs within schools and the extent to which ally participation is encouraged and even utilized as a source of compulsory power.
Chapter four lays bare my research methods and methodologies. As this was a qualitative study, I relied largely on symbolic interactionist and feminist approaches to conducting social science research. In doing so, I deeply examined the meaning systems constructed within the everyday experiences of GSA participants to uncover issues of power and privilege embedded within the straight ally identity. I explored the discourse of straight allies through the lenses of adult teacher sponsors, LGBTQ student participants, and the straight ally youths themselves to get a greater sense of how social actors understood the roles of allies in the organization. In chapter four, I also discuss my role as the researcher, my personal motivation for embarking on this project, and the enormous difficulties I faced when trying to gain access to an institution so heavily guarded by gatekeepers.

In chapters five and six, I explore the meanings of straight allies as they are constructed by GSA participants. Through observations and weekly club meetings, I uncovered the multiple layers of what it means to be a straight ally in a GSA through the words and actions of teachers, LGBTQ youths, and straight allies themselves. I conceptualize the compulsory alliance, and argue that straight allies are highly regarded as sources of power for the LGBTQ youths by both the LGBTQ youths themselves and the teacher sponsors of the GSA. Because of this power, (which consequently brings a perception that outsiders of the club reward it with social legitimacy), allies are allowed to attend meetings without condition, and remain invisible in those gatherings through their heterosexual privilege. Chapter six reveals the ally critics, a small group of GSA dissidents who struggle to find their role in a safe space in which straight allies are allowed unfettered access and unchecked privilege. Ally critics are highly critical of, and may even reject participation or attendance at GSA meetings because of ally presence. Their disenchanted with the GSA, coupled with the lack of criticism and clarity of ally participation
challenges us to rethink the significance of allies in a high school GSA, and whether or not we should continue to include straight allies in these organizations at all.

In chapter seven, I address the gender question of straight ally participation. Given that prior research concurs with my findings that the majority of allies in GSAs are straight-identified girls (Duhigg 2010; Goldstein and Davis 2010), I explore their participation and the absence of straight-identifying boys in these clubs. I draw on past and current literature on masculinities and feminism to show that dominant cultural expectations of gender shape the reasons for straight youth participation in the GSA. In my observations, I uncovered a disparity between the actions of allies as advocates for gay boys and their reluctance to act on behalf of a lesbian girl who was assaulted during a PE class. I bring in the theoretical discussions of girls’ relationships with other girls, and women’s relationships with gay men to theorize the reasons for the tensions between straight ally girls, and queer-identified girls in the GSA.

In my concluding chapter I argue for the need to rethink the ways in which we involve straight allies in a student club designed to be a safe space for sexual minority youths. Unconditionally including straight allies who have little to no knowledge of the social history of LGBTQ oppression creates a tension with fellow students who live an identity excluded from heterosexual privilege and marginalized in a heteronormative society. I explore the possibility that for some GSAs, students and schools may be ready for a Queer-only space, in which straight ally participation is minimized or excluded entirely. I also argue that the wider ally discourse needs refining, whereby allies need not be recognized in such glamorous ways for their support of the LGBTQ community. My data shows that praising allies in such a way alienates the young people whom allies claim to support. Rather, ally discourse should be subject to constant scrutiny and reframing, structured around LGBTQ youth power with straight peer supporters.
behind them who are thoroughly aware of their own heterosexual privilege, and of the social history of LGBTQ identities in a heterosexist society.

A Note on Acronyms

Scholars who research the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning communities run into the challenge of creating an inclusive “label” for the groups of people whose lives they are exploring. Social constructionists subscribe to the argument that labels are socially created, contextually specific, and exclusionary (Becker 1991; Goffman 1963; Rist 1977; Stein 1994), and indeed, the term community is problematic for LGBTQ identifying people because it oversimplifies the conglomerate of complex and often disparate needs of marginalized people. Like women in the Feminist Movement who have been at odds with uniting under one constrained label of “woman,” (Breines 2006; Collins 2000), LGBTQ history is similar in that combining LGBT identities under one category falsely connotes solidarity when people who do not embody straight identities carry a diversity of lived experiences with inequality that can often lead to a fractured social movement (Adam 1995; Kumashiro 2001; Levine and Evans 1991; Shneer and Aviv 2006; Taylor, Kaminski, and Dugan 2002; Warner 1993).

In my own analyses of my fieldwork in this dissertation, when referring to these diverse and complex communities, I’ve carefully chosen the acronym LGBTQ, which encompasses the identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning young people. I’ve selected this acronym as I trust it respects the diversity of identities within GSAs. Many researchers simplify the letters to GLBT, or LGBTQ, and throughout this manuscript, you’ll
notice that whenever I’m discussing another author’s work, or using the words of my participants, I stay true to the ways in which they designate language about the communities. One of my participants used “LGBTQ+,” and that was an acronym I considered as an alternative to LGBTQQ. However, the “+” may also connote “heterosexuality” for some people, as it did for GSA student leaders who wanted to be inclusive of all sexualities in their club, and given the arguments I will make about heterosexuality and straight participants in the GSA, I chose “LGBTQQ,” in the interest of clarity, to illustrate hierarchies of power and privilege. I’ve included students who are “questioning” their sexual identity, because I’m not satisfied that the previous letters represent an identity for them. “Questioning” students are unsure if a straight identity belongs to them, for either it doesn’t seem to fit into their conceptualization of reality, or they simply embrace exploring several sexual identities, including a straight identity, to find where they are comfortable. I also met students who identified as pansexual, an identity not obvious in my acronym, but hope that they will find inclusion in the representation of “queer,” as historically, this identity was proffered as a way of including all sexual and gender identities that did not find a home in heteronormativity (Ault 1996; Engel 2002). According to Engel, “In some sense, being queer was not so much positive identification as it was identifying what someone was not” (2002: 395). My research participants who identified as pansexual clearly states they were not straight. It is important to note that some students in my study understandably rejected the confines of labels, but reluctantly, settled on a Queer identity as a way of distancing themselves from a straight identity. Ultimately, for clarity and consistency throughout this narrative, I’ve settled on LGBTQQ, and trust that my research participants would be satisfied that I’ve made a calculated attempt at trying to capture a label inclusive and respectful of all of them, to the extent that any label would even come close to being inclusive.
Chapter Two

From Elimination to Necessity: Gay Teachers, Adult Allies, and High School GSAs in Historical and Current Contexts

In order to comprehend the significance of my findings as they relate to broader discourses of social inequality and contemporary social processes surrounding marginalized youths, it is critical to situate the Park High School Gay-Straight Alliance within the larger social history of cultural beliefs about gay-identified teachers and their roles in and rejections from schools and their communities. High School GSAs typically depend on an adult teacher-sponsor who supports the student-led organization, and although not all teacher-sponsors are LGBTQ identifying, many are. The presence of gay teachers in schools has been challenged for decades, and social climates in school communities certainly impact the viability of a GSA, as I will discuss below. In this chapter, I aim to elaborate on the historical experience of gay-identifying teachers in schools to glean a deeper understanding for how they emerged as leaders within the GSA movement. I examine the historical context within which GSAs emerged and the ways in which the processes of being a GSA connect with the mundane interactions in the Park GSA. This social history has origins in the early gay and lesbian communities in the United States, leading to the creation of gay and lesbian activist groups, and then evolves into the establishment of the youth clubs in schools in the early 1990s. I discuss the creation of spaces for LGBTQ
youth: from the support group model to Gay-Straight Alliances—student led clubs that conceptualized themselves as safe spaces for young people of all gender and sexual identities. I also identify some of the challenges and legal rulings surrounding GSAs. Finally, I lay out the general context of the Park GSA, a sketch of the daily actions and interactions in a youth club. It is my goal that this chapter will provide the foundational context in which I situate my analysis of the GSA at Park High School.

*The Campaign against Gay Teachers*

Teachers who do not identify as heterosexual have long faced the likelihood of public shaming and job loss over their sexual identity (Blount 2000; Braukman 2001; Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013; Frank 2013; Graves 2009; Graydon 2011; Harbeck 1995; King 2004; McLaren 1995). Often viewed as sexually perverse, an inherent danger to children, blamed for indoctrinating youths with the mental sickness of homosexuality, and even as communist party sympathizers during the Cold War, gays and lesbians have been the scapegoats for the social ills in American culture (Braukman 2001). For nearly a decade, beginning in the late 1950s, the Johns Committee embarked on a campaign of intensive interrogations of lesbian women and gay men whom they believed were recruiting young people into their sexual conquests (Braukman 2001; Graves 2009). They focused on teachers because they had access to children. Aside from losing their teaching licenses, many were jailed. Braukman (2001) notes that the Johns Committee stalked lesbians for beliefs that authorities traditionally branded against gay men. The committee wasn’t only after teachers, but looked specifically for lesbian women, and
contributed to a moral panic that lesbian women were in schools harming vulnerable children (2001).

Homophobia that took on the form of eliminating teachers suspected of being homosexual relied on an open season campaign supported by celebrities like Anita Bryant, who in the 1970s was a spokes model for the Florida Orange Juice Company. She headed the Save Our Children organization, a Christian campaign that accused gays and lesbians of preying on children with their underdeveloped sexual identity, that they learned and could in turn, then teach to children in their classrooms (Duberman 1997; Frank 2013; Graydon 2011; Harbeck 1997). Anti-gay supporters also based their platform on the “rights of parents” to protect their children from predators, usually gay men and lesbian women (Frank 2013). Anita Bryant’s crusade emerged at a time when gay rights groups were succeeding in creating legislation that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation in the work place, but Bryant put her celebrity onto a national stage, creating a cultural panic that gays and lesbians were seducing and corrupting children. In California, Senator John Briggs took notice of Bryant’s campaign and tried to pass an initiative to ban gays and lesbians from working as teachers, but was ultimately defeated (Blount 2000).

A major consequence of the Briggs Initiative, Anita Bryant’s Save Our Children Campaign was the forcing of teachers who identified as gay or lesbian, into the closet—a space symbolic of a history of oppression and hatred against LGBTQQ identifying individuals (2000). Teachers feared loss of their careers, and not just from being fired, but also from the possibility that they would never be permitted to teach in a classroom with children again (2000).
The defeat of the Briggs and Bryant campaign, although allowed gays and lesbians to teach in schools (although many states still do not protect against firing employees based on sexual orientation), left many of afraid of being open about their private lives. The cultural panic spurred by campaigns of homophobia, with children as the potential victims of pedophiles, scarred many parents, and strong remnants of parents’ fears can be seen in popular cultural media today. Ferfolja and Hopkins’ work in Australia on the complex experiences of gay and lesbian teachers illustrates a desire for many to be open about their sexuality, but choosing allow others to know about one’s non-heterosexual identity often comes at a cost (2013), or at the least, with constant negotiating with oneself about the appropriateness of such choices. Ferfolja and Hopkins argue that LGBTQQ identifying teachers feel most comfortable when they have colleagues who are also out about their sexuality, and when they have co-workers who may be straight, but identify as allies (2013). They go on to suggest that the school’s micro culture (the practices and rituals that govern individual school climate and attitudes toward diversity and social equality), along with a strong gay friendly administration is the ultimate determining factor in whether or not a school is a supportive environment for LGBTQQ identifying teachers (2013). As schooling is such a large part of children’s lives, one’s ability to present an environment respectful of LGBTQQ teachers can undoubtedly lead to a student culture that follows. King (2004) argues that gay male teachers have the power to challenge cultural and media narratives that consistently disparage gay men as the creepy pedophile lurking in the dark. He argues that rather than hiding homosexuality, gay men have the opportunities to openly dispel the myths created by homophobia, and instead be positive role models to students, particularly those who might identify as gay in the future, while illustrating the oppressive structures of gender in schooling (King 2004). Specifically, openly gay teachers can teach students about the
struggles to deal with issues of “passing” and invisibility, that institutions like schools tend to reinforce when they are so committed to stringent gender role conformity (Rofes 2000). These teachers eventually became critical supporters of LGBTQ youths in schools.

LGBTQ Youth and the Emergence of Gay-Straight Alliances

Measurable hatred against gay, lesbian and transgender people inspired the growth of support groups for gay and lesbian youth and eventually the creation of the first gay-straight alliances in schools. Young people who did not identify with heterosexuality, yet were entrenched in the heteronormative institution of schooling, found their voice in the larger gay and lesbian movements and began to challenge heterosexist practices that excluded them from social acceptance and subjected them to harassment and violence at school.

In 1979, two life partners, Damien Martin and Emery Hetrick learned of a 15 year-old boy who was beaten and thrown out of his home for being gay. The two men, a professor and a psychiatrist, were compelled to start the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth in New York City. Later named The Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI), their program still exists today as a place where LGBTQQ youth may go for health and counseling services, academic enrichment, and social networking. It is also a space for families of LGBTQQ youth to seek support. According to their website, HMI worked with over 2,000 LGBTQQ youth and their families (2012). The organization operates in connection with Harvey Milk High School, a small public high school named after Harvey Milk—the first openly gay man elected to city council in San Francisco who was assassinated by a former colleague in 1978. Before its transformation
into an accredited, degree granting public school, HMI operated a small part of its services in the practice of delivering GED courses to give at-risk LGBTQ youths a greater chance at academic success in a welcoming and safe space. Harvey Milk High School was the first public school aimed at a specific group of young people—at-risk LGBTQ youth, and today the school has over 100 students, many of them under the care and guidance of HMI.

Similarly, Project 10, an organization grounded in Los Angeles and conceived by Virgina Uribe, a Ph.D. student who uncovered the pervasive hatred of and abuse perpetrated against LGBTQ youth in public schools across the U.S. during her dissertation research, opened in 1986. Still a viable organization today, Project 10 works closely with the LA Unified School District to provide support services for LGBTQ youth on public school campuses and education consulting to ensure those school systems are complying with federal laws protecting these youth (2013).

The advent of Project 10 and the Hetrick-Martin Institute signaled a shift in thinking about LGBTQ issues, recognizing that addressing the needs of the LGBTQ community must include teens, for their experience with anti-gay violence and homophobia was commonplace at school—a space at which they were mandated to attend daily. Indeed, being gay, lesbian, or bisexual wasn’t exclusive to adults; young people experience sexualities in meaningful ways that don’t necessarily wait to present themselves upon succession into adulthood (Fine 1988).

Young people who did not identify with heterosexuality also had the characteristic of living with parents who may or may not accept their identity—which creates a unique need for social, emotional, and financial support that adult LGBTQ persons may not experience. Melinda Miceli (2002) argues that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are unique among
marginalized social minority groups because most minority youths can count on the support of their families to deal with bigotry and discrimination because the rest of the family likely experienced the same hatred. Contrary, sexual minority youths are often forced to turn away from their families to find support, because usually, family members cannot relate to being a member of the LGBTQQ communities (2002). Children are confined to the legal boundaries of being a minor, thus navigating the heterosexist world presents greater difficulties for vulnerable LGBTQQ young people, especially if their family isn’t supportive of their sexual identity. For many LGBTQQ youth, coming out to their parents translates into loss of their home, loss of family connection, and loss of financial security. Therefore, this shift in thinking by adults in the LGBTQQ community to focus on the young people in their communities laid the foundation for the emergence of Gay-Straight Alliances.

In 1988, a straight girl with gay parents, attending a private school in Massachusetts approached her gay male teacher with the idea of starting a school club that took a public stand against homophobia. They decided to call the club a Gay-Straight Alliance because they believed that having a gay-only club would be too threatening to the status-quo, but they wanted to include straight allies: people who would support social equality for their peers who didn’t self-identify as heterosexual (Miceli 2005). Soon after, another GSA formed in Massachusetts at a separate private school, and since these early years, thousands of GSAs have formed all across the country.

Gay-Straight Alliances are extracurricular clubs that typically meet on school campuses. They are spaces where youth of all sexual orientations may gather to support each other in their positions against homophobia, transphobia, school bullying, and discrimination based on these bigotries. GSAs might look different at different schools. For example, at some schools, the
spaces act more like support groups for marginalized youth and their straight allies, while, in other schools, the GSA might be more of a social activist group where students participate in shaping school and community policies around social equality for all young people no matter their sexual identity. GSAs often work in collaboration with community outreach programs to support Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning youths, and might sponsor a Queer Prom, or participate in local Queer Pride events like parades and political protests. Many GSAs are vocal groups within their own schools, where they promote days like “Coming Out Day” or “Day of Silence”—both historically significant days in the lives of many LGBTQ people as they symbolize the years of hatred and the oppressive nature of the “closet” in which many LGBTQ people are forced to reside out of fear of what their public identity might mean to the compulsively heterosexual world. Underlying all GSAs, and their premise for existing, though is the concept of the “safe space.”

The GSA as a ‘Safe Space’

For marginalized young people, the safe space takes on a myriad of meanings. Fetner et al. in their research on GSAs as safe spaces, look to social movement theories to expand upon the concept of the safe space as it might apply to GSAs more specifically (2012). For Fetner et al., the safe space, as a function of gay-straight alliances is a complex concept that demands a deeper examination for it to be applicable to the lives of the young people who seek out these spaces. They argue that the safe space is dependent on 3 factors: context, membership, and activities (2012). In other words, “Safe from what?; Safe for whom?; and Safe to do what?” (2012). Depending on the current school climate, and the degree to which LGBTQQ young
people feel unsafe in their schools, and/or are victims of homophobic assault and bullying, they may look to the GSA as a safe haven from these threats of violence (2012). For students who attend a more liberal school, where heterosexuality is still the norm, but other students and faculty might demonstrate an indifferent attitude toward same-sex couples, the GSA typically has wider opportunities to be a safe, but more open space—with a greater focus on promoting school and community awareness of LGBTQ issues (2012). In their research, Fetner et al. also explored the safe space in terms of who feels safe? Conducting online interviews with young adults who participated in a GSA or a related LGBTQ group in high school, Fetner et al. discovered many students of racial minority groups who identified as gay, bisexual or lesbian, and students who identified as transgender felt excluded from their high school GSA, as they did not feel it was a safe space in which they could freely participate (2012). While my research sample included an ethnically diverse group of students, and 2 transgender youths, when I asked Alexandria, the secretary of the GSA if there were students at Park who chose to not come to GSA meetings, she did confirm that the transgender community at Park High School did not feel comfortable coming to meetings despite her pleading with them to be a part of the LGBTQ community at Park. Alexandria’s experience with the transgender students at Park affirms Fetner et al.’s similar findings from students throughout the U.S. and Canada. In this dissertation, I consider Fetner et al.’s conceptualization of the safe space, and concur that if a GSA is to be a safe space for all students, regardless of gender presentation and/or sexual orientation, then the complex needs of all students must be heard and considered when shared.

The GSA at Park High School embraced all of these forms of being a GSA. The club was a support group and activist group, in that they participated in community Pride events, protests, and one student even testified in a public hearing about legalizing gay marriage. The
Park GSA also participated in Coming Out Day, and Day of Silence. They promoted Ally Week—a week in which LGBTQQ students who participated in the GSA were encouraged to show appreciation for their straight allies. Many of the students attended Queer Prom, and training sessions for GSA leaders, sponsored by local colleges. In my 14 months at the school, I observed a vocal, visible, and welcomed club at the high school that believed in being a safe space for all students.

At several meetings, Mr. Cruz, a gay, Latino man in his early 50s, who was one of the teacher-sponsors of the Park GSA, asked students if they were feeling safe:

Mr. Cruz wants to know if people are saying hurtful things to them, and if they are being treated well by their peers and staff in the school, and by their family and friends outside of school. He reiterates that students can always come talk to him if they need to (field notes, 1/30/12).

Commonly, especially when student leadership came ill-prepared to run the meetings, Mr. Cruz convened a meeting by asking students, “How are things going?” or, “Anyone having any issues?” or, “Everyone feeling safe?” Mr. Cruz was deeply concerned that his students were feeling safe at school and at home. His quiet and calming voice, and reassuring presence, conveyed a protective and heartfelt spirit in the GSA. His face often expressed worry that he might learn of homophobia against his students, despite his conviction that he generally felt Park was a safe and welcoming school for LGBTQQ students.

GSAs Under Attack

GSAs haven’t always been welcomed in school communities, and especially not in particular regions of the country, like the South and parts of the Midwest. Numerous lawsuits
have ensued over the rights of GSAs to be a part of the extra-curricular programs at public schools. School districts and parents fought to keep these “Gay Clubs” from indoctrinating their children with gay ideologies. Because so many of the people in these regions of the country subscribe to the notion that being gay is a sickness or a sin, parent organizations and school boards were relentless in finding language to defend their stances. Also, it isn’t uncommon for school districts that subscribe to an “Abstinence Only” sexual education policy to claim that GSAs can’t exist because students aren’t allowed to start clubs that talk about having sex. Such a claim is clearly shortsighted because GSAs aren’t focusing on promoting sexual intercourse between adolescents. This stance also contributes to the stereotype that gays and lesbians are somehow more promiscuous than straight people. However, “Abstinence Only” school policies are not adequate legal defense strategies for barring GSAs from public schools.

Because GSAs were relatively new in the early 1990s, many young people didn’t understand they had rights to fight back and win against social conservatives (http://www.lambdalegal.org/in-court/cases/east-high-gsa-v-board-of-ed-salt-lake). In 1984, the Federal Equal Access Act passed into law, stating:

It shall be unlawful for any public secondary school which receives Federal financial assistance and which has a limited open forum to deny equal access or a fair opportunity to, or discriminate against, any students who wish to conduct a meeting within that limited open forum on the basis of the religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the speech at such meetings (www.aclu-wa.org).

In its early conception, religious organizations fought for this law, so that secondary school students (grades 7-12) would have the freedom to create and operate Bible Study groups at school. The law fell under the protection of the First Amendment’s Freedom of Speech, of the U.S. Constitution, and courts have interpreted the law to mean that if a public school allows any extra-curricular group to convene on its campus, then it must allow all student groups the same
access, and the same resources, like an adequate meeting space. “Access” also means
opportunity to utilize other school resources like the student newspaper, bulletin boards, and the
public address system for club promotion. The conditions state that the organizations must be
voluntary, student-led, and independent of the formal curriculum taught at the school.

The Equal Access Act is significant in the historical narrative of Gay-Straight Alliances,
because in 1998, several national legal organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union and
Lambda Legal filed suit against the Salt Lake City School District because it denied equal access
to a student petition for a high school GSA. When the students initially proposed their plans for
the club, the high school responded by eliminating all student-run extracurricular activities.
They argued that they could avoid the enforcement of the law because they would not allow any
student groups to form. However, students learned that the Future Homemakers of America
clubs were still meeting, and thus, filed suit against the school district. In 1999, a judge from the
United States District Court, District of Utah ruled that the school was violating the rights of the
GSA students, and ordered the Salt Lake City School District to pay the students’ families for
their incurred legal fees (http://www.lambdalegal.org/in-court/cases/east-high-gsa-v-board-of-ed-
salt-lake). The East High School Gay-Straight Alliance v. Board of Education of Salt Lake City
School District case set the precedent for future GSAs by affirming that Gay-Straight Alliances
must be allowed to commence upon student petitions for their creation, and that they must exist
equally with all other extracurricular clubs at the school.

Although the court decision did require public schools to allow GSAs, social
conservatives have created an alternative way to restrict access to GSAs. Specifically, school
districts across the country have voted to adopt parental permission policies, whereby students
may participate in a club only if they have parental consent. These policies take the form of the
student needing written consent for any club, or in an “opt-out” format where all extracurricular club descriptions are distributed at the beginning of the school year, and parents can single out clubs in which they will not allow their child participation. In order for these policies to be legal, schools must apply them to all clubs at the school, as the Equal Access Act ensures fair and equal treatment for all clubs. However, research shows that these parental permission slip and opt-out policies tend to emerge only after the creation of a Gay-Straight Alliance at the school (Vandewalker 2009). These policies are problematic, especially for GSAs, in that they may dissuade students from participating in the clubs. For students who might not be open to their parents about their non-straight identity, requesting permission to participate in the GSA runs the risk of parents questioning why their child would want to be in such a club; parents might assume their child is gay. Indeed, several of the students at the Park GSA shared this with me in our interviews—Park did not require students to secure parental permission to participate in its extracurricular clubs. Their parents did not know they were going to GSA meetings, and several gay, lesbian, and bisexual students who did tell their parents about their participation believed their parents thought they were going as a straight ally. Additionally, for students whose parents might be homophobic, and therefore would forbid their straight child to associate with gay and lesbian peers, receiving parental permission to participate in a GSA may be impossible. Several states, including Utah and Georgia have passed legislation requiring all public school districts to utilize a parental permission policy for students to participate in extracurricular clubs—legislation passed in direct succession to the proliferation of High School GSAs (ibid).

Those GSAs that did form were often the targets of what Kirk and Madsen (1989) conceptualize as “homohatred,” which builds upon the concept of homophobia where people have a fear of homosexuality and those who engage in sexual practices inconsistent with
normative heterosexuality. Homohatred refers to the practice of acting on those feelings that leads to violence against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (1989). During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, LGBTQ young people and their straight allies who worked to establish GSAs in their schools were often the victims of homophobic violence (Fetner 2012). In my research, Betsy, the straight-identified teacher-sponsor and co-founder of the Park GSA dealt with threats of both physical and verbal violence in the early years of the GSA because she supported LGBTQ students. At meetings, she often shared her past experience with death threats on her answering machine and rocks thrown at windows as the GSA meetings proceeded. For GSAs that exist in more socially conservative areas, if they are not threatened with violence, many clubs still deal with uphill battles of acceptance in their schools and in their wider communities (Vandewalker 2009).

**The Inclusion of Straight Allies**

Miceli (2005) notes that GSAs were an expansion of the LGBTQ community and the gay and lesbian rights movements, yet, they are distinguishable by their inclusion of straight allies. Allies to the LGBTQ community are distinguished by their membership to a socially dominant group, i.e. heterosexuality (Washington and Evans 1991). According to the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN), “An ally is an individual who speaks out or stands up for a group that is targeted and discriminated against. An ally works to end oppression by supporting and advocating for people who are stigmatized, discriminated against, or treated unfairly” (GLSEN 2012). Prior to the first GSA meetings, a “support group model” existed, that focused on the health and well-being of LGBTQ youths, many of whom were homeless (ibid).
GSAs were distinct from the support group model in that they were a space for young LGBTQQ people and their straight allies to present a public face against homophobia, school bullying, and discrimination against LGBTQQ youths in their schools. They were student-led organizations, supported by adult faculty and administration allies, designed to fundamentally change the culture and structures of their schools that ignored these issues affecting the daily lives of marginalized youths. In her study, Miceli found that the majority of straight allies were girls, and that they were teens who often experienced bullying.

In 1990, a group of educators in Massachusetts created the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), an organization established to support all school-aged youth regardless of their sexual or gender identities. At its inception, the organization focused on outreach to educators who worked with young people daily with the purpose of creating “a safe and affirming school environment where [all students] can learn and grow (GLSEN 2012). GLSEN encourages youth, teachers, and administrators, who do not identify as LGBT, to become an ally for LGBT identifying young people. Allies can be straight or cis gender (a person who identifies in the same gender as the sex into which he or she was born), or an LGBT identifying adult (GLSEN 2013). A large national organization today with thousands of registered GSAs nationwide, GLSEN still prides itself on its mission to support all LGBT youth, their teachers, and their allies. The organization conducts a biennial study on the national school climate, a survey identifying LGBT student perceptions of safety in their school environment. Additionally, Gay-Straight Alliances can register their organization with GLSEN to receive educational materials for furthering their organizational goals and implementing safe space practices at their school. According to GLSEN’s website (2012), school administrators, teachers, and LGBT allies can learn about the best ways to be a supportive ally by reading their extensive,
40-plus page manual. In its “Guide to Being and Ally to LGBT Students,” GLSEN encourages allies to listen, be supportive, and visible while not assuming the student needs advice or help (GLSEN 2012). As part of GLSEN’s emphasis on allies, the national organization promotes a yearly “Ally Week” which was created in 2005 to “celebrate allies committed to ensuring safe and effective schools for all and to encourage students to take action” (GLSEN 2013). The GSA at Park High School participated in Ally Week, and I discuss the ways in which Ally Week manifested at Park in chapters 5 and 6.

The Park High School Gay-Straight Alliance

The Park GSA was an extracurricular gathering of students at the high school who believed in creating a safe and welcoming environment for all students, regardless of sexual or gender orientation. At meetings, students and teachers discussed topics relevant to the LGBTQ community like same-sex marriage, bullying, homophobia, gender identity, and celebrities who were public about their gay or lesbian identities. Students and their teacher sponsors also participated in rituals like telling their “coming out” stories, and promoting awareness of LGBTQ issues through events like Coming Out Day and Day of Silence.

The meetings took place in a classroom toward the back of the school. The classroom belonged to Betsy, the theater director, who was also one of the founding faculty sponsors of the GSA at Park. Her classroom looked like one would imagine a theater classroom. In the front, a small black stage rested between side curtains. In the back of the room, colorful wooden benches adorned with names of famous plays and musicals were positioned in a stadium-style arrangement. Their teacher-sponsors, Betsy and Mr. Cruz typically sat in the front of the room,
while Ron, the third faculty leader, sat quietly to the side. All students sat along the benches during the first part of my tenure at Park, and then during the second year, student leaders Lucas, Alexandria, and Dorian sat on the stage down in the front of the room, facing their peers.

The GSA at Park High met every Monday during their 45 minute lunch break. Typically, Mr. Cruz and Betsy were most involved in the daily meetings, and Ron attended, but sat quietly off to the side, eating lunch, and rarely contributed to discussions. Students went to GSA meetings for a variety of reasons. Straight allies typically identified the need to speak out against social inequality and anti-gay bullying. They felt a need to be a part of social change, and to support their friends and family who were struggling to come out of the closet. The GSA offered straight allies that space. LGBTQQ identifying students also cited the desire to be involved in movements for social change at their school. Dorian described her family as being social activists, and because of her experiences with their beliefs, she told me: “[I want to be] very involved in social justice, and so it’s kind of like something I wanna do, and it’s something that’s important to me, and I want to like make a difference, the first step is gonna be like at school and stuff. It was very important to me to be a part of this club” (Dorian, 18, lesbian, club president).

Other LGBTQQ students joined because they perceived the club as a safe space to be themselves. Lucas, the co-president, who identified to me as “gay; in the closet,” went to the GSA initially because he only knew 3 gay people at Park, and wanted to meet more students with whom he could identify. Generally, students went to the GSA to build social networks with students who had similar desires to support their peers in addition to focus on building awareness in the school for LGBTQQ issues like homophobia and anti-LGBTQQ bullying. Participation within the club manifested across several contexts of sharing experiences, teaching about gay
history, asking for advice, and public awareness campaigns in the school outside of Betsy’s classroom.

Public sharing of coming out of the closet emerged as one of the most common practices at GSA meetings. Coming out of the closet refers to an experience that speaks to the abuse, silencing, and oppression of marginalized sexual identities (Irvine 1996; Sedgwick 1990; Valentine 2002). The concept of “coming out” was developed by the Gay Liberation Movement in the 1970s and may be defined as the process in which one explores and identifies with an LGBTQQQ identity and then tells others about their identity (Levine and Evans 1991). Coming out is both a private and public process of coming to understand one’s own LGBTQQQ identity, and the sharing of this journey became an important ritual at meetings.

Dorian, the GSA president during the second year I was at the school, encouraged participants to share their coming out stories arguing, “Coming out is an obvious GSA thing, and it would be just wrong if we didn’t do it.” Of the 34 meetings I attended, sharing of coming out stories consumed the entirety of 4 of the meetings, and was a topic of discussion in several others. At the very first meeting of the school year, in September 2013, when prompted to make suggestions for activities and guest speakers for the year, one girl requested that the GSA solicit a speaker who could talk about the ways in which young people might come out to their parents, and how to deal with their reactions. As I discuss in later chapters, coming out stories were layered with several negative, positive, and neutral experiences.

To the Park GSA, the emphasis on coming out of the closet also played out in the public hallways of the school itself. Specifically, the GSA participated in “Coming Out Day,” recognized nationally by GSAs, as a day idealized to celebrate LGBTQQQ identities emerging out of oppression and into public acceptance. In the morning, GSA students gathered at a table in
the hallway and distributed stickers with a variety of identities: straight, ally, gay, lesbian, and a selection of others that students penned themselves onto blank labels. The Park GSA also celebrated Coming Out Day during their lunch period, having pizza, socializing in small groups throughout the room, and playing “Pin the Tail on the Rainbow Unicorn.”

Another day on which the Park GSA promoted awareness of LGBTQQ issues was “Day of Silence.” Day of Silence is a day each April in which GSAs try to bring awareness to the years of violence and oppression against LGBTQQ people both throughout history and in contemporary society. On the Day of Silence, Park GSA participants distributed various colors of duct tape at the school entrance, and offered each entering student and teacher the tape to place over their mouths, taking a vow of silence for the day. Students were given the option to wear the tape across their mouths, or on a visible part of their body. GSA members also distributed a small pink pamphlet, printed from the GLSEN website, explaining the purpose of the day:

Please understand my reasons for not speaking today. I am participating in the Day of Silence, a national youth movement bringing attention to the silence faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and their allies. My deliberate silence echoes that silence, which is caused by anti-LGBT bullying, name calling and harassment. I believe that ending the silence is the first step toward building awareness and making a commitment to address these injustices. **Think about the voices you ARE NOT hearing today** (GLSEN 2014).

Not all of the students in the GSA participated in the Day of Silence, but during both years I observed at Park, teacher-sponsors and 5-7 club participants distributed tape and pamphlets.

The first school year I attended the GSA at Park, meetings were poorly attended. At most, I observed 10 students in a meeting. On 3 occasions that year, I went to a meeting, and it was adjourned within the first 10 minutes because only a couple of students appeared and they didn’t bring topics for discussion. During the first year of my research, student leadership wasn’t
obvious. Students like Claire, a straight ally, and Narscia, a bisexual girl, both seniors, attended most often, and sometimes drove discussions. For the majority of that school year, during the late winter and entire spring, GSA meetings focused on writing skits to create videos for school-wide awareness and distribution during the week leading to Day of Silence. That year, the GSA discussed the experience of Stella, a gay student who preferred to dress in drag at school. It was an issue that divided GSA teacher-sponsors from school administrators and the boys’ family, that I discuss later.

During the second year of my research (fall 2012 – spring 2014), meetings carried greater attendance with anywhere from 10-30 students. Alexandria, Lucas, and Dorian led the club. The first meeting that year welcomed over 40 students. Meetings during the second school year carried a richer variety of activities and discussions, though they were still loosely structured. Typically, the student leaders or the teacher sponsors raised some topics like the presidential election, or current laws on the local ballots, related to LGBTQQ rights. The leaders would also apprise club members of college scholarships designated for LGBT teens, and about local meetings or other community events. After the leadership team concluded their opening remarks, and discussion concluded about the topics they introduced, discussion would carry over into what one gay student called, “the free discussion part of the meeting.” In our interview, a straight ally called this time, “confessionals.” Club members discussed their weekend nights at a gay club, or movies they saw. On several occasions, straight allies raised their hands to ask for advice for dealing with homophobic family members. LGBTQQ students often talked about their experiences with unsupportive family, or anti-gay language used by students in the hallways at school. Club members brought topics and experiences to the club, and Betsy labeled
that year, “the best year yet” in terms of student engagement with the GSA at Park. She had never seen so many students participate so frequently, and that pleased her.

Throughout both years in the Park GSA, a core group of students attended nearly every meeting, comprised of LGBTQQ students and straight allies. In both years, several students came to meetings one time, and then I never saw them again. Sometimes students would come for just a couple of meetings or very sporadically throughout the years. Generally, the participants in the club were a transient group of young people, with 5 core people who consistently attended meetings in the first year of my research, and 10-12 core participants during my second year.

Conclusion

The GSA at Park was established as a space where LGBTQQ young people and their straight allies could come together to promote awareness of anti-LGBTQQ violence and discrimination and provide an unconditional support network for LGBTQQ youth and their straight allies. The structure of the Park GSA closely mirrored the ideals of national Gay-Straight Alliance organizations like GLSEN and the Gay Straight Alliance Network in California. At meetings, LGBTQQ students often shared their experiences of family members who were or were not supportive when they came out of the closet. Straight allies sometimes asked for advice on how to deal with peers and relatives who were homophobic as well. On a few occasions, LGBTQQ students came to share an experience of violence or an offensive school related issue like social exclusions and bathroom assignment inequalities. Where then, do allies fit into these experiences that are shaping the futures of LGBTQQ youth, if they fit at all?
In this chapter, I elaborated on the historical context out of which high school GSAs grew. LGBTQQ history reveals a conglomerate of diverse minds, needs, and stories of struggle and liberation. They are histories that cannot be neatly packed into a one-dimensional conceptualization of what it means to be lesbian, or gay, or queer, or bisexual, or transgender, or a myriad of sexual identities that I haven’t yet mentioned. Thus, if we are to learn anything from the histories of LGBTQQ people, we must embrace that diversity of needs, and resist the temptation to compartmentalize complex identities. My research with the GSA at Park High School will hopefully inform this narrative, particularly the history of the ways in which we’ve constructed the straight ally, and thus, how we might think about straight allies in the future of LGBTQQ movements as they continue to build new histories. In the next chapter I unpack the literature and theory that informs my analysis of the GSA at Park High School.
Chapter Three

Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter, I consider the literature and theories in which I situate my research about youths who participate in gay-straight alliances. First, I consult literature on gender and sexuality, particularly the ways in which both are socially constructed and as such, create gender hierarchies of privilege influenced by patriarchal structures of social inequality. I explore gender in the context of both symbolic interactionist and feminist theoretical perspectives, to uncover the meanings individuals assign to gender and sexuality in their lived experiences with heterosexual and male privilege. I also consider the ways in which gender manifests in schools as social spaces and as a social process. Specifically, because gay-straight alliances are often housed in high schools it is important to consider schools as larger socializing institutions that police gendered behaviors, and to examine their relationship to GSAs—organizations that regularly face and confront issues of gender and sexuality in their schools. Finally, I summarize and critique the existing research on GSAs and the discourse of straight allies who participate in these clubs. This literature lays the groundwork for my current project, in which I endeavor to expand upon current quantitative and qualitative research that overlooks the complexities of lives embedded within contemporary experiences of gender, sexuality, and social inequality.

Gender and Heterosexual Privilege
Scholars have theorized gender for several decades, uncovering the ways in which gender is a social construct, embedded in systems of patriarchy and social inequality (Bourdieu 2001; Connell 1995; Connell 1987; Gardiner 2002; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Morgan 1996; Paechter 2006; Plummer 1996; Richardson 1996; Thorne 2001; West and Zimmerman 1987). In their widely cited theoretical piece about gender, West and Zimmerman argue that gender is a social performance. They state, “Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the ‘essentialness’ of gender” (1987: 137). Gender organizes institutions like families and schools, and reveals practices of inequality as teachers and administrators treat children differently to enforce gender norms (Thorne 1993). Because gender is socially constructed, it remains a fluid and often unstable component of social life (Butler 1999; Butler 2004; Connell 2005; Pascoe 2007; Richardson 1996; Seidman 1996).

In his work on male bodybuilders, Tristan Bridges builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of capital and conceptualizes gender capital as a way in which male body builders use their bodies as a means for gaining social status (2009). Bridges writes, “Most broadly, gender capital refers to the resources (e.g. knowledge, body image and tastes) that individuals employ to gain status in certain contexts” (2009: 84). In this way, bodybuilders construct meaning of gender through their ability to shape and transform their bodies to conform to hegemonic notions of masculinity. Gender capital may be used to understand ways in which young people in a school club may use their own gender capital to establish power over others who do not exhibit characteristics that would lead to higher social status. In the context of the GSA, gender capital may manifest to reinforce hierarchies, particularly when straight youths are invited to support sexual minority youths.
Situated within the discourse of gender are dominant assumptions of what it means to be a man, and what it means to be a woman in contemporary culture. Gender scholars argue that societal norms require a heterosexual identity for every individual, or what Adrienne Rich terms compulsory heterosexuality, (1980), whereby deviations from straightness are ridiculed, and even persecuted. Compulsory heterosexuality is invisible, and thus unacknowledged and often unchallenged as a mainstay of social interaction. Heterosexual identity is especially policed in boys and men. Hegemonic notions of masculinity leave virtually no room for straying from heterosexuality or stereotypical assumptions of what it means to be a man (Allen 2005; Behnke and Meuser 2001; Bourdieu 2001; Connell 1995; Corbett 2001; Fausto-Sterling 2004; Kehily 2000; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Mechling 2001; Morgan 1996; Paechter 2006; Pascoe 2007; Plummer 1999; Tolson 1977).

Sexualities as Social Constructions

As with gender, feminist scholars and queer theorists frame the concept of sexuality as a social construction, and argue for an examination of heterosexuality as an institution that governs social relations (Halley 1993; Ingraham 1996; Ingraham 2002; Jeffreys 1996; Katz 1995; Rich 1980; Weeks 1996). Jonathan Ned Katz argues that the very concept of heterosexuality is a recent construct that is historically situated as a way to exclude homosexuality from normative expectations of appropriate sexual behavior (Katz 1995). Likewise, queer theorists challenge the power of heterosexuality suggesting that the invisibility of heterosexuality shields those who
embody such an identity from recognizing their unearned privilege (Harbeck 1995; McIntosh 2012; Rich 1980).

Queer theorists have argued that categories of sexuality, although often tied to personal identities are typically unstable (Epstein 1996; Irvine 1996; McIntosh 1996; Seidman 1996; Stein and Plummer 1996; Warner 1993). According to Seidman (2003), “Rather than approaching gay, straight, or bisexual identifications as stable, core identities, that motivate our behavior, a performance approach emphasizes sexual identity as a process” (38). Similarly, Janice Irvine warns against limiting sexual identities to essentialized understandings rather than considering their complexly situated meanings within social processes (1996). According to Weeks (1996), “It is vital to keep in mind when exploring homosexuality which has always been defined in our culture as a deviant form, that what matters is not the inherent nature of the act, but the social construction of meanings around the activity and the individual response to that” (59). From Weeks’ argument, we can see the challenge to sexualities as essential, limiting categories that are comprised of fluid meaning systems and performances.

Another component of the discourse of sexuality among social science scholars, is the challenge to rethink the heterosexual/homosexual binary, whereby homosexuality is typically misunderstood in society as what heterosexuality is not (Epstein 1997; Roseneil 2002; Seidman 1996; Stein 1994). In doing so, we oversimplify the diversity of meaning systems association with sexualities, and situate heterosexuality at the forefront normative sexual behavior while casting non-heterosexual practices as deviant, disgusting, and abnormal. Scholars recognize two specific consequences of subscribing to such a hetero/homo binary. Such a distinction often leads to tendencies to mainstream sexual minority identities in the name of diversity (Epstein, O’Flynn, and Telford 2002; Kumashiro 2001; Nardi 2002), or, relegates non-heterosexual
identities as the marginalized Other (Pharr 1997; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002; Renold 2004; Seidman 2013; Wittig 1992).

In terms of mainstreaming non-heterosexual identities, popular culture and academics alike have attempted to be inclusive of marginalized identities, often recognizing their oppression, but decentralizing individual identities. According to Nardi (2002), "This kind of mainstreaming of gay and lesbian issues involves decontextualizing experiences, that is, failing to provide an analysis of the larger cultural contexts that perpetuate the inequalities that gays and lesbians face" (45). Nardi (2002) and Ward (2008) both suggest that this attempt at diversity consequently appears as a way of creating a sameness that minimizes the significance of lived experiences of social inequality.

Another way that sexual minority individuals may experience this culture of sameness under the guise of diversity is in the practice of tokenism (Kumashiro 2001; Pharr 1997; Rich 1980). Suzanne Pharr (1997), in her theoretical piece about homophobia confronts the practice of tokenism as a way of othering marginalized identities. Pharr (1997) argues that tokenism is a form of co-optation, and a practice in which the tokenized person is pressured to assimilate. She writes, “Tokenism is the method of limited access that gives false hope to those left behind and blames them for ‘not making it’” (62). GSAs are organizations typically premised on creating a sensitivity to issues of diversity, but may ultimately lead to tokenism and cultures of sameness that decentralize LGBTQ youth identities and experiences.

Scholars also problematize the process of othering those who identify with marginalized identities. Such a practice shifts discursive analysis away from the power structures that marginalize queer identities. Thus, queer theorists stress the importance of looking at
heterosexuality as an institution that structures inequality and relegates non-heterosexual identities to the outside (Allen 2005; Halley 1993; Ingraham 1996; Richardson 1996; Seidman 1996). Stein and Plummer (1996) suggest studying the center, not always focusing specifically on the margins or the other when trying to grasp the complex social processes associated with sexualities and gender. Analysis should shift to the center, where heterosexual privilege exists.

Scholars have analyzed the existence of privilege, specifically white male privilege, and some have expanded on the discourse of the ways in which unearned privilege exists among the most powerful group in our society: white, heterosexual men (Bourdieu 2001; hooks 2000; Kimmel 2008; McIntosh 1988; Rochlin 1985; Sedgwick 1990). McIntosh (1988) argues that while white men may recognize the disadvantages of women, they fail to acknowledge their own unearned power. Instead, the unearned privilege of being white remains unexamined and free from critical judgment in historical and popular social discourse. The invisibility of white male privilege perpetuates this power as normal and taken for granted. Similarly, some scholars have gone beyond the notion of white male privilege to create a discourse examining heterosexual privilege (Bourdieu 2001; Duhigg 2010; Mac an Ghaill 1994; McIntosh 1988; McIntosh 2012; Nielson 2000; Rich 1980; Richardson 1996; Robinson 1996; Rochlin 1985). Like male privilege, heterosexual privilege is highly pervasive, yet immensely invisible. Rochlin (1985) and McIntosh (1988) both highlight some of the key characteristics of heterosexual privilege. Among them, is the ability for children of straight parents to not have to answer questions about their parent’s relationship with a partner (McIntosh 1988). Rochlin (1985) created a list of questions that force a reflection of heterosexuality as one answers questions that the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender community is asked as a regular occurrence, like: “What do you think caused your heterosexuality?” (467).
According to Sasha Roseneil (2002), ‘Queer’ has become a coveted status where individuals are free to explore a multitude of sexual experiences that transcend the hetero/homosexual binary. Rather than being confined to this dichotomy, embracing a queer identity becomes a liberating experience. “‘Queer’ has become, in British popular culture, an attitude and a stance which rocks the hetero/homosexual binary, and is one to which a generation aspires” (36).

Children, Schools, and Sexuality

As GSAs are typically clubs formed by students who seek support from an adult teacher or administrator in schools, they are usually housed within schools as extracurricular clubs. That GSAs are situated within schools suggests a complicated relationship between the school itself, the club, and youths who might appear to be discussing issues of sexualities and sexual identity—topics that schools notoriously try to control and ignore simultaneously (Best 2000; Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford 2002; Fine 1988; Gilbert 1998; Horne 2008; Kehily 2000; Lipkin 2005; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Martin 1996; McLaren 1995; Pascoe 2007). Research that focuses on children, gender and sexualities in schools seeks to understand the heteronormative practices and gender hierarchies embedded within the institutions of schools.

Schools, are places in which young people are forced to appear throughout most of their childhood. Schools shape student experiences with gender, race, class, and sexuality and organize these social phenomena into hierarchies of inequality (Biddle 2001; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Brint 1998; Coleman 1990; Collins 1979; Kozol 1991; Lucas 1999; Orfield and Lee 2005; Rothstein 2004; Sacks 2007; Shapiro and Johnson 2005; Weis and Fine 2005) They are spaces

Stein and Plummer (2004) argue that schools need to recognize and address the ways in which classrooms are heterosexualized. That is to say that as schools adhere to dominant prescriptions of heterosexual norms, they create school cultures in which children who do not identify as straight may feel pushed to the outside, stigmatized, or simply abnormal.

Research on Gay-Straight Alliances

Research focusing on gay-straight alliances examines the impact of these organizations, and particularly the ways in which GSAs seem to bring about positive change in schools in terms of providing a safe space for LGBTQQ youths and their allies (Fetner 2012; Hackford-Peer 2010; Kosciw 2012; Lee 2002; Russell 2009; Walls 2010). Scholars have also argued that the mere presence of a GSA in a school may lead to less homophobic and transphobic violence, encouraging a more tolerant school climate (Kosciw 2012). This research is multidisciplinary, represented heavily by educational researchers and psychologists who look at the connections between GSAs and the experiences of marginalized youths in schools and school psychologist settings.

Ally Discourse
Conclusions drawn from research centered on GSAs tend to favor the participation of straight allies, revealing a desire to include straight allies because they seem to help the LGBTQQ community garner resources for advancing their fight for social equality (Cortese 2006; Fetner 2012; Miceli 2005; Walls 2010). According to qualitative data, youths who were still closeted about their sexual minority status felt able to participate in a GSA because straight ally presence allowed them to pass as straight. Fetner states, “The inclusion of straight allies in the club provided the cover for students who were not ready to disclose their sexual identity or who were questioning their identity. Straight allies were crucial to creating a space in which closeted kids could participate” (2012: 201).

In one of the very few studies measuring straight ally participation in LGBT groups, Daniel Cortese’s qualitative research explores the reasons why a national LGBT activist group, similar to GLSEN, would deploy a straight identity as a tool for achieving their organizational goals, and what that identity deployment looks like in various regions and chapters of the organization (Cortese 2006). Through 30 intensive interviews, Cortese’s findings lead him to conclude that the national organization he calls “SAGA” (Straight and Gay Alliance): an organization consisting of LGBT adults and straight allies that supports and mobilizes GSAs in chapters across the country to combat homophobia and promote student safety in high schools, has utilized the straight identity for political and economic access that contributes to the strength of the organization as a whole (2006). In other words, SAGA is able to use straight privilege as a way to legitimize the organization’s goals and thus gain access to social networks that support SAGA’s aims, both politically and financially. Cortese also finds that the ways in which SAGA deploys its straight identity differs across geographic regions. In areas of the United States where the political climate and social culture are homophobic and hostile to LGBT rights, SAGA
strives to garner support for its mission by deploying its straight employees with the LGBT colleagues to speak together, advocating for the rights of LGBT youth. In some cases, like in an Alaskan chapter, the straight activists are the only staff members representing SAGA (2006). Dissimilarly, in socially liberal areas, where rates of intolerance and homophobia are lower, SAGA can focus its straight identity to network with social organizations for financial support (2006). Cortese concludes that ultimately straight ally involvement in SAGA did not lead to a destruction of the organization because the boundaries of straight and LGBT were fairly clear. Identities were defined and understood—that straight people would never be LGBT, thus if they want to speak with their LGBT colleagues, then they are accepted into the SAGA organization (2006).

Cortese’s work speaks to the roles that straight allies play in a large national LGBT activist organization, and by his arguments, we see that many people in the LGBT movement believe that straight allies are indeed a necessity for advancing political causes. However, Cortese’s work leaves out the voice of the young people, for whom SAGA works every day. As a national organization that strives to make schools safe for all children, regardless of their sexual or gender identity, and so heavily relies on straight allies as an essential part of GSAs, it is crucial to explore the ways in which children actually live the experience of participating in a GSA with straight allies. Like GLSEN, SAGA emerged as an organization in the early 1990s immediately inclusive of straight ally participation, and remains that way today. However, is the “straight” in the “GSA” still a necessary component? Have GSAs in some geographic areas moved beyond needing or even wanting straight allies present at every meeting? In my study, I conduct ethnographic research, which I discuss in the next chapter, and discover patterns in ally
participation that build upon Cortese’s findings and take ally discourse literature into new
directions that challenge the limiting practice of embracing allies at any cost.

A limited amount of research does uncover some criticism of straight allies in GSAs,
particularly as their participation is considered in relation to the participation of racial minority
and transgender youths. According to Fetner (2012), who interviewed young adults who
participated in a high school GSA, participants noticed an absence of Black and Latino student
participants as well as transgender students. Fetner’s findings support McCready (2001), whose
research shared the narratives of young Black gay males who felt alienated by Project 10 in
California, because group meetings seemed dominated by white female lesbians. The boys
struggled to find peers who could relate to their experiences of being both Black and gay (2001).
Similarly, Griffin et al, in their research on the establishment of GSAs in Massachusetts,
supported by the Safe Schools Coalition, a statewide organization promoting safety and anti-
bullying campaigns, found that some gay and lesbian identifying youths tend to shy away from
GSAs because straight peers attend meetings (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, and Beyer 2003). They
found that some sexual minority youths feared their confidentiality could be broken by straight
allies. This research speaks to the complexities of trying to organize students who embody such
diversity through the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender into one cohesive gathering.
Adding more privilege, in the form of heterosexuality would certainly complicate the group
dynamics, and this literature begs for a deeper exploration the relationships in these settings.
The research also suggests the need to think about the ways in which schools, as socializing
institutions, both impact, and are impacted by youth interactions and GSAs generally.
Situating the Study

The conceptualization of heterosexual privilege as a social phenomenon that warrants deeper study frames the understanding of interactions within the Park High School GSA. I utilize theories of heterosexual privilege to ground my conclusions about the events that unfolded in my fieldwork. I also expand upon the theories of gender and heteronormativity to critically analyze a setting that seeks to create a safe space for students who are often marginalized by their families, at school, and by society as a whole.

Current research on GSAs, and national organizations that support these student-led organizations focuses a great deal on the inclusion of straight allies and on the positive impact that GSAs have on schools, particularly in the challenge to create safer school climates for all children. While GSAs seem to have a positive effect on student culture in high schools, many factors in particular schools can influence that affect, particularly current political climates and geographical contexts that might also contribute to a more inclusive and fully accepting social environment. Because of the increased awareness of anti-gay bullying and general homophobia, as well as gender inequality in schools, I argue that it is important to examine the deeper meaning systems within a club that is ultimately part of a larger discourse of social equality and school policies. GSAs have been offered as an effective way to support LGBTQQQ youths and promote social equality throughout school culture, but little research explores the ways in which students experience GSAs over a longer period of time. Nor does the literature examine the ways in which heterosexuality ultimately plays a role in the social interactions among GSA
participants, particularly because of the presence of straight allies who embody heterosexual privilege.
Chapter Four

Doing Ethnography in a High School

I approached my dissertation research from the methodological framework of qualitative data collection, through the methods of ethnographic fieldwork. Specifically, I employed participant observation and intensive interviewing strategies to glean the ways in which students in a high school gay-straight alliance make meaning of and construct the straight ally participant. Symbolic interactionists and feminist scholars often utilize ethnographic methods to capture the lived experiences of people negotiating their everyday lives. According to theorist Herbert Blumer, symbolic interactionism “believes [a] determination of problems, concepts, research techniques, and theoretical schemes should be done by the direct examination of the actual empirical social world, rather than by working with a simulation of that world” (1969). To account for the patterns of heterosexual privilege and gender hierarchies in the GSA, I also worked within the frameworks of feminist methodologies that uncover the existence of patriarchy, guiding most social interaction (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002; Smith 1987; Smith 1990). In this chapter, I reveal my personal motivations for and methodological approaches to studying the mundane, yet meaningful interactions of students who participated in a high school GSA. I include the struggles, as a researcher, with gaining access to schools— institutions that work so closely with children. I then elaborate on my research site and discuss the methods I employed to explore the constructions of straight allies. Finally, I discuss the methodological challenges I encountered in the field.
The Origins of this Project

My passion for learning more about Gay-Straight Alliances stemmed from my own personal journey through my relationship with one of my uncles, with whom I was strongly bonded. Before he and his partner had their own children, I felt like I was his only child. He was openly gay, and I grew up through most of my young childhood without comprehending that society labeled and stigmatized sexual identities that weren’t heterosexual. My uncle’s partner was my uncle too. To me, his relationship was like any marriage—between two people who loved each other. I never thought that my parents’ relationship was qualified by a “legitimate” love that my uncle shouldn’t have with his own partner. It wasn’t until I reached my early middle school years when I deciphered the meaning of fag, always used as a way to degrade boys, as a connotation of gay men, or that being gay was so negatively deviant in our society.

There were many times when the fag epithet really affected me. Nobody ever directed the comments at me, because I was a girl, and liked boys, but I felt the intended insult when it was lodged at someone nearby, because to me, it was a verbal assault on my uncle. When I was in 5th grade, my mother sat me down to tell me that my uncle had HIV. I was only 10, and in 1991, an HIV diagnosis meant that death was imminent, or at least that’s how my young mind interpreted it. I was so completely devastated, and my mother told me on several occasions that I could not tell anyone, because it would ruin my uncle’s life if people knew. At the time, people ignorantly thought that if you had HIV, then just touching someone would transmit the disease. I clearly remember a profound cultural panic about the disease, and here I was, a young girl, so scared to lose my uncle, and I couldn’t talk to anyone about it. My only option was to talk to a guidance counselor. I went to the counselor’s office every Wednesday for several weeks. I
vividly recall sitting there and sobbing, as I was trying to deal with a death that hadn’t happened yet. My heart was so broken, and I felt so small and hopeless.

Although I went to what I would call a socially progressive high school in New England, the school didn’t incorporate a GSA until after I graduated. When I learned that such organizations existed, I immediately thought of what my life would have been like had I been able to attend GSA meetings. To have a safe space in which I could be supportive of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens, and perhaps share my story about my family would have been a positive experience for me. Perhaps I would not have felt so lonely in fearing my uncle’s death. I would have been a straight ally in my high school GSA. My uncle died in 2010, from an unrelated heart condition, and it was the worst day of my life, but it is our story that lies beneath my inspiration to pursue and complete this research project.

Methodology

Symbolic Interactionism

Herbert Blumer, in Symbolic Interaction: Perspective and Method (1969), argues that social meanings are created through human interactions whereby people interpret those encounters and thus act on the meanings they’ve created from those experiences. The meanings that people create through those interactions are central to their social lives and understandings of the world.
This standpoint in sociological research breaks from the positivist paradigm which believes in an empirical reality that follows rigid guidelines for scientific research, a model set by the “natural” biological sciences, as a way of shunning bias and distancing the researcher from her subjects. Contrary, qualitative research methods embrace a post-positivist standpoint in which the researcher cannot be separated from those from whom she desires to learn. Post-positivism argues that the researcher brings her own social location—the way in which we are situated in the world—to the field. In other words, as researchers, we cannot be disconnected from our own lived experiences and those realities inform the ways in which we interpret the lives of our research subjects.

William Corsaro, a qualitative sociologist and ethnographer who has pioneered the study of children and childhood argues that older models of thinking about children in terms of their occupation of the social sphere that only leads to adulthood, and therefore childhood is to be viewed as their vehicle, is shortsighted (2011). Rather, Corsaro conceptualizes interpretive reproduction. Drawn from the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, Corsaro writes:

The term interpretive captures the innovative and creative aspects of children’s participation in society. …children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer cultures. The term reproduction captures the idea that children are not simply internalizing society and culture but are actively contributing to cultural production and change. The term also implies that children are, by their very participation in society, constrained by the existing social structure and societal reproduction. That is, children and their childhoods are affected by the societies and cultures of which they are members. These societies and cultures have, in turn, been shaped and affected by processes of historical change (2011: 21)

Corsaro challenges linear and overly simplistic models of childhood that fail to account for children’s agency, and their ability to create and navigate complex peer cultures (2011). Instead,
Corsaro emphasizes the ability of children to interpret their worlds through language, cultural routines, and symbols of what it means to be a social actor in society (2011). Corsaro’s theory of interpretive reproduction informs the ways in which I researched children. Rather than thinking of children only in relation to becoming adults, in my research, I examined the shared meanings that evolved in children’s interactions with each other and with adults, as well as their interpretations of the world they navigated daily. Such a methodological approach captures the authenticity of the daily lives of children—the mundane, taken-for-granted interactions that conceal deeper meanings and our understandings of the worlds in which children construct their realities. It also recognizes and embraces the agency with which children negotiate their social worlds.

I also utilize feminist methodologies that uncover the complex relationships between gender, sexualities and power. Specifically, feminist methodologies argue for a non-linear way of exploring identities (who they are now) rather than a deterministic approach (who they will become), which can be a particularly easy trap to encounter when studying children (Corsaro 2011). According to Niobe Way (2001), this strategy to studying children through feminist qualitative methods “allows for stability and spontaneity rather than constructing the ‘Other’” (114). By accounting for and embracing the numerous ways in which children make sense of their worlds, we are able to retell their experiences as they see them, and as they live them in the present (Best 2007; Corsaro 2011; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Way 2001).

This project focuses on youths rather than on adult GSAs because for children, the power of institutional management of sexual identities at school and at home is age-specific. Children are legally bound to their families and to attend school. The GSA then offers a space to which they can retreat, which is often confidential—children don’t have to inform their parents of their
GSA participation, and at least some of them feel safe enough to attend meetings with peers who might be like them. According to Epstein et al. (2002), sexual minority youths have little freedom to explore a part of their identity that is highly stigmatized by society, and may not be supported by financially their families if they come out as LGBTQQ. Adults may have the freedom of being away from family and compulsory schooling to worry less about being openly LGBTQQ.

*Proposing my research*

In October 2009, I reached out to a friend who was a teacher at an urban public high school, and told him about my research project. I intended to explore the ways in which high school boys constructed masculinities in a Gay-Straight Alliance. Specifically, I wanted to know how straight boys embodied masculinity in such a way that permitted them to join this typically female, queer space: a space in which straight boys who committed to hegemonic masculinities might feel uncomfortable (see: Allen 2005; Anderson 2006; Connell 1995; Connell 2005; Donaldson 1993; Epstein 1997; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Pascoe 2003). My friend was excited about my research, and was confident that he could get approval from his principal to permit me access. I call this high school Central High, and their principal was Mr. Jones. I gave Mr. Jones a copy of my research proposal that clearly explained my procedures. He agreed to allow me to do the research at the high school with the condition that I did not go into the classrooms out of concern this might disrupt the learning process. In our first encounter, his only other question was with how I was going to recruit students for my research, to which I responded that I would
attend extra-curricular activities, introduce myself, and distribute my contact information for interested students to reach out to me. He approved, and in December of 2009, I successfully defended my dissertation proposal in Boston.

In January, 2010, I asked Mr. Jones if he would sign the consent form for my university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), and at that time, I included a copy of my interview schedule. In my interview schedule, I distinguished between students who participated in the Gay-Straight Alliance, and those who didn’t. Upon review of my interview schedule, Mr. Jones requested that I rework questions so that students’ parents wouldn’t be offended by my exclusive focus on GSA participants while neglecting the Black Student Alliance, or the Latino Student Alliance (in the Parkview School District, parents had the right to request a viewing of the interview schedule if their child participated in a research project). Mr. Jones wanted me to have a section for every school group. I restructured my interview schedule to contain more blanket questions. For example, I did not exclude any student groups from any sections of my outline. Instead, I created more general questions as they measured student thoughts about gender, reasons for participating in school clubs, their roles and experiences in those clubs, and their perceptions of other students who participated in the same clubs.

Because my interview schedule included a demographic question about racial identity, Mr. Jones felt obligated to consult with the school district’s legal department for approval. He informed me that as a school administrator, he was not permitted to ask students about race. A week later, Mr. Jones, reported to me that he was briefed by the legal department on a formal review process with which all proposed research studies at Parkview schools must engage. What seemed like an easy entrée into a public school suddenly transpired into bureaucratic delays and another IRB process, subject to the limited school calendar, and by the infrequent meetings of
the Parkview IRB itself. In February, 2011, I was invited to the Parkview Public Schools administrative offices to meet with the members of their Institutional Review Board. I was 7 months pregnant, and the room was stifling hot (or I was just nervous). I sat before 4 members of the committee, not one of them with a Ph.D., but there to judge whether or not my research proposal was appropriate to conduct within one of their schools. They gave me 20 minutes to outline my research proposal, and then we had a Q&A session for the last 40 minutes. The committee was most concerned with my role as a “mandatory reporter.” For the school district, a mandatory reporter was someone who must inform authorities if a child is being harmed, or there is significant cause to believe that the child might harm him/herself or others. Most states do not require researchers to be mandatory reporters. However, in order gain access to the schools, they required that I complete a “volunteer” application, typically designated for adults who intend to do volunteer work at the school. With the application, I submitted to a background check. With my new “volunteer” clearance, I was officially a “mandatory reporter” to the Parkview School District.

In terms of content I was required to report, when rewriting my consent forms, the committee approved my language: “I will not tell what you say during our conversations to your parents, teachers, principal, or friends of yours I may interview, unless I feel you are at risk for hurting yourself or someone else.” ¹ Before each interview, I also requested verbal consent, where I read a brief paragraph apprising students that I would inform a Park guidance counselor if I felt the student might harm someone else. If I felt the student was at risk for self-harm, I would offer contacts to local support networks. Thankfully, I did not encounter these scenarios,

¹ See Appendix for complete consent form.
although it’s possible that students didn’t share the risks out of fear I would make that information public.

When I left the Parkview administrative building on that February day, I was charged with redrafting my consent form to a 3rd grade reading level. School policies required that all communication with children’s parents be written in accessible language. Given the class and racial diversity of the school district, this policy was designed to ensure that parents had access to school news and important information related to their children. I was also required to transcribe my consent form in Spanish if a parent requested, but I never encountered such a need. I completed my consent form revisions soon after my presentation to the school administration, but it was already March. School clubs at Park stop meeting by the middle of April because the students are consumed by end of the year exams and festivities. To begin fieldwork in March and only be in the school for six weeks, after which school would end, and current students would graduate, would have done nothing to support building rapport—particularly in a group of people who might feel marginalized, and unlikely to talk to a stranger. I agreed to postpone entry into the field until the following September; the new GSA meetings would bring a new group of students and an entire school year in which to conduct extensive fieldwork. During the summer of 2011, Mr. Jones left Central High School meaning that I needed newly signed approval from the incoming Central High principal. The Park IRB was ready to approve my study before Mr. Jones moved to a new school, and I was encouraged by the director of the IRB to inform that new principal of the rigorous approval process I negotiated. After two weeks of not receiving a response from the new principal at Central, I reached out again via email. She was deeply apologetic and asked that she have the opportunity to speak with the director of the Parkview IRB. One week later, I received notice, that she declined my proposal, and would not
give a reason, other than she was not allowing any research studies at her school. The director seemed perplexed and the sound of defeat came through in his email. My only option was to find a new school, at which I would have no connection.

In September, 2011, I was faced with finding a new high school that had a Gay-Straight Alliance, at which I was permitted to embark on a year-long ethnography. I chose the other high school in the district with a large population and an active GSA. I reached out to the new principal at Park High School, Mr. Brown, an energetic and responsive man who initially declined my request, citing his new role as principal, despite his employment at the high school for several years. I asked him to please reconsider, promising that I would not disrupt class time and reminding him that the Parkview IRB was ready to approve my research proposal once I got consent from the current principal. Mr. Brown responded, questioning how many students I would involve in my study. My initial proposal detailed 50 students, but Mr. Brown thought that would be too many. Being a new principal in a large urban public high school understandably meant reluctance to take on or defend more decisions, and I understood. Clearly, such a transition did not permit Mr. Brown the time to read the entire research proposal package (totaling over a dozen pages) required by the Parkview school district that I, in turn, delivered to him as part of my compliance with ethics of obtaining informed consent. I replied to Mr. Brown’s concern defending my initial choice of sample size, clarifying that I wanted to be thorough in capturing the widest breadth of thoughts and experiences of my informants, but that given my specific research questions, it may not be possible to reach that many students. I informed him that my sample size may be as small as 25. My brief response, coupled with my reassurance that I would not disrupt the formal learning environment, sufficed to get an enthusiastic signature from Mr. Brown, and approval from Northeastern University’s IRB came
almost immediately afterward, in December 2011. I began research in January, 2012 upon students’ arrival from Winter Break. During my days at Park, I only saw Mr. Brown in the hallways and outside the school as he monitored students returning from their lunch break, during which time, many left campus. Except for when I reached out to him providing all of the documentation of approval from both IRBs, he and I never spoke at length again.

My experience trying to gain access into a school, which ultimately took longer to reach final approval than my entire data collection process, highlights the immense hurdles that adult researchers face when trying to access the lives of minors. Schools, particularly public ones, are entrenched in intricate and confusing webs of laws and restrictions, pressures to perform despite deep underfunding and complex bureaucracies in addition to the responsibility of the safety of their minor-aged students each day. Consequently, access to children, a vulnerable population by common standards of ethical research, for research purposes, renders the researcher at the mercy of gatekeepers, or people who have the power to restrict access to outsiders, a category to which I belong as a researcher (Best 2007). These challenges speak to the lack of research on children’s lived experiences. When a researcher is bound by issues of feasibility, particularly time constraints and the ability to gain access, it’s not surprising that so many researchers interview legally aged young people about their memories of childhood. I reached out to a few people who did research about children, asking for advice on how to gain access, and some of them told me they just interviewed 18-year-olds, so they wouldn’t have to deal with approvals. This frustrated me because how, then, do we access the stories of children—the real authentic experiences of their social worlds? At times I considered changing my topic out of fear that my timeline was no longer feasible, but in the end, I can reflect on the authenticity of my research, the trials of and lessons learned in gaining access to and studying children, and argue that the
evidence of my analysis are the words of children, not told through reconstructed memory, but in their present views of the world.

Gatekeepers

In my research endeavor, I encountered several adult gatekeepers I had to convince of my legitimacy (or so I worried): 3 principals, 2 IRBs, and 3 adult-teacher sponsors of the GSA. Reflecting on the challenges to gain access to the school, what I thought would be obvious concerns in the minds of adults, weren’t terribly concerning to them after all. The Parkview District IRB did want me to comply with “mandatory reporter” guidelines, and because I did not foresee uncovering a dangerous situation, I relented. However, the concerns of principals were more about making sure they weren’t upsetting anyone by allowing my presence, rather than for the safety of the students. It may be that my unassuming, non-threatening stature and female presentation conveyed a gendered stereotype that I was trustworthy, but generally, their questioning centered on the potential for disruption to daily schooling processes, or in dealing with distrusting parents. The adult-teacher sponsors of the GSA, also gatekeepers, were incredibly welcoming and at one meeting, Mr. Cruz told the club, “We’re fortunate to have Amie here.” He sporadically checked in with me to be sure that I had enough students volunteering for interviews, concerned that I wouldn’t get enough people, or that I wouldn’t be able to finish my research. After I gained access to Park, I never met another obstructionist.

Research Site
I conducted ethnographic research at Park High School for 14 months, beginning in January 2012 and concluding in April 2013 with a summer break in 2012, while the students were out of school. Park is an urban public high school west of the Mississippi River. It has over 2,000 students with a diverse student body. Students represent many ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds, which is a strong source of pride for the school community. Park is situated close to downtown in the city of Parkview. The school is on a major bus line, which many students employ as a means of transportation to and from school. Neighborhoods surrounding the school include multi-million dollar houses and condominiums, as well as federally subsidized apartments. Unlike some cities where the majority of students in the surrounding wealthy neighborhoods might attend local and elite private schools, Park High is revered in the city as one of the best high schools, thus upper middle class students and their families often choose Park over the private institutions. I chose Park because of its active GSA, and ultimately because the principal, Mr. Brown, gave me permission to conduct my research at his high school.

GSA meetings were held in the classroom of one of the GSA teacher sponsors, whom I call Betsy. The classroom meeting location, situated at the back of the school, gave students the ability to attend meetings discreetly. When I entered the GSA at Park in January 2012, the group was small. Typically, 10-13 students attended meetings, but sometimes no more than 3-6. By fall in 2012, 20-40 students attended several meetings, so many knew about my project. Initially, my dissertation committee and I considered expanding to schools outside of the city to measure straight ally participation comparatively. However, I quickly found that participant observation of GSA meetings, events, and interviews of GSA members at Park offered
opportunities for a deeply rich analysis of this particular group making it unnecessary to expand my research outside of the Park High School GSA for the scope of this project.

Participants

Students

Research participants were high school students, ages 14 – 18 years old, who had ever attended a GSA meeting at Park. I observed students and their 3 teacher-sponsors while I attended the weekly GSA meetings and at any GSA sponsored activities at the school, including “Coming Out Day” and “Day of Silence.” Because of the loosely structured and “open house-like” feel of the GSA meetings where students come and go, and the descriptive profile of the meetings changed each week, it’s hard to conclude how many students I observed. Some students only came to one meeting, and then never returned. Because the GSA is a space that promotes its openness to anyone regardless of their sexual or gender identity, it’s likely that students would come to “test the waters” to get a better understanding of the group dynamics before deciding to become a regular member. As I quoted Lucas in chapter two, he initially went to the GSA to identify other gay kids at Park. He, of course, did stay in the club over both years, but his reasons for joining speak to the curiosity with which some students attend one GSA meeting and then might not return. I often observed students enter a meeting quietly, sit alone and silently, and then leave when the meeting adjourned—never returning.

Adult-Teacher Sponsors
Both years I was at Park, the meetings were supervised by three adults, teacher-sponsors who oversaw the club discussions, and generally guided the group in their proceedings: Mr. Cruz, Betsy, and Ron. Typically, Mr. Cruz or Betsy, or both of them attended meetings. They usually deferred to the student leadership to run an agenda if they came prepared with one. Ron attended many meetings and sat to the side, but didn’t usually offer opinions or guidance. However, he embodied another ally in whom the students could trust. On some days, Mr. Cruz or Betsy couldn’t go to meetings because of obligations to other school activities. Betsy ran the school play, and Mr. Cruz was a leader for the teachers at Park. On days when neither sponsor could attend, meetings would usually adjourn within a few minutes.

Before I attended my first GSA meeting, I reached out to Mr. Cruz, who is an openly gay Latino man, to introduce myself and explain my study. During our first meeting, Mr. Cruz expressed intrigue about my research project, and shared his belief that Park was a supportive high school, but he was curious to find out if students thought the same. He supported me in my first introduction to the group, where I revealed myself as a graduate student conducting doctoral research exploring how kids in GSAs think about gender and identities.

Mr. Cruz is a soft-spoken man with a quiet fire of a personality who openly talks about his partner, whom he calls his husband, “only when I’m mad at him…otherwise, he’s my partner.” He’s deeply devoted to the students, and outwardly worries about them. At our first meeting at a local coffee shop, just before I started my research at Park, Mr. Cruz told me a little about his involvement with the GSA. Betsy had asked him to join the group as a teacher-sponsor not long after she started the club its inaugural year in the 1990s, and he continued his participation while I was at Park. He was a slightly heavy man, who was confident in his
knowledge about gay issues, and sometimes offered narratives of his personal experiences in solidarity with student sharing times.

Betsy was a straight, white woman in her late 50s with a loud, commanding voice and a warm, motherly spirit. She was a heavy-set woman who dressed casually, typically in slacks and a sweater with her hair messily coifed into a hair clip. Students loved and relied on Betsy, and she returned that respect. They addressed her by her first name, and often times during meetings, non-GSA participants would come to request her keys to use her microwave in her office. She was frank and comfortable with the students, not afraid to use swear words when she shared her passionate thoughts on issues like gay marriage, and the presidential election when she feared that the Republican Party might win. Throughout my research at Park, Mr. Cruz and Betsy openly supported my project. They often checked in with me to confirm that students were offering to participate in interviews.

*Participant Observation*

One of the major roles of the ethnographer is that of the participant observer. The participant observer not only observes the interactions of the research setting, but he or she also participates in the rituals and interactions within that setting. I practiced overt and unobtrusive participant observation. That is to say that I was forthright with my research participants, and spoke when I had information about community events, or if someone asked for my thoughts on a particular social issue. At the first meeting, and at several others, I told students that I was also a student, a role to which they could relate. I elaborated that I was working toward my Ph.D., and that my research study looked at gender and experiences in a GSA. Given my straight
privilege in a space inhabited by marginalized youths, I was conscious of taking any time away from their experiences, and intruding on the reasons for their attendance, whatever they may have been. Occasionally, I would have informal conversations with students, but only when the meeting agenda digressed into a lunch gathering absent of a larger group discussion.

While I was usually an observer who sat on the side of meetings, during GSA sponsored events like Coming Out Day and Day of Silence, I did help students set up and take down their displays. Once I felt as though I had some rapport with students, I shared newsworthy events related to the GSA, like movie showings, and community gatherings. During discussions about gender, or current events, the teachers or groups leaders would ask for my thoughts, knowing that I studied gender and sociology. I found that talking during the meetings was another way to build rapport with students, as the more I became involved, the more they started to inquire about my research and approached me with interest in participating in an interview.

Interviewing

During the meetings, I obtained permission from the student leaders to remind club members of my research project, and for recruiting purposes, I distributed a sign-up sheet for volunteers interested in participating in a one-on-one interview to offer their first name and email address. During the first school year in which I was at Park, I only interviewed 6 students (4 girls and 2 boys), which reflected the low participation rates at the meetings. In this first phase of my data gathering, it was common for only 2 or 3 students to show up at a meeting and then leave early. During the second school year, however, over 40 students attended the first meeting, and subsequent meetings carried regular attendance of 10-20 students at least—an unprecedented
number of attendees in all of Betsy’s years as a sponsor. Like the first year of my research, a few eager students immediately contacted me to do an interview, but after September, I found that few students would sign up, and those who did would stand me up without warning or explanation.

As I lacked interviews toward the close of my deadline to complete field research in February 2013, Alexandria checked in with me at the beginning of the meeting to confirm interview completions. As a student leader, she pleaded with her peers, “Do you guys know how hard it is to get a Ph.D.?” I interviewed Alex the previous fall, and she frequently checked in to see if I had enough interviews. I reported that I still needed at least 10 more students to participate. As ethnographers before me have noted, rapport with a research participant, with whom I’d spent some time, legitimized me as a person the students could trust (MacLeod 2009). Suddenly, a dozen club members scheduled and appeared for an interview.

Initially, during the recruiting process, I only asked students for their email addresses. I learned that many students do not check email regularly, or they simply ignored my confirmation emails, and finally one girl gave me her cell phone number and encouraged me to text her rather than contact her via email. Once I started asking students for their preferred method of communication, and most offered their cell phone numbers, text messaging became a very efficient way of scheduling and confirming interviews. Students were more likely to reach out to communicate their need to cancel, let me know they were running late, and were generally more responsive with text messaging than with email.

Ultimately, I completed semi-structured one-on-one in-depth interviews with 23 students: 22 GSA student participants and 1 student who attended the GSA prior to my study,
but not while I was at Park. I interviewed 7 boys and 16 girls. Interview volunteers consisted of
students who were self-identified LGBTQQ youth and straight allies. 2 of the boys I interviewed
self-identified as straight allies, but one admitted being open to having a homosexual
relationship. 4 boys self-identified as gay, and one self-identified as bisexual. 4 of the 16 girls I
interviewed self-identified as bisexual; 2 identified as a lesbian; 2 identified as pansexual; 1
identified as questioning; 5 identified as straight allies; and 2 girls said they did not want to put a
label on their sexual orientation, but then settled on “queer.” I conducted one follow-up interview
with a GSA student leader, my very first interviewee, as I observed his evolving experience from
one year to the next, where he initially self-identified to me as “gay, in the closet” and then came
out as bisexual at the first GSA meeting of his senior year, and eventually as gay in the second
half of that school year. As I had predicted, his thoughts about the GSA and Park High School
shifted in the year between our first and follow-up interview.

For the interviews, I met students at public cafes and coffee shops, usually within
walking distance from the school or at a location that was more convenient for them, and
interviews lasted from 30 minutes to an hour and a half. Although I did not offer monetary
compensation for their time, I did treat students to a soft drink and a snack at the café in which
the interview took place. One student, a senior straight ally, had a free period and requested that
we have our interview at the school because her free time was short in duration. For her
interview, we met on the side of the stage in the empty school auditorium. Otherwise, I
conducted all other interviews off campus.

Research Ethics
All social scientists who conduct research with human subjects must abide by standards of ethical treatment of research participants. I followed the American Sociological Association’s Code of Ethics and went before Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to seek approval for my research proposal. Their approval was conditional upon approval from Parkview High School’s District IRB, whose approval was contingent upon consent from Mr. Brown. Given that my research subjects were children, I also followed procedures for working with vulnerable populations.

Assent to Participate

Conducting research with children, carries unique responsibilities because we consider them a vulnerable population, unable to give consent, yet able to assent to participating in a research project. I distributed a consent form to students (either hard copy at meetings or in an email form for those who utilized email), who wished to participate in an interview, and I required interviewees to bring the form signed by both the student and a parent/guardian. I purposely kept the consent form general, summarizing my research as looking at gender in high school student activities and student culture, taking specific care to not mention the GSA in my research project description. I obtained approval from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board to omit this information out of concern that I might reveal some students to their parents who did not already know their child participated in a GSA. My concerns were substantiated when some students admitted to me that they withheld the status of their participation in the GSA because they believed their parents would disappointedly assume they were gay upon learning of their child’s affiliation with the club. On most occasions,
interviewees brought their complete consent forms, but I did have to reschedule one interview because of the student’s failure to produce the signed document at our first meeting.

*Participation and Confidentiality*

In both the consent form and prior to our interview, I informed students that their participation was voluntary, and that they could choose to end the interview at any time. I also told them they could refuse to answer any question for any reason. Participants were informed that the interview would not impact their standing in school in terms of grading. I assured participants that I would not tell their answers to their parents, teachers, friends, or anyone else. They were aware that their answers are confidential, and their identities are anonymous to the extent that all identifying names and places have been given pseudonyms. I recorded all interviews with a digital recorder that kept track of each file by a letter and a number (e.g. C2), and kept a file that matched the student’s pseudonym with the lettered file on the recorder, thus, no names were audibly recorded. The list of pseudonyms is in a password protected file on my computer.

*Avoiding Harm and Exploitation*

Another of the crucial pieces to conducting ethical research is the avoidance of harm and exploitation of the research subjects. As a researcher, I experienced the tension of knowing that students were offering their time, and although I offered a token of appreciation, in the form of a snack and a drink, I didn’t compensate them otherwise for their time. Their participation was
voluntary and generous. Given their knowledge of and reaction to my research project, I inferred that those who participated in an interview were proud to be a part of a study. They were excited to tell their stories, and pleased that someone wanted to listen to their thoughts. Indeed, Alexandria tried to promote my study by emphatically telling students she had fun in our interview because, “When else do you get to talk about yourself for an hour?” For my last question in my interview, I asked students why they volunteered to participate in my interview, and their answers fell within two categories: the “I wanted to help you” and “I wanted to share my story to make a difference” camps. I concluded that these answers spoke to both my rapport—that students trusted me and my need for participants for an important project, and in terms of the latter, the need for adults to respect children’s abilities to think about the world in complex ways that contribute to our understanding of their experiences as young people. By sharing their stories, the research process was an avenue of empowerment for them.

Speaking to the avoidance of harm that we as researchers must respect, as I mentioned earlier in the chapter, under my “volunteer” status, I was required to report any student about whom I believed would harm him or herself, or others. Fortunately, I never encountered imminent danger. Two of my interviewees shared that they had attempted suicide in previous years, but one told me that she continues to go to therapy for it, and the other boy also told me that his parents knew about his attempt and sought help for him. Otherwise, the content of my interviews did not involve emotionally charged discussions with the potential to harm my research subjects.

Coding Data
I transcribed each of my interviews through voice recognition dictation software. I listened to each interview with a set of headphones and dictated the interviews, through a microphone onto my computer. I left a 2 inch margin on the right side of each sheet for each interview, in which I open-coded for themes in my data (e.g. gender, masculinity, straight ally girls, ally, privilege, etc.) (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). I then created a Microsoft Excel file in which I entered each code into the spreadsheet with the quote to the right. Some quotes contained more than one code, so each code went to the left of each quote, which allowed me to track which quotes I used throughout the dissertation. I utilized the same process of coding for my fieldnotes: 2 inch margin on the right with codes, entered into the spreadsheet. My compilation came to over 800 pages of qualitative data, each sheet filed under its appropriate code.

Following My Data

When I first entered field work, I was particularly interested in how straight boys in the GSA constructed their own gendered identities within paradigms of masculinities. However, as my participant observations and interviews progressed, I realized that straight boys rarely participated in the GSA. As I gathered more data, I shifted my focus to exploring the meaning of being a straight ally, to the straight allies themselves, and also to the ways in which allies were constructed during GSA meetings and by the LGBTQQ students as well. The interactions, behaviors and thoughts around allies came to light as a dominant theme, and thus I followed that revelation. I questioned students on the importance of allies: did they think the GSA needed allies, and why they thought more girls than boys participated as straight allies? Aspects of ally
participation emerged early into my research, during meetings, and appeared frequently in both my field notes and in my formal interviews with GSA participants. In analyzing my data, I began to uncover strongly held beliefs about allies, and within the discourse of allies among GSA participants, relations of power frequently came to the foreground, despite some club members’ failure to identify these interactions as such.

As an ethnographer, we are charged with following our data—understanding that by proceeding with an inductive approach to data collection, we cannot always prepare for the patterns, behaviors, and observations that will drive us to new conclusions, although we must be open to them. We must remain flexible, constantly reflecting and refining our thinking as the ethnography progresses. What we see on the surface doesn’t always speak truth to what appears in the deeper layers, therefore, we are charged with uncovering those complexities that we take for granted. From this methodological approach, I employed a grounded theoretical practice in which I induced sociological theory from the patterns I uncovered in my data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Limitations to My Data Gathering

All social scientific research practices carry limitations that must be addressed and acknowledged. First, my methodological approach captures the depth of a particular setting and the social processes that guide the relationships and interactions in that space. It is a research strategy that does not emphasize generalizability as a particular goal, which methodologists may regard as a limitation. However, I argue that the stories and interactions I uncover bring value to the discourse of straight allies because these narratives speak to the ways in which children
experience and realize a high school Gay-Straight-Alliance. Large surveys cannot capture the complexity of these relationships, and as I will show, these lived experiences contradict the large-scale national studies of GSAs.

My greatest limitation in my data collection is that I am a straight-identified white adult woman. I embody heterosexual privilege: the very privilege I discovered so deeply embedded in the daily interactions and rituals of the GSA. Consequently, I take that privilege into the field, and through my daily life, and must acknowledge my straight privilege informs the ways in which I see the world. This position also shapes children’s understanding of me as a researcher. As an adult, I come with adult privilege and knowledge about society that children haven’t yet encountered. I have the responsibility to account for those inequalities when I interact with children in field research (Best 2007; Chu 2004; Way 2004). With these limitations in mind, inspired by ethnographers who explore privilege from a privileged position (Best 2007; Bettie 2002; Brown 1995; Brown 1998; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011; Krummer-Nevo and Sidi 2012; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002; Stacey 1988; Weiss 1994). I take the side that we as researchers who inhabit many complex identities, many of which reside in privilege, need to be more critical of these ascriptions. We need to hear the voices of those who have been marginalized because they do not possess such privileges, and we need to learn to step aside, rather than in front of them. We need to call the privilege by its name, and unpack its power. It is my hope that this dissertation will speak to the power of heterosexual privilege and contribute to the body of literature that attempts to dismantle that power.
Chapter Five

Constructing the Compulsory Ally

The GSA at Park High School openly promoted itself as a Gay-Straight Alliance, rather than an LGBTQQ or Queer-only group, meaning that the members and teacher-sponsors accepted and even recruited straight-identified youth to attend and participate in their meetings and outreach activities. As straight allies were present at nearly every meeting or GSA sponsored activity I attended, it was clear that allies were significant actors within this space, as a perceived source of support and as contributors to the culture of the club.

Sadie’s uncomfortable experience, as a straight ally participant in Coming Out Day speaks to the importance of exploring the complexities of being an ally in a Gay-Straight Alliance. In this chapter, I unpack what it means to be an ally in the Park GSA. What does an ally look like to LGBTQQ students in the club? How do teacher-sponsors shape understandings of allies in the club? How do allies view themselves in the context of the GSA meetings and activities and in the greater LGBTQQ community? Here, I focus on the ways in which GSA participants constructed allies favorably, meaning that they desired the attendance of and strove to include allies as part of their GSA.

I identify this relationship to allies as a compulsory alliance, which I situate within the framework of Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980). In this essay, Rich (1980), calls for an examination of compulsory heterosexuality, the explicit and implicit assumption that heterosexuality is the only socially acceptable sexual identity whereby
those who do not conform are relegated to the marginalized and oppressed “other.” Rich argues, “Failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism and the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces including both physical violence and false consciousness” (317). In the Park GSA, the overt adherence to the inclusion of straight allies reinforced a status hierarchy with heterosexuality at the privileged top, even though none of its members noticed or acknowledged this pattern, and ironically, were trying to provide a safe space to empower sexual minority youth.

In my time at Park, I uncovered two specific components of the compulsory alliance. First, I noticed a construction of the ally that reinforced an unexamined heterosexual privilege. When allies were mentioned in meetings or explored in my interviews, they were usually situated within a context of power, viewed as essential for the strength and legitimacy of both the GSA as a club and of the LGBTQQ movement as a whole. Their specific role as privileged youth within the group was only discussed once in the entire 14 months I was at Park. Second, I saw the practice of including allies, as rarely identifying them as allies at all. Similar to the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality manifests as invisible in the larger social structures of our society, in the GSA space, I argue that straight allies were usually invisible in their position, in that they were integrated without condition into all LGBTQQ group rituals like personal sharing times and club awareness events at the school-wide level. When teachers or students solicited advice about bullying or experiences with anti-LGBTQQ issues, students and teacher-sponsors did not distinguish between calling on LGBTQQ identifying students or straight allies. All advice was welcomed and treated with the same attention. Additionally, any student who attended GSA meetings was invited to participate in “Day of Silence” and “Coming out Day,” days within the LGBTQQ movement that symbolize both oppression and liberation.
I identify those who subscribe to the necessary inclusion of allies as “pro-allies”. Pro-allies students and teachers ask allies for advice, and depend on allies for support and to spread the values of the GSA outside of the club. They are committed to the belief that allies are imperative for the strength of the GSA and for the larger LGBTQQ movements. According to Miceli (2005), who documented the social history of GSAs, “The [LGBT Youth Rights] movement would have grown much more slowly, made much less of an impact on change, and perhaps even have died out completely before it really got off the ground, if it had relied only on the courage and activism of LGBT students (193). Miceli’s (2005) tone on ally participation in Gay-Straight Alliances speaks to the pro-ally student and teacher-sponsor emphasis on ally presence in the Park GSA. Yet, while most students and all three adult sponsors exhibited an affinity for straight allies, a few students, whom I identify as “ally critics” were undoubtedly uncomfortable with the ways in which the GSA appeared to favor allies at the expense of the empowerment of LGBTQQ students in the club. I explore this group, the ally critics, in the next chapter.

Who is an Ally in the Park GSA?

While at Park, I interviewed 8 of the students who identified as an ally: 6 girls and 2 boys (I explore this gender disparity in chapter 7). Of the 6 girls, 5 identified as straight, and one, Celeste, identified as questioning, meaning for her that she didn’t yet know how she identified in her sexuality. Both boys, Leo and Holden, who identified as allies, told me they were straight, but Leo also shared that he was open to what he called “a homosexual or bisexual experience.”
On the first meeting of my second school year at Park during which, pizza was offered for lunch, over 45 students attended, but this level of attendance never occurred again. Dorian, the new president for the year, asked every student to introduce themselves and identify their sexuality, if they were comfortable, or if they were a supporter, and what pronouns the student preferred when being addressed. In those introductions, 4 boys identified themselves as supporters, and 17 girls identified as supporters. That does not mean that the students who identified as supporters were straight, as the identity of “supporter” or “ally” usually connotes “straight-identifying,” but that they simply identified as supportive of LGBTQQQ needs. Some students utilize the term “ally” or “supporter”, while attending GSA meetings, as umbrella terms when they are not public about their sexuality. In my study, both Sarah and Chris identified as bisexual in our interviews, but both students claimed to be an ally when the topic of their GSA participation emerged in conversations with their parents. Chris was not public about his bisexual identity when he attended meetings, and told me that he attended the GSA as an ally.

As that second year wore on, of the 10-20 participants who regularly attended meetings, straight identified supporters or allies dwindled to 3 boys, each never attending more than 5 meetings and none of them ever together at the same meeting, and at least 6 straight identified girls who attended nearly every meeting. The rest of the members who were present at meetings during the 2012-2013 school year identified as lesbian, bisexual, gay, pansexual, or queer. The previous year, 3 out of the 7 core club members who attended nearly every meeting identified as straight allies, and all were girls. However, throughout both years of my research there were several students who attended only one or a few meetings, about whom I could not determine sexual orientation, gender identity, or ally status because they did not share, nor did I assume this information.
Claire

Claire was a senior girl with a fiery personality, whom I met early into my research at Park in the winter of 2012. She identified as white and as a straight ally who had moved to Parkview to live with her sister after her drug-addicted mother and stepfather physically abused her and continually left her unsupervised, moving from one friend’s couch to another just to find shelter. Claire regularly attended and was a vocal participant at GSA meetings. She was deeply passionate about standing up for her LGBTQ friends who encountered homophobia and transphobia both in school and outside. Each week, she appeared at meetings with one of her best friends, Yvonne. Yvonne identified as gay, and as a boy who dressed in drag and was proud to embody “Stella” when he was in drag. Yvonne was ordered by his aunt, who was his legal guardian, to stop being a “fairy” at school after the then principal called home to let the aunt know he was dressing as a girl after he left home for school in the morning. School administrators supported the wishes of Yvonne’s aunt; however, Mr. Cruz, Claire, and Betsy were clear in their disagreement with the school’s choice to contact Yvonne’s home. As part of the discussion with Yvonne’s family, he agreed to go to GSA meetings to get some support as he navigated his gay identity and desires to dress in drag. Claire was entirely supportive of her friend Yvonne, and especially when he embodied Stella. When Yvonne or Stella didn’t show up for meetings, Claire would go and find her friend and bring him to meetings. Often times, Stella came to meetings as Yvonne, dressed in typical boy clothing, like jeans and a t-shirt and wearing his necklace with the name, “Stella.” In the middle of one meeting, Yvonne abruptly left, and Claire ran after him. In a few minutes, they returned, and Claire sat very close to him, rubbing his leg and staring at his saddened face. She arranged her hands into a heart, and whispered, “I heart you.” Yvonne reciprocated. He then quietly whispered, “She’ll [Stella] be back next year.”
Claire responded with a distressed voice, “No more Stella at school? I’m gonna miss letting her borrow my bras and seeing her every day” (field notes). Claire felt she was a good friend to Yvonne, because she supported him by parting from her bra in the middle of the school day as he cautiously snuck into a hallway closet to dress into Stella’s clothing. At another meeting, Claire enthusiastically told the group:

“I had to let her [Stella] borrow my bra, and she doesn’t let me know until I’m already here, so I have to go to the bathroom and whip it off!” Claire acknowledged that she wasn’t wearing a bra then, but took more pride in protecting her friend and enabling Stella to be who she wants to be (field notes).

Claire didn’t just support Stella; after Spring Break, upon her return from Mexico with her family, she shared the story of her plane ride where she “wanted to punch a bunch of Christians in the face!” She added that she would have done it if she wasn’t on her way to Mexico, fearing she wouldn’t get to enjoy her vacation if she was arrested. She noticed some Evangelical Christians a couple of rows ahead of her on the airplane, whom she identified by their affiliations marked on their shirts, and leaned over the seat in front of her to ask them why they hate gay people:

Claire is very animated while telling the story of confronting the conservative Christian passengers, “Why are you so against gay people?” They responded by telling her that gay people were tempted by the devil. She insisted, “The reason why I don’t go to church is because they think that LGBTQ people are tempted by the devil” (field notes).

Claire was an outspoken ally who was fiercely loyal to her friends. In our interview, she shared that she circulated a petition at Park to convince the administration to open a unisex bathroom. She was sensitive to and annoyed that Stella couldn’t use the girls’ bathroom when she was in school. Claire feared that Stella would be harmed if she used the boys’ bathroom. She witnessed boys bullying Stella and Yvonne in classes they took together, and concluded that the
bathroom, as a space without regular adult supervision, would be a dangerous place for her friend. Claire stood out from the other allies I observed and met in the GSA in that she was usually alone in creating and following through with ways to promote equality at Park. Contrary, her ally-identifying peers didn’t usually admit to going beyond supporting their LGBTQQ friends at the GSA meetings.

Amber

Amber was a self-identified straight white girl, who regularly attended meetings during the first school year of my research. She was a junior then, and when I first visited Park, she had just returned to school after taking a couple of weeks off from having her baby. She was a quiet member of the club, virtually never speaking, but nonetheless, always present. She attended the first few meetings in the fall of 2012, when she was a senior, but I never saw her again after that. Amber was an insecure girl, very shy and a bit reclusive. She claimed to not have many friends, and she usually dated men who were 10-15 years older than she. She lived with both of her parents and her newborn daughter. She shared that she was not in a healthy relationship with her baby’s father, and that he in fact wanted nothing to do with Amber, nor her baby. In our interview, Amber described her life as “really hard” being a single teen mom. She was very close with her father, but not her mother. Amber told me, “My mom hates me and makes me feel like I can’t do anything right” (interview with Amber). As an ally, Amber told me that being an ally makes her happy, “like I’m good for something else that helps people to be strong.” Amber admits that she’s “proud to support somebody that’s in need.”

Celeste
Celeste identified as a 16-year-old Hispanic and questioning girl. She was the only student I interviewed who self-identified as an ally but who was also questioning her sexuality. I asked Celeste to tell me what it means to be questioning, and she replied, “Basically, it means that I haven’t had enough amorous or sexual experiences to really know what I prefer and um…what I like.”

I met Celeste in the fall of 2012 when she started attending GSA meetings, and she did so regularly for the rest of the year. She was a kind but confident girl who wore very little make-up, and often appeared in dark hues: black short skirts over tights with plain shirts and flat ballet shoes. Celeste seemed to have many friends in the GSA. She participated in most of the discussions, and desired more of a leadership role, which she secured at the end of that school year as a co-president of the 2013-2014 GSA. She was constantly brainstorming ways to raise awareness for and recruit new members to come to GSA meetings. In our interview, Celeste told me that she joined the GSA, “just because I have so many friends that are gay, and my mom is gay. I just…I don’t like to see anyone get bullied at all, and I do like to talk to people and I do have some ideas as to how we can help, and I am connected to some organizations.”

Liza

Liza was an 18-year-old Jewish, straight identified ally and a senior at Park who was new to the GSA in the fall of 2013. Her parents were recently divorced, and she spent most of her living arrangements with her father. She was one of the few kids I interviewed who had the means to drive her own car to school, and was also accepted to several highly regarded private universities on the east coast of the U.S. Liza came to the meetings regularly with her friend, Sadie, also a straight identified ally. Liza was an active member of the Park GSA. She attended
meetings regularly, and was an ally who was often and openly concerned about ways to deal with friends and family members who were homophobic.

Liza’s reason for joining the Park GSA aligned with Duhigg et al.’s (2010) findings that allies join because they have a history of seeing the marginalization of LGBTQQ peers. Liza was in the school theater company, and acknowledged that several of her friends in theater identified as gay:

I’ve been an ally for as long as I can remember. I’ve never had any feelings besides “they’re just like everybody else”: anyone who identified as different than what I had been raised around. And, I think being a part of theater, because theater really is my home, I’m really connected to the people that I do theater with, and I almost feel that it’s a responsibility that I take by being a part of that community…to be an ally, and to be there, and to be there for anyone who needs someone to talk to.

Sadie

Sadie was a 17-year-old girl who identified as white, and a straight ally. She earned straight As and like Liza, had her own car that she used to get to school. According to Sadie, her father was a well-known lawyer with ties to the Democratic Party. She had the time to regularly volunteer at non-profit organizations because her parents insisted she focus on school and community service rather than having a paying job. She was excited and proud to tell me that she had been dating her boyfriend for almost 3 years. Sadie was accepted to her top choice school in California, and seemed confident in her college and career path in sociology and public health. Sadie usually sat in the front of the room at GSA meetings, and when the opportunity arose, offered advice to GSA participants. When Sadie and I talked about her role in the GSA, she told me:

Um…just to help out, I guess, and have a different perspective on issues, and um…Not that different (nervously giggles). Just to kind of think of different
ways, and I guess in some ways I have a completely different role than those who identify differently because I can bring the issue to people like me, and they can bring the issue to people like them, so it’s helpful to have both of those combined.

Sadie was confused about her role in the GSA. When she could employ language to describe her position in the club, she saw herself as a person who could bring different viewpoints into the weekly meetings, and believed those thoughts would be valued by her peers. She also felt that her role was different from her peers who were not straight-identifying, in that she could be the one to raise awareness for LGBTQ issues with straight people because they could not.

Carrie

Carrie was one of my first interviewees at Park when I started my research in the winter of 2012. Then, she was a freshman living with her aunt because her father died, and her mother, according to Carrie, was unable to care for her. She identified as straight, and gender fluid, meaning that she didn’t adhere to specific gender markers that might distinguish her as a boy or a girl. Carrie described herself as a “girl, but not a girly-girl,” because she hated makeup and hyper-feminine clothing.

Carrie was a quiet member of the GSA, and her participation spanned the entire time I did my research at Park. She often volunteered to fulfill the behind-the-scenes work the club needed, like printing flyers, or gathering information for the group email list. Despite her consistent participation, when students and teachers were wondering where to find the email list, nobody could remember Carrie’s name. In our interview, Carrie claimed she was an introvert, but had a few lasting and loyal friendships. Her actions in the GSA reflected that sense of self, as she usually came to meetings alone, but confidently took on vital jobs that nobody else wanted.
Holden was a 14-year-old freshman boy who identified as a straight ally, yet he only attended 5 meetings in the spring of 2013. He was a white boy who was living with his single mother and doing poorly in school. Holden occasionally used recreational drugs like marijuana, and told me that he participated in sports in which he admitted to getting hurt a lot, like skiing and long boarding. Holden told me that he doesn’t think about the consequences of his actions, and didn’t care if he got hurt or caught doing something illegal, like drugs or trespassing. Holden chatted often with Lily and Johnny, and appeared to come to the meetings with them. Lily, a freshman, who identified as bisexual, but was not public about her sexuality, and Johnny, also a freshman, identified as gay and transgender because he often dressed in drag (women’s clothing and makeup). When I observed Holden’s interactions with Lily and Johnny, he was condescending and critical, but the three of them laughed a lot, and didn’t seem to take Holden’s comments seriously. In a GSA meeting in April, 2013, Johnny, Lily, and Holden were sitting together and eating lunch. There were only 3 other kids in the GSA that day, and no agenda existed for the rest of the meeting, so students were invited to stay and hang out:

Johnny, sitting with Holden and Lily sighs and shares, “People annoy me! Someone walked into me today and said, ‘You’re Ugly!’” Lily quickly cuts off Johnny’s complaint and brags, “That doesn’t happy to me.” Holden, who had been quiet at meetings, but took liberties to respond to Lily’s declaration by stating in a quiet and condescending voice, “Nobody loves you.” I notice that he’s constantly picking on Lily, joking about how tall she is, and how she’s not pretty. She brushes it off and tells him he’s not being nice, but these are things over which she expressed insecurity in our interview, so I know this exchange is uncomfortable for her (field notes).

Holden’s behavior in the GSA was mysterious to me. He wasn’t very kind to his friends, but in our interview, he expressed concern over LGBTQ rights and safety. Although Lily told
me that she identified as bisexual and had just ended a relationship with her girlfriend, Holden wasn’t aware of her relationship with another girl. Lily was a really tall and attractive freshman girl who excelled in a varsity position on the Speech and Debate team, a rare fete as a freshman in a large school with a popular Speech and Debate club. Holden also participated in Speech and Debate, and seemed drawn to Lily, despite his affinity for jabbing her with insults. I assumed he had a crush on her that may have provoked him to join the GSA as an ally.

Leo

Leo was 15-years-old, and self-identified as white or Hispanic and Mexican boy, and as a straight ally. He elaborated, “I’m straight, but kind of open about it, like if I would have a gay or bisexual experience, I don’t think I’d necessarily mind it or anything, but more or less, I consider myself straight.” Leo only attended 2 GSA meetings in the spring of 2013, as Celeste encouraged him to participate in my study. He was highly invested in his new venture developing a video game with people all over the world. He had created a network of young people interested in his concept, and together they were working to launch this game. In our interview, Leo appeared in khaki pants with a buttoned down shirt and neck tie, complete with a blue blazer. He told me that he was just at a meeting with his friends at Park who were collaborating on his video game. He seemed deeply comfortable with himself, and spoke with highly sophisticated vocabulary in a tone that reminded me of a salesman trying really hard to sell me something I kept declining. When I asked Leo why he joined the GSA, he responded, “I believe everyone has their own choices in life, and I think they shouldn’t be discriminated against for being who they are, really.”

Betsy
Straight allies in the Park GSA included both teacher-sponsors and student participants. Betsy, one of the teacher-sponsors of the GSA at Park was the sponsor of the club since its establishment in the 90’s. Although I did not interview teacher-sponsors, they were still significant actors in the daily process of the GSA meetings I observed each week.

During both years I attended GSA meetings at Park, Betsy often shared her story of starting the GSA, and about being a straight ally. At meetings, she recalled her first years with the club:

Back then, it was dangerous to be gay, but people were proud to identify as gay and come to meetings. People would walk into our meetings and throw rocks at us or stand outside and throw rocks at the windows.

Betsy’s interest in theater led her to becoming an ally. She was deeply passionate about acting and admitted, “When you’re in theater, you meet a lot of gay people.” At one meeting, she told students that she believed there was a “creative gene connected with theater and being gay.” Betsy shared with students an experience of a very close male friend who was in a long term relationship with a man who had AIDS, and when his partner died, her friend had no rights. According to Betsy, “The family didn’t even acknowledge their relationship!” Betsy’s experience with her friend and the death of his partner strongly influenced her decision to sponsor the GSA at Park despite the stigma of participating in the Gay Rights Movement as a straight person in the 90’s. Betsy often recalled receiving threats against her life on her answering machine when she first ran GSA meetings. Betsy’s journey to becoming a straight ally to the LGBTQQ population follows Duigg et al.’s (2010) research exploring the ways in which heterosexual adults become allies. For Duigg et al. (2010), heterosexuals evolve into what they call “sexual minority allies,” because they usually have some sort of awareness of

94
privilege and oppression, as well as a desire for social justice and equality. At several meetings, Betsy identified both of these reasons for becoming an ally because she was angered by her friend’s lack of rights and acknowledgment by his partner’s family upon his partner’s death. In her experience of starting the Park GSA, her choice to become an ally in the 1980’s resulted in threats against her personal safety, but she remained as a GSA sponsor at Park for decades.

Students like Mark and Sean, both openly gay senior boys, told me that Betsy encouraged them both to attend GSA meetings because she believed they had valuable experiences to share with their younger peers. Both boys obliged. Betsy was a genuine friend to her students, and wanted nothing more than to be a person in whom they could trust and confide. As a teacher, she often talked about the two kids at Park who attempted suicide, both of whom were gay, and one of them succeeded. According to Betsy, “I didn’t even know he was gay!” As someone who started the GSA because she wanted to protect children from the violence and abuse they experienced as gay youth, it was obvious that Betsy felt guilt that the student didn’t come to her before he took his own life. She wanted all students to know they could come to the GSA and be safe.

*Constructing the (Straight) Ally*

When the first GSA was established in Massachusetts in 1988, a straight-identified teen, approached her gay teacher seeking support for her plan to start a club where gays and their straight allies could come together to strategize ways to combat homophobia in their private school (Miceli 2005). Members of the current Park GSA related to allies in a similar way, as
straight, or simply not gay or lesbian, which concurs with research done on allies in current GSAs where the discussion of ally participation in the GSA defines them as straight or heterosexual (Fingerhut 2011; Goldstein and Davis 2010; Horne 2008; Miceli 2005; Stotzer 2009; Walls 2010).

Except for Celeste, who was questioning her sexual orientation, all of the self-identified allies I interviewed, and Betsy admitted to being straight. Further, most of my interviewees believed that allies were straight-identifying. Dorian, told me in our interview, “yeah, usually I think people who are allies are heterosexual or they’re like questioning…but they usually are heterosexual, I think.” Breanna, who self-identified as pansexual,2 told me about how she defined allies, “It’s basically when you are not gay or lesbian or whatever, and you understand it’s OK to be that, and it’s perfectly normal, and just like you, and that’s fine.” For Breanna, whom I did not ask how she perceived allies in terms of sexual orientation, but when I asked her how she defined an ally, immediately connoted them with not being gay or lesbian. Similarly, Johnny told me about a teacher in the school in whom he felt comfortable confiding. He identified her as an ally, and when I asked how he knew she was an ally, he answered, “Because she’s married to a man.” Johnny’s teacher was supportive of him, and his assumption of her ally status rested on the premise that she was in a heterosexual relationship, thus she was an ally because she was not gay. Alex, a girl who self-identified as bisexual, and who was also the vice president of the GSA had a more complex understanding of ally sexualities. When I asked her if she assumed allies were straight, she replied, “probably not. I mean, I’m sure there’s trans[gender] people who consider themselves straight, like a man is born as a woman, but he

---

2 In terms of sexual identities, pansexuality refers to love and/or sexual attraction to all gender and sexual identities. Breanna identified as pansexual because she “does not consider a person’s sex or gender” when pursuing a romantic relationship.
himself identifies as straight. So he would just be a straight ally, you know?” Alex’s understanding of ally identities also considered gender presentation, and the often misunderstood and understudied lives of today’s transgender youth. Both of the transgender youth I observed in the Park GSA were boys who dressed in drag and self-identified as both gay and transgender, but never as allies. Although Alex’s thinking speaks to the call by many researchers for a better understanding of transgender identities, in the Park GSA, allies were almost always straight, or at the very least embodied some heterosexual, thus privileged identity.

Interestingly, straight allies and Celeste, who was questioning and considered entering a straight relationship, did not identify allies as being straight. During one of the GSA meetings, I asked students what it means to be an ally, to which Celeste responded, “It should be implied that you’re an ally.” For Celeste, an ally could embody any sexual orientation. Similarly, in our interviews, when I asked each of the straight allies how they defined being an ally, absent from each of their definitions was the recognition of a straight sexual orientation. This speaks to the invisibility of privileged identities (Bourdieu 2001; Connell 1995; Kehily 2000; McIntosh 1988; Rich 1980; Richardson 1996) where those who inhabit positions of power, like being a straight white male, but specifically straight in this context, rarely, if ever, acknowledge their position of power in the social hierarchy of privilege. Contrary, LGBTQQ students, who are a part of a marginalized social minority group, were clearly aware of the position of allies as straight-identifying peers.

“It’s an ‘everyone problem’!": The Compulsory Alliance in the Park GSA
Adrienne Rich in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” argues for the deeper examination of compulsory heterosexuality, challenging social scientists to rethink the ways in which they too construct and assume heterosexuality as a taken-for-granted norm (1980). Rich brings to light the limits to the practice of “tokenism” where scholars who claim to subscribe to diversity are indeed overlooking characteristics of power within relational structures, when they believe that publishing a few works on lesbian lives is sufficient to create a comprehensive narrative of those lived experiences (1980). Rather, Rich charges those with the power to advance social thought to critically analyze and move toward dismantling that hierarchy that serves to silence and disenfranchise those who deviate from a static heterosexual identity (1980). The Park GSA constructs allies similarly to Rich’s concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” in that they overlooked and failed to examine the power and privilege that straight allies embodied, while enabling and even encouraging allies to sustain that power.

Pro-ally students and teacher-sponsors, both LGBTQQ and straight-identifying, usually situated the meaning of ‘ally’ within a context of power, in that for them, allies were essential for the strength of the group if it were to affect any social change in the way of equality and eradicating homophobia and transphobia. I uncovered these meanings in my observations at GSA meetings, in my informal conversations with students at the meetings, and in my one-on-one interviews. In my field work, I found that the relationships between allies and their LGBTQQ peers are much more layered than previously acknowledged in research on GSAs.

In the Fall of 2012, during one of the GSA meetings, after the presidents concluded that there was a lack of planning on their part to bring any content for discussion, thus time to hang out, eat lunch, and chat with friends, I informally asked the students, as a whole group, why GSAs had allies in their clubs and what it actually means to be an ally. I found on that day that
anyone who volunteered to answer my questions validated the need for allies to participate in the GSA. I asked the club members if the group should be a Gay-Straight Alliance, or if it should be an LGBTQQ-only space, and Olivia, a straight-identifying ally replied, “It needs to be an alliance. It shouldn’t be like if you’re not LGBT you can’t be in this club.” For Celeste, a self-identified Hispanic and questioning ally, the problem of bullying and discrimination against LGBTQQ youth is “an everyone problem.” Celeste and Olivia felt that allies were at the meetings to support their LGBTQQ friends who might be vulnerable to verbal and physical abuse because of their sexuality. Her argument signaled an understanding that both allies and LGBTQQ youth are responsible for dealing with inequality issues surrounding the LGBTQQ community, and by attending meetings, those peers could also encourage students who did not go to meetings to still support LGBTQQ students at Park.

I shifted the conversation to the meaning of allies in a GSA. For another girl in the meeting that day, being an ally meant, “you are for LGBTQ rights, and you promise not to discriminate.” Romy, a self-identified lesbian defined an ally as someone who is “against hate.” In this conversation, with the 8 students present, during which I sat among them, so as to minimize my social and physical distance as an adult researcher (Mandell 1988), the students who offered answers were highly confident in the role of allies. No uncertainty existed about whether or not allies belonged in the Park GSA. Indeed, they were a necessary part of the group, and nobody openly disagreed in this rare discussion of the significance of allies in the club.

I also explored the construction of allies further in my interviews, and 18 students, both straight and LGBTQQ-identifying framed allies in a positive light and as a necessity for both the Park GSA and for the greater LGBTQQ communities outside of the school. 5 interviewees were critical of allies in some way, whether they accepted allies in the GSA, but wanted to shape some
aspect of the allies’ thinking, or they just preferred a Queer-only space, free of ally attendance. I
discuss this group of students, the ally critics, in the next chapter.

Alexandria, a 17-year-old girl, and the secretary of the GSA who identified as bisexual,
argued for allies as a necessity for the strength of the GSA, and that without them, the
community wouldn’t be big enough. In our interview, Alexandria told me:

I think we need allies to know that there are people in the straight community who
really believe in this and wanna fight for our rights as well. I think it would be
like only admitting black people to the Civil Rights Movement. You had to have
white people there too. You have to have like as big a community as you can get.
There’s so much strength in numbers. I think that would just be really elitist of
the group.

Alexandria’s construction of straight allies reflects much of the work done by researchers who
argue that allies have a considerable amount of power to advance the causes of the LGBTQ
movement in a homophobic society (Cortese 2006; Harbeck 1995; Miceli 2005). Like
Alexandria, scholars and founders of national GSA organizations at least imply that without
straight allies, the LGBTQ movement alone would not have enough strength to succeed in
transforming heterosexist institutions (GLSEN 2013).

Liza’s conceptualization of an ally also connected this role with power. She described
what being an ally meant to her in our interview:

I think an ally means that you’re there for whatever they need. I think you’re
there to be a wall to talk to or to be an advice giver. I think you’re there to protect
them from something that’s hurting them or to encourage them to face their fears
whether it be coming out or um…or facing a relationship that they don’t know
how they feel about it…um basically, I think an ally is just there to be someone’s
friend, and that if they need something, then just like anybody else you’re there
for them.
Liza’s construction of the ally is one that takes on a protective role, reinforcing the ally as a person with the power to offer advice, defend and support a peer in a sexual minority group from bullying or from the challenges of coming to one’s own identity, even though she herself had never experienced any of those tribulations with her own heterosexuality.

According to Dorian, the president of the GSA in 2012-2013, and a self-identified lesbian:

[Allies] like, are helpful people. They’re people who are gonna be understanding. Like if you think about World War II or something, you think about our allies; that they’re people we’re fighting with and not against…I think their role is to support decisions that we make to make strides to get more like, rights and equality

For Dorian, allies in the GSA are similar to allies fighting in a war, which is significant in that she situates allies within a context of necessity and heroism. The larger discourse of war history in the United States constructs allies as necessary to the success of winning against an enemy. For example, defeating Nazi Germany is rarely discussed without some inclusion of European and American “allies” joining forces to rid the world from Hitler and his accomplices who perpetrated mass genocide against the Jews. Dorian’s reference is indeed, World War II, thus arguing for both the necessity for and power of allies, to work, within her GSA, together against homophobic peers and violence, outside of her club.

I asked Holden, a straight-identified ally and freshman boy, what it meant to him to be an ally and he replied:

Well…um…for instance, this is something I’ve never encountered, but if a gay kid was getting bullied on, I would stand up for him…um…you know, like I…I went to a gay pride rally at the capitol a while ago with friends, you know just trying to get the laws passed to start gay marriage.
Holden identified with his ally participation in a powerful and political way. He believed he had the power to stand up to someone who was bullying a “gay kid,” and that he was an ally by participating in a political rally supporting gay marriage. Holden’s ally identity is similar to the allies in current research (See Miceli 2005, Stotzer 2009, and Duigg et al. 2010), where being an ally includes some active political involvement in what the ally him or herself has defined as lobbying against a specific social injustice. Holden told me it was important for straight people to join GSAs and also went further to elaborate on the power of and necessity for allies when I asked him why he felt that responsibility: “It’s an important civil rights issue that goes for everyone. And like, it can’t just be gays advocating for their own rights; it has to be everyone.” I then asked him why he felt that way, to which he responded, “because nothing ever gets done unless you have majority, and right now, I’m pretty sure the gay population at Park is not the majority, and so we need more people to be involved in at least passing stuff that will be beneficial.” For Holden, a straight ally, LGBTQQ students were powerless, to some degree, without straight allies. In Holden’s view, laws, like gay marriage would not be passed without straight allies supporting them. An LGBTQQ-only student movement at Park would have too few students to make progress toward social equality.

I asked Breanna, a self-identified pansexual if she thought it was important to have straight allies in the GSA:

It’s certainly a nice thing to have…cause I mean it wouldn’t exactly be very powerful if it were just a bunch of lesbian and gay people…and no one was actually listening to them except to what other lesbians and gay people say. It’s definitely important to have people who are not that so they know what’s going on.
For Breanna, a girl who was very public and confident about her sexual identity, straight ally participation in her community meant that more people would listen to her needs if straight people supported her. Breanna, who was 14 when I interviewed her, revealed to me that she’s very loud, and that she liked to think that she’s funny. My observations of Breanna corroborated her self-description. She was a tall girl who often wore her hair in what the students called a “faux-hawk” style, where all of her hair was gelled together in one row that ran from the top to the bottom of her head. She seemed to have a lot of friends, and whenever Breanna was with friends, boisterous laughter ensued. Breanna told me that she felt like she was ahead of most kids her age in that she believed in more progressive ideas about racism and homophobia, because she wasn’t “really a sheltered kid.” She credited her parents with “showing [her] what the world is like for real.” Breanna was a very mature 14-year-old. Yet, despite all of Breanna’s measurable confidence, her understanding of allies revealed a belief that her own voice didn’t carry enough power to affect social change for her LGBTQ peers. Without straight allies, fewer people would listen to her.

Breanna was not the only LGBTQ-identifying student who felt like she needed allies to progress toward social equality. Lucas, an 18-year-old boy who self-identified as gay, and who was also the co-president of the GSA with Dorian, told me why allies are important to the GSA.

I think allies are one of the biggest main strongholds of the club because without allies, I guess you wouldn’t have this sort of difference. You wouldn’t have that feeling of like different people coming together just because allies are so proud of like...I guess we shouldn’t really like discriminate kind of...because I guess people tend to forget that straight people are like gay people just that they are like a certain gender...and that’s the only thing that separates us, and when we all come together, that’s the only thing that separates us is who we love. We’re all regular people. And straight people...they...I feel like without their support, then other people won’t necessarily understand how some straight people could react to gay people, and because of allies [in] other states, we have gay marriage and
more quality rights. But that’s how I feel straight people are a big part of the gay community.

Sociologist Jane Ward (2008a), is critical of this “normalization of difference” which Lucas employs when considering the relational elements that exist between straight allies and his LGBTQQ peers. Ward argues that oppressed groups who form coalitions in the interest of diversity often work to normalize oppressed identities to conform to the interests of the privileged majority (2008). In other words, in the recent emphasis on diversity and equality in institutions like corporations and schools, people who embody marginalized identities within sexual, racial, gendered, and class minority categories, may lose their uniquely deviant identities to those who co-opt those identities for the sake of presenting an affinity for diversity in the interest of looking inclusionary. This normalization of difference indeed, allows those with privilege to maintain that power (2008).

Callie also believed that allies were significant to the GSA:

I think they are an essential part of like understanding outside of the LGBT community. As harsh as it seems, people seem to listen to them more than they seem to listen to members of the LGBT community, just because of stereotypes and stuff, but I think it’s definitely an asset to have allies and people to support the community.

I asked Callie what makes her think people listen to allies more:

I spent a lot of time on the internet. It just seems that whenever an ally or somebody makes a post, it just seems that stereotypically they’re more like…people just hear them out because as horrible as it sounds, in the eyes of the people that like…they are normal to those people.
Callie spoke to the privilege of allies in that straight ally voices were more powerful than those of LGBTQQ youth because straight people are viewed as more normal, thus more credible than LGBTQQ young people. Callie shared with me that she noticed straight kids participating in online social networking sites and blogs originally claimed as queer spaces. To Callie, when straight kids joined LGBTQQ youth spaces online, their voices commanded a following and overshadowed those who were not straight-identifying.

Callie’s experience with straight kids in online sites where large numbers of LGBTQQ-identifying youth frequent, speaks to the complex relationships that she and her peers have with straight allies. On one hand, Callie sees and can identify this power, which is taken from her, yet she feels she can only harness that power if it is expressed through the words and actions of a straight ally. Her words are no longer a symbol of her strength because she is silenced in these settings, and those words are coopted by straight and privileged kids telling her story, over which, she has limited, if any control.

Like Callie, Johnny constructed allies within similar contexts of power. He told me, “An ally to me is someone who supports you, who is there for you whenever you need them.” Johnny favored getting advice from his straight ally friends when his gay friends aren’t answering their phones or texts. To him advice from his straight friends is usually more “appropriate”:

Like the last problem I talked to one of my gay friends about it and asked for advice and it was about just how to talk to more straight guys and be more outgoing to them and show them that, and how can I get them to just be an ally and stop hating on the gay community…and he told me not to talk to them and stuff and it’s gonna be bad for me. That’s when I decided to talk to one of my straight friends and ask him for advice and he told me to just talk to them and be myself and tell them that you’re not there to flirt with them, but to make friends with them and show them that not all gay people are the same.
Johnny valued his straight friend’s opinion over that of his gay friends, but the language the straight boy used to give advice encouraged Johny to defend himself first and to convince other straight boys, by going out of his way, that he was like them. For Johnny to make friends with homophobic straight boys, his only option was to give up portions of his identity that emphasized difference and instead, assert his sameness with heterosexuality. According to Jane Ward, this “normalization of difference” encourages those in marginalized groups to give up their identities for the sake of progressing toward social equality in a heteronormative society (2008a). Contrary, Johnny’s gay friends wanted him to disassociate himself from hateful people. I expand on this discussion in the next two chapters.

Johnny’s experience illuminates the power that straight allies carry—that they are the most direct pathway to acceptance by the straight community. Johnny’s gay friends felt that he didn’t need to convince anyone to stop “hating on gay people.” For them, it wasn’t his responsibility to convince them. But, Johnny believed that his straight friends would show him how to negotiate with homophobic straight boys. Indeed, the advice was delivered in such a way that Johnny had to identify all the ways he’s not gay, nor a part of the gay community, thus marginalizing his own identity.

Each of my pro-ally research participants constructed allies in such a way that they were necessary for the GSA to survive, yet none of them acknowledged the connection between straight privilege and the power that straight allies carried.

**Ally Week**

GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, a national organization conducts regular research on school climate and LGBTQ student safety in schools and emphasizes the
necessity of ally support in advancing the organization’s goals of a safe school environment for every student. GLSEN publishes its research findings on its website, and compiles a myriad of materials designed to enlighten educators and students on how they can affect social change in light of pervasive homophobia. One of the ways that GLSEN creates awareness of importance of allies is by promoting a yearly “Ally Week.” According to the GLSEN website, the purpose of ally week is to “ensure that all allies understand the important role they play in making schools safer for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression” (GLSEN 2013). At a meeting in January, 2013, Dorian reminded her club participants that Ally Week was approaching the following week. Betsy asked Dorian and the group what they could do to participate in Ally Week. Dorian responded to Betsy, “Thank allies, I guess…” Then, Dorian’s tone changed from a quietly answering voice to a louder, commanding tone directed at her peers. “If you don’t thank at least once person, I will be disappointed!” Lucas added, “Unless you’re an ally…then you can pat yourselves on the back.” Betsy concluded, “Please remember to thank our allies! We get our power from our allies!” In this particular meeting, both Betsy and the co-presidents reinforced ally power by demanding the obligatory “thank you” from the LGBTQQ community and by permitting the right to commend oneself for being an ally. In this sense, GSA participants who did not identify as straight were expected to acknowledge and be grateful for the power of allies. In other words, they were being reminded that they should never assume they had a right to ally support. Rather, they had to empower allies further, so that they wouldn’t stop supporting the LGBTQQ students.

The discussion of Ally Week in the Park GSA served to remind participants that allies embodied a significant amount of power, for which marginalized youth should be grateful. This reminder worked to entrench heterosexual privilege by identifying it as essential to the
advancement of social equality for LGBTQQ youth, rather than understanding this power as an oppressive agent in social hierarchies. I argue that this overemphasis of power further contributed to the compulsory alliance within the GSA, and did so by failing to examine the ways in which this same power contributes to relations of inequality, thus solidifying its invisibility.

The (In)Visible Allies in the Park GSA

Several social scientists and theorists have unpacked the significance of heterosexual privilege (Duhigg 2010; Ingraham 1996; McIntosh 1988; Richardson 1996; Rochlin 1985), as it manifests in our heteronormative society, where heterosexuality sits at the forefront of most social interactions, yet we take it for granted, thus leaving it unexamined. One of the ways in which heterosexual privilege functions in our society is through its invisibility. It is what Ingraham (1996), conceptualizes as the heterosexual imaginary. According to Ingraham, the heterosexual imaginary is, “that way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution” (169). Herein, I argue that the Park GSA functioned within this heterosexual imaginary, by placing such an emphasis on and acceptance of straight ally participation while failing to acknowledge their privilege as part of the larger hierarchy of oppression. By never addressing the role of an ally and allowing allies open and unconditional access to all GSA activities, allies and their heterosexual privilege maintained their invisibility.
One of the ways in which allies were invisible was in their entitlement to hear the stories of LGBTQQ youth and their experiences navigating a homophobic society. During one meeting, members were invited to tell their “coming out” stories, in which they recall and share the moment when they publicly acknowledged their sexual orientation as not straight by coming out of the “closet.” Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick (2009) argues that the closet is, “a defining structure for gay oppression in this century” (71). The closet is a place that reinforces the heterosexual/homosexual and in/out binaries, symbolizing the structures that neglect and oppress the identities of those who do not embody strict heterosexuality. For some youth in the Park GSA, their coming-out-stories were times of celebration, while for others, publicly acknowledging a non-heterosexual identity is both heartbreaking and humiliating.

Kristy, a self-identified lesbian, who was a freshman at Park, shared her experience with the group: “In 5th grade, 9 girls beat the shit out of me. I was doing everything to destroy my life. I told my mom, and she told me that she was also a lesbian. I told my Dad, and he said, ‘Fuck You!’ I don’t see him anymore.” While LGBTQQ students were invited to share their stories only if they felt comfortable, straight allies were always present at these personal sharing times. The teacher-sponsors, like Mr. Cruz, promoted the sharing of coming out stories as a way for LGBTQQ youth to not feel alone in their experiences. Particularly, for those who were still private about their sexuality, the sharing of coming out stories was an opportunity for LGBTQQ peers to feel some solidarity with those who had already experienced the anxiety of sharing their identities with straight people, but it wasn’t clear why allies were entitled to witness this story telling.

By initiating the ritual of telling coming out stories, Mr. Cruz may have unintentionally contributed to this invisibility of allies. The first occasion I witnessed students sharing their
Mr. Cruz decided to tell his story. “This [coming out in high school] wouldn’t have happened in the 70’s. I didn’t even know what it meant to be gay then. In my 9th grade math class, a boy was sitting in front of me (Mr. Cruz gestures to show the boy’s body position), and I just reached forward and starting rubbing his arm.” Mr. Cruz recalled the boy annoyingly asked him why he touched him like that, and Mr. Cruz said he didn’t know why. He remembered spontaneously touching the boy without a reason he could identify. Mr. Cruz then tells the students, “Know that things are much better for you...(pauses, contemplating next words). I came out in my late 20s. It took me a while to tell myself [I was gay]. I thought, ‘only 10% of the population is gay; I’m not that special.’ I told myself, ‘Every gay guy is good looking, and I’m not.’ The first time I went into a gay par and saw normal people, it was shocking! Mr. Cruz then ruminates on the title of his partner, with whom he shares a home. He says, ‘‘Boyfriend’ feels temporary. ‘Partner’ is OK...When he makes me mad, I call him my husband.” The students and Mr. Cruz giggle. He then graciously thanks the students for sharing their coming out stories (field notes, 1/30/12).

After that meeting, at which students shared their coming out stories, I walked out of the classroom with Mr. Cruz, and he quietly commented, “I’m glad you were here to hear their stories. I just feel so bad for them. Their stories brought tears to my eyes.” Mr. Cruz’s comment to me was reassuring that I had gained some rapport as a researcher in his space. At that particular meeting, only a few students attended, and Dorian, Narscia, Alexandria, Rose, and Yvonne shared their stories. Narscia had a positive experience with her families accepting her bisexual identity, although she admitted to experiencing bullying in middle school when she was publicly denigrated for what she labeled as “making out” with her best girlfriend.

The GSA ritual of telling coming out stories becomes problematic because we can interpret their practice as praising those who do, and admonishing those who don’t (Hackford-Peer 2010). According to Hackford-Peer, discourses of safety in GSAs tend to highlight young
people as victims or activists, which consequently, denies the intersection of complex identities (2010). Hackford-Peer states, “These discourses imply that being out, or being visible in our queerness is and should be the goal of all queer people, students included. However, this denies the power that the epistemology of the closet (Sedwick 1995), has over all queer (and non-queer) lives. It also allows us as queers to exalt the brave queers who do come out of the closet and simultaneously diminish those who do not” (550). In the context of the high school GSA, I conclude that the sharing of coming out stories should be qualified, and perhaps eliminated altogether because straight students are not apprised of the significance of the closet, and because of this celebration/admonishment dichotomy suggested by Hackford-Peer. Although I did not ask students about their thoughts on telling coming out stories in meetings specifically, the practice itself could also alienate those young people who do not have supportive parents as they witness the stories of those who do experience full acceptance at home. Clearly, the sharing of coming out stories warrants a deeper discussion in GSA meetings. Because straight ally roles and responsibilities were never discussed in the meetings, narratives of coming out of the closet gave straight youth open access to private lives, a privilege that the straight community typically employs over marginalized groups because their lower status on the sexualities hierarchy renders their lives open for public consumption.

Martin Rochlin’s “Heterosexual Questionnaire” leads the reader through a series of questions that LGBTQQ-identifying people face regularly, but instead of questioning gays and lesbians, he turns them into a questionnaire for heterosexuals, and asks “When and how did you first decide you were heterosexual?” (1985). By inviting LGBTQQ youth to share their coming out stories, but not discussing their significance with straight allies, nor inviting allies to tell about the time they had to publicly declare they were straight, which of course they’ve never had
to do, but nonetheless should be aware, straight ally privilege remained invisible. This is not to say that sharing coming out stories in a queer friendly space should not happen at all. Rather, I am arguing that allies need to be charged with recognizing their privilege and the role that privilege plays in the discourse of the closet before they are allowed free access to these stories.

Recall in my introduction, where Sadie participated in Coming Out Day, and was confused by the reaction from her teachers, who, she presumed, were associating her with being gay rather than commending her for supporting her LGBTQ peers. She expected her teachers to show some appreciation for her participation as an ally and feared that they would associate her with being gay. Sadie’s concern relates to what Goldstein and Davis label, “stigma by association” where they find that most straight allies express anxiety that other straight people will assume they’re gay if they participate in LGBTQ organizations (2010). Despite the significance of Coming Out Day for her LGBTQ peers, Sadie’s focus turned from pride for supporting the GSA to disenchantment with her role as an ally. A deeper understanding of privilege may have provided more context in which Sadie could situate her own thoughts about being a straight ally on Coming Out Day.

Sadie’s experience during Coming Out Day speaks to the relative invisibility of allies. On the one hand, she showed up to the table with an open invitation from the GSA leadership, as all GSA participants were expected to participate, and declared that she was an “ally” in wearing her labeled sticker. That did give her some visibility as a supporter of the Park GSA for the day. On the other hand, Sadie had little understanding of her role as an ally, or at the least she did not anticipate the scrutiny she received, and neither she, nor anybody in the GSA took the time to explore her ally identity beyond her desire for appreciation. In sharing, with me, her discomfort about her perceptions of teacher responses to her, which she did not discuss publically in any
meetings, Sadie missed her connection to Coming Out Day: that of an ally who had the privilege of being heterosexual and therefore, never having to “come out of the closet.”

Rochlin’s “Heterosexual Questionnaire” also relates to Sadie’s experience in that as a straight-identifying girl, she never had to consider what it would be like to publicly declare her straightness. Straight people often take for granted their ability to navigate the social world free from declaring and labeling their sexual identity for public consumption. In Sadie’s declaration on Coming Out Day, she felt uncomfortable; afraid she was considered gay because she was “coming out” as an ally. Straight people don’t have to “come out” of the closet, and in the Park GSA, they weren’t responsible for understanding the significance of such an act.

In fact, the straight allies in the Park GSA lacked minimal understanding of the history of LGBTQQ violence like Stonewall, and the murders of Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard. At one meeting, Mr. Cruz asked students if they had heard of the Stonewall Inn. In June, 1969, a popular gay bar in Greenwich Village in New York City was raided by police, and although invasions were common practices against spaces in which gays, lesbians, and transgender people claimed for their own, during this particular event bar patrons resisted and protested against the police. Riots ensued, and continued for several days, thus the Stonewall Inn Uprising has since been revered as a significant provocation and symbol of the Gay Liberation Movement. According to Engel (2002), “This event is so crucial because it signifies the emergence of group action among a previously docile, invisible, and seemingly powerless minority” (379). Before Stonewall, small groups of gays and lesbians joined forces to push for social equality and to

3 Brandon Teena was a transgender young man who was brutally raped and murdered in Nebraska in 1993 after his transgender identity became public. Matthew Shepard was a young gay man who was severely beaten in 1998 by 2 men who tied him to a fence and left him to die. He died 5 days later. Both of these stories are significant to the LGBTQQ movement in that they reveal the pervasive hate and violence perpetrated against those who do not conform to hegemonic notions of gender and sexual identity.
pressure the medical establishments to remove homosexuality as a specific disease, yet these smaller groups of activists gained little ground, because the power of the medical community and the invisibility of gays and lesbians in powerful political positions translated to a distrust of out gays and lesbians among gays and lesbians who weren’t public about their sexual identities (2002). After Stonewall, the visibility of gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals willing to fight against their oppressors encouraged others to join them in a grander social movement (2002).

Dorian, the club’s vocal and assertive president and a self-identified lesbian gave some historical context, specifically telling her peers and Mr. Cruz that riots occurred to protest the police raids at the Stonewall Inn in New York City when police officers stormed the gay space in 1969. Mr. Cruz filled in some of Dorian’s gaps but asked students to come back with more research and he would give away the too small t-shirt, he purchased for his partner, to the student who came prepared with the most comprehensive information of the events at Stonewall. The next week, Celeste brought in several research notes on Stonewall, but it was clear that everybody else forgot about the assignment. Mr. Cruz gave Celeste the Stonewall t-shirt.

Mr. Cruz’s emphasis on the events at the Stonewall Inn, and the lack of awareness by straight allies demonstrated a limited comprehension of the historical events that highlight the institutionalized oppression and violence against LGBTQ people. As straight allies who claim to support LGBTQ youth, their reluctance to learn the histories of the Gay and Lesbian movements signaled their contentment with remaining blind to their own privilege.

Betsy was unique as a straight (adult) ally in that she understood the significance of supporting the gay and lesbian community since she was a young women who witnessed hatred
and discrimination against her gay friend. Betsy’s experience in the GSA over the past several years revealed a generational gap between students who identify as allies now, and those in Betsy’s generation of allies in the GSA. For students who participate in the Park GSA today, although this cannot be said in other geographic regions of our country where levels of bullying against LGBTQQ youth are substantially greater and more dangerous, being an ally at Park doesn’t come with the same past experiences that are similar to Betsy’s. None of the allies shared any experiences of threats against their life as Betsy received, and none of the allies expressed fear that their safety was in danger if they attended a GSA meeting.

During my attendance at Park’s GSA meetings, allies were often some of the most vocal of the group’s members. They consistently sat down toward the front of the room, usually in the front row, and seemed to have little hesitancy when offering advice or thoughts on particular topics about LGBTQQ youth or suggestions for the group’s future activities. This is not to say that the group’s student leaders, Alex, Dorian, and Lucas, and the teacher sponsors, Betsy and Mr. Cruz weren’t active and assertive participants, but that it is important to note that straight allies assumed an indistinctive role amongst the rest of the club members: visible with their presence, but invisible in their identity and privilege.

Discussion

In the Park GSA, well-intentioned straight youth participated in a space where their unearned heterosexual privilege remained invisible in a space originally created to combat homophobia, which is structured by that very privilege. The construction of allies in the GSA revealed a pervasive and unquestioned power grounded in the heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham
By unconditionally including allies and by not discussing the role of a straight ally in a GSA, nor their unearned heterosexual privilege, the GSA neglected to dismantle the taken-for-granted power that these allies embodied. I explore the issue of straight allies being a gendered identity, where straight girls outnumber straight boys as allies, in chapter 7, but in this chapter, I unpacked what allies mean to “pro-ally” students and teacher-sponsors of the GSA. This construction of allies creates what I conceptualize as the “compulsory alliance,” where allies are essentialized, and their privilege left invisible and unexamined.

The ways in which GSA participants discuss and identify straight allies situated these young people in such a way that they are only seeing oppression in the public sharing of the violent or rejection experiences of their LGBTQQ peers, which distances straight youth from their own privilege, and objectifies the “other” non-heterosexual peer. These sharing times did not challenge straight allies to deconstruct the consequences of their own heterosexual privilege. Jane Ward and Beth Schneider (2009) argue that studies about heteronormative practices need to look beyond uncovering only those who are marginalized, like LGBTQQ community members, and instead need to look at the structures of oppression themselves. In the Park GSA, coming out of the closet narratives functioned as identifying marginalized youth, but not as a way of analyzing oppressive social processes that originally created and continually maintain that closet. Straight allies presented themselves as supporters, friends, and advice givers, yet they were missing the opportunity to look beyond their own ideas about being an ally to reflect on their privilege. Researchers and theorists (Butler 1999; Renold 2004; Ward 2008a), suggest that measuring social inequality by looking only at the marginalized Other, often leads to a taken-for-grantedness of the structures that create such oppression. I argue that the GSA at Park was
indeed a space where straight allies were free from the challenge of linking their own subscriptions to the powers of heteronormativity with the stories shared by their LGBTQ peers.

At GSA meetings, not only were straight allies entitled to hear the coming out stories of LGBTQ youth, but they were invited to participate in all GSA sponsored activities, and to provide advice to those students who had experienced violence, ostracism, or dismissal by fellow students, friends, or family members. Perhaps no other experience illustrated this complex relationship between straight ally privilege and LGBTQ oppression than Kate’s story. During one meeting at the beginning of the second school year in which I was at Park, Kate, a freshman girl who self-identified as lesbian, shared her story about running along the trail outside of the school as a gym class requirement on Halloween the previous week. She was “jumped” by 2 ROTC boys who were also sharing the same trail for their physical education class. Kate told the GSA that one boy was holding her down calling her a faggot as the other put a lighter in her face. The room was strikingly silent, which wasn’t always the case because some students could not refrain from chatting during their free lunch period. Clearly, Kate, visibly shaking as she told her story, believed that the GSA was a safe space in which she could tell her story, or she would not have been able to reveal such an experience. While Kate’s experience was the only narrative of physical violence against an LGBTQ student that I heard while at Park, students often came forward in the GSA to share their struggles with disapproving family members, and incidents of verbal harassment by outside peers. As Kate told her story, Betsy asked her if she had told anyone, and Kate replied that she did inform her gym teacher who promised to bring it to one of the deans. However, Kate hadn’t received a report back speaking to any disciplinary actions against the two boys about the assault, which was by then five days before she told her story at this GSA meeting. Betsy, Lucas, one of the GSA student presidents, and Mr. Cruz advised Kate
to go to a different dean. Betsy’s voice was audibly louder and her body language conveyed agitation at the apparent indifference of the school administration. Betsy urged Kate to be more persistent with finding someone who will listen, telling Kate, “You need to make a bigger stink!” Liza added, “You need to be involved,” concurring with Betsy’s charge to fight harder for herself. Lucas told Kate that her experience “bordered a hate crime.” After that meeting, I never saw Kate again in the GSA.

Kate’s experience in the GSA was troubling because at least two straight allies pressured her to be stronger, to find someone else who had authority to punish the two ROTC boys who assaulted her, and targeted her sexuality. I could see the stress in Kate’s face, and hear the softening of her nervous voice as her straight allies were only telling her what to do, yet they never followed through with defending her or supporting her through the school administration. Liza and Betsy’s assertions to Kate reflect what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva conceptualizes in racism as the “abstract liberal” (2006). According to Bonilla-Silva, colorblind racism occurs when whites often contend that they are not racists, because they don’t support discrimination, yet they embody what he identifies as abstract liberalism (2006). In abstract liberalism, whites believe in individualism and that social policies should not be forced on people. Thus racial minority groups are not “getting ahead” because they are individuals who are not making good choices, and we shouldn’t force people to hire blacks over whites. Abstract liberalism is a way for whites to appear moral and just while still skirting from responsibility to promote change and equality. In Kate’s sharing of her violent experience in which she was assaulted by 2 boys, I argue that Liza and Betsy, in addition to the other straight allies present that day, took an abstract liberal stance on a homophobic act. On one hand, they agreed that the actions perpetrated against Kate were unacceptable, but on the other, they released themselves from the
responsibility of taking any action to promote discipline of the two boys. Consequently, they left Kate with the individual responsibility of remedying her situation. Betsy and Liza’s choice speaks to the tensions between those in the privileged majority group and those who are subordinated.

As my fieldwork continued, I asked Lucas, who himself was an ROTC student leader, if he knew of any outcomes in Kate’s case, and he acknowledged that nobody ever talked about it, nor could he identify the perpetrators. Kate’s experience with sharing her story in the GSA revealed a contradiction in the construction of allies. Although participants consistently revered allies as supporters and protectors of LGBTQQ youth, on this day, no ally utilized that power to support Kate as an ally outside of the GSA, and nor did they hesitate to advise Kate, from a position of power, on what she was supposed to do despite never being vulnerable themselves to an attack based on their own sexuality. Kate obviously sought out the GSA meeting as a safe space to share her story, but I can only speculate that the overpowering advice of the allies may have tainted that space for her.

The construction of allies in the Park GSA revealed the maintenance of heterosexual privilege where straight allies were virtually invisible, and their privilege unexamined. I’ve argued that this compulsion to include allies in a space that prided itself on being an LGBTQQ space is problematic in that it does not challenge the structures that originally created the necessity for such safe spaces. Ally participation and their unfettered presence in the meetings and activities consequently stifled a richer dialogue of sexually marginalized identities and criticisms of heterosexism that marginalizes non-normative sexualities. As we will see in the next chapter, not all GSA participants desired the unconditional presence of straight allies, and there, I explore those who criticized ally participation.
Chapter Six

“It’s like a puppy or a trench coat”: Ally Critics, Othering, and Sameness in the Park GSA

An ally is someone who supports...you know, gay rights and stuff. However, I think a large majority of straight allies are sort of, maybe...not doing it right, as many allies do...Like, maybe male feminists for example, or white people against racism and stuff. You can’t quite understand it always, so you end up making mistakes. Um...a lot of the time, for example, maybe I’ll see a straight person sort of like being really open into gay things like everything’s gay, happy awesome, and in the process they might be fetishizing gay people, I guess...or want gay friends, or something like that, I guess (Fairchild, 16, Queer-identified)

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the ally discourse surrounding Gay-Straight Alliances constructs straight allies as a positive and essential contribution to these youth organizations (Harbeck 1995; Miceli 2005; Stotzer 2009; Walls 2010), and indeed, most of the youth and the GSA teacher-sponsors echoed that sentiment in my study. Yet, while most GSA student participants I interviewed felt that allies were necessary members of the GSA and contributed to the strength of the club, I discovered a spectrum of GSA participant opinions on which some students articulated a measurable level of criticism of straight allies. It was a continuum on which LGBTQQ youths culled practices of objectifying the “other” from ally behaviors. In this chapter, I conceptualize what I call the “ally critic discourse.” I complicate the construction of straight allies, and I argue that the ally critics simultaneously identify their
othering through the actions of straight allies and reveal the consequences of current practices of mainstreaming sexually marginalized identities by encouraging their conformity with heteronormative values. I also take the position that ally critics illuminate the decentering of LGBTQQ identities in the GSA through an emphasis of normalizing difference (Ward 2008a). Not all ally critics wanted straight allies expelled from the GSA, but their thoughts reveal tensions and a developed awareness of straight privilege in their thinking about the roles of straight allies, and thus, I consider them ally critics.

In our interviews, 4 students straddled the spectrum of ally inclusions, and told me that they did not think the GSA absolutely needed allies, but allies weren’t harming, or disrupting the club by participating. Lily and Mark were 2 of these students. In our interview, Lily told me, “I feel like you don’t have to [have allies], but it definitely helps you out because if you get into a conflict, they can back you up or give you advice to help you with whatever you’re going through.” Mark carried a level of indifference to allies: “I don’t think they’re absolutely necessary, but I don’t see any negative effect of them being there.” Similarly, Celeste saw allies as a temporary fixture in the GSA, as part of the transition toward social equality for LGBTQQ youth:

I don’t think people should need allies, but because there are so many people who hate and don’t support these sexualities, they are needed, but I think that people should be open and aware of it so that it comes to a point where you don’t need allies. That’s what I’m saying, because people who say, I’m not black, but I support you…So now it’s like we’ve moved so far for in like Civil Rights, in terms of race, you can’t just say, ‘Oh, I’m a black ally’ because they don’t really need allies anymore because race is essentially gone, so I think that right now, the gay community does need allies, but I think it should progress to a point where allies aren’t needed.

Although Celeste’s thoughts on race may be misguided in terms of the general condition of racism in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2006), nonetheless, she did believe that the
LGBTQQ community should no longer “need” allies in the near future, and her point of comparison was what she perceived as the experience of the overall, albeit oversimplified, black community. Indeed, the Black Student Alliance and the Latino Student Alliance were both heavily attended clubs at Park, and both were examples of spaces without the obvious inclusion of racially privileged peer allies. Lucas, a Latino student who participated in the leadership team of the Latino Student Alliance confirmed that he had never seen a white student attend a club meeting.

Celeste is unique in this discussion of ally critics in that she identified as an ally, but also as questioning, thus not claiming an exclusively heterosexual identity as most allies in the GSA. Because she was not public about her questioning identity, and only revealed her ally status in GSA meetings, I conclude that most GSA club members believed Celeste was straight given their tendency to define allies as straight. Only Dorian included those who were claiming a “questioning” identity under the ally umbrella, but Dorian also spent significant amounts of her free time learning about LGBTQQ lives and identities on the internet, thus comprehended the concept of a “questioning” sexual identity.

Further away on the spectrum of critical thoughts about allies, stood a small group of students who strongly criticized the necessity of allies, and often abstained from attending or participating in club activities because of the presence of allies. I identify these five students as the ally critics. The ally critics are students who were critical of the motives of allies, may desire an exclusive LGBTQQ or Queer specific student organization, and/or were frequently offended by the behaviors of and comments from allies. In my study, the ally critics were all girls. Five students who identified as lesbian, bisexual, or queer: Alexandria, Dorian, Taylor, Rose, and Fairchild, shared their criticisms about allies with me in our interviews. The voices of these
young people brought to light a powerful sentiment that covertly threaded through the Park GSA. Not everyone in the GSA unconditionally embraced allies into the club; thus, I argue that we need to rethink the ways in which we involve allies in these clubs if we are to fulfill the mission of providing a safe and empowering space for LGBTQQ youth.

The Ally Critics

Rose

I first learned about Rose when she confidently introduced herself as a Pandora Romantic Asexual in the second GSA meeting I attended, in January of 2012. During that meeting, Mr. Cruz asked me if I would introduce myself again. He had arranged for pizza delivery to the meeting with the hope of attracting a larger group of kids. As I sat among the 15 students, which was on the higher end of attendance numbers from January through April of that first year, though slightly off to the side, I stood to tell them that I was a student researcher working toward my Ph.D. in sociology, trying to understand how students in the GSA thought about gender, and that I would eventually like to interview them. During that meeting, I distributed cards that listed my email address and invited students to contact me if they were interested in learning more about my research project, and if they would like to participate. Rose was one of the first students to email me, the same day of that meeting. In her email, she reminded me that she was the “Ace” in the group, and that she would like to do an interview. I responded to her email, asking her for a good time to meet for an interview, but I never received an answer. During that first year, Rose attended meetings very infrequently, often arriving late, and rarely contributed to discussion topics. By the end of the year, I had not seen her in over a month.
In the fall of 2013, I returned to Park, and immediately noticed Rose at the early meetings. She had cut her hair short, and seemed quieter, with less confidence than I noticed last year. After a meeting, as we all exited, I walked out alongside her and asked if she was still willing to do an interview for my research project. She stopped walking, turned toward me, and quietly told me that she wasn’t out to her parents yet. I offered her a consent form, and reassured her that the form did not out her as a participant in the Gay-Straight alliance, and that I would not discuss her interview with her parents. She agreed that she would contact me for an interview, but several months passed before she finally reached out.

At the rare meetings Rose attended, she seemed withdrawn from the group. No longer was she expressing her dry sense of humor as it related to her interpretation of LGBTQQ life, nor sharing her extensive and complex knowledge of LGBTQQ issues. Instead, she sat back quietly, calling no attention to herself. During the first year, I had imagined Rose as one who was going to take a leadership role in the GSA, but as time went on, she seemed disengaged from the club.

In January of 2013, Rose finally added her name to the interview sign-up sheet I distributed in the GSA meeting. She gave me her new email address and was immediately responsive in our email correspondence to schedule and confirm a time and place to meet. She requested that we meet at a different coffee shop, one that was a few further blocks away from the café across the street from the school, at which I usually met students for interviews. She simply preferred this smaller space, as she frequented it after school, and enjoyed its eclectic style and unique coffee and tea offerings. When I arrived for our interview, she was delighted that I complimented her choice of such a fun and unique place for our meeting.
Before we sat down, I offered to buy Rose something to drink, and she ordered some tea. We sat at a narrow high top table on tall stools across from each other. When I first started asking Rose my open-ended questions, her answers were very brief without much, if any, elaboration. I initially interpreted her responding tone as an annoyance with my questions, or me. I couldn’t tell. This was the only interview at which I became concerned that my interviewee might ask to leave early. It was hard to not be distracted by her gum chewing, and by the seemingly condescending tone in her voice. It became apparent, however, that the topics of gender and sexuality were ones about which she had very strong and deeply critical opinions, and I wasn’t the one with whom she was frustrated. She carried an outwardly cynical viewpoint on gender relations in our society, but as our interview progressed, that apparent cynicism was overshadowed by her deeply thoughtful analyses of larger structures of power and privilege. In our interview, she discussed allies and her strong opinions against them in the GSA:

I don’t even know…Why…I don’t…Allies believe that we need them to perpetrate the cause. ‘How else will you poor little people get anywhere in life?’ I don’t really see a need [for allies in the GSA] (rolling her eyes, and obviously annoyed).

Rose’s tone about allies revealed a clear disdain for straight ally participation, which led her to ultimately admit that she simply preferred a Queer-only space where straight youths weren’t invited to participate. For Rose, allies were unnecessary.

**Fairchild**

Fairchild was a 16-year-old junior who described herself as white and reluctantly as queer because she struggled with the limited options for appropriate language describing her sexuality. When I asked her if she had a sexual identity, she replied: “Not really as of yet. I
know I’m not straight.” Fairchild never came to a GSA meeting in the time I was at Park, but had attended a couple of meetings during her freshman year of high school there. She heard about my project from Rose, and reached out to me in an email offering her time to give an interview.

Fairchild was a very quiet girl. In a public coffee shop where the background varied from quiet with interruptions from the grinding espresso machine to boisterous teens patronizing the café after school, it was sometimes difficult to hear her naturally subtle voice. Like Rose, Fairchild was deeply critical of the GSA at Park because it encouraged the attendance and participation of straight allies, but she differed from Rose in that she refused to participate in any aspect of the GSA because of ally attendance. For Fairchild, allies may be supporting gay rights in their own justifiable way, but she translated their participation differently. Fairchild believed that because allies could not understand the experience of LGBTQQ youth, their intentions translated into an objectification of the marginalized youths.

Alexandria

Alexandria was a senior girl at Park who self-identified as mixed native, Hispanic and Caucasian, and bisexual. She attended GSA meetings the entire time I was at the school, and was the vice president during the second year of my research. She wore her hair in long dreadlocks, and worked as a barista at a local coffee shop. She was a vegan, and spent a lot of hours reading about social movements around the world, and was highly critical of politics, possessing a solid awareness of global issues of inequality. She loved art, meditation, playing the Ukulele, and gladly rode her bike all over the city to get anywhere she needed. In our interview, Alexandria told me that she enjoyed participating in “anything that gives [her] a
heightened state of consciousness, and just getting away from society…” She was pretty free-spirited, and involved herself in several social justice clubs at Park. When I asked Alexandria if she was going to college, she told me that she was going, but not for a career: “It’s just to learn all that I can. I don’t wanna pay my bills with my passions. I think it’s a really silly thing that people get themselves into.” Alexandria seemed pretty comfortable in her own skin, and told me that she wanted to just graduate from Park because all of the rich white kids were bothering her. She correlated her annoyances with having a summer job, developing relationships with older friends, and learning about what she called “real life.” In her World Religions class, a classmate called her a “non-conforming bitch,” which offended her, but was a comment she claimed to expect because she wasn’t one to hide her thoughts about her perceptions of society. Alexandria tended to straddle both sides of ally constructionism. In the previous chapter, I shared Alexandria’s thoughts about allies where she analogized the power of straight allies to whites who protested in support of blacks for civil rights. Although Alexandria believed allies should be in the GSA, she revealed her discontent with their ways of participating:

I think their heart’s in the right place. They’re trying to help the LGBTQ+ community, but…a lot of them are just in there to look good. I feel like I’ve talked to a lot of them and they’re just like, ‘Yeah…you know, I like gay people!’ And they talk about like…they talk about like, just how their ideas are so structured in terms of the gender binary, and things like that. I don’t think they’re as open minded as they could be.

Alexandria’s role in the GSA was to shepherd the straight youths through the acquisition of knowledge she hoped they’d gain from being in the GSA and learning about the experiences of

---

4 Alexandria identified the LGBTQQ community as the LGBTQ+ community. She was adamant that sexual identities were excluded in every other acronym utilized to identify what she called a “spectrum” of sexuality, and believed that by adding the “+” to the end of the acronym, less people were excluded.
LGBTQQ youth. She believed that straight allies came to be supportive, but their attendance gave her an opportunity to educate them in ways they did not anticipate.

**Taylor**

Taylor was a junior at Park, who self-identified as Caucasian and as a lesbian. She started coming regularly to GSA meetings after the winter break during the second year of my research. Taylor liked to “doodle,” as she called it, and that was confirmed with the extensive black Sharpie marker drawings on her lower arms. In our interview, Taylor shared:

> I’m really self-comfortable, and I guess I’m not good at censoring myself. If I’m gonna say something, then I’m gonna say something; I don’t hide stuff. Like the fact of my homosexuality is not a hidden thing, but I’m not gonna go around telling the mountains. But, I just like knowing about other people and having them know about me, I guess. I don’t keep a lot of secrets.

Taylor was a confident girl, who didn’t speak much in meetings, but was really open in our interview. She told me, “I’m very feminine; *very* feminine,” and that her friends thought it was strange that she was a lesbian, yet so feminine. Like Alexandria, Taylor felt that allies were a generally positive addition to GSA meetings, but she did share some reservations with me. Her perception of straight allies centered on what she called the “token” gay friend, where straight allies strove to have a gay friend so they could claim a compassionate social status of supporting gay rights. In Taylor’s words:

> Allies are really great because they’re supportive and it’s like this straight person is supporting the gays, and that can be really good, but when they do the token thing, like stereotypical…allies really just want to be the friend and be like, ‘Yeah! Great! Go for that!’ I guess that just irritates me…(becomes silent, looks down and sips her milkshake).
Taylor was frustrated with allies because while they may support LGBTQQ peers, they often appeared superficial, stereotyping marginalized youths rather than developing deeper relationships with them.

**Dorian**

Dorian was a senior girl who identified as masculine and a lesbian when I interviewed her in the fall of 2012. She was also Alexandria’s best friend. Dorian regularly attended meetings as a junior during my first year at Park, and then became the club’s president for her senior year. Dorian was a commanding presence in the GSA. She had a really deep and occasionally loud voice, and used that voice to communicate leadership and confidence. She told me that she had a bad temper and that she was very opinionated. In meetings, she certainly made her peers aware of her positions on political issues, and was politically active herself in promoting gay marriage by writing letters to her congressional leaders. She believed strongly in empowering her LGBTQQ peers, and gave them “permission” to “punch someone in the face” if they were experiencing the wrath of a bully. She admitted getting into physical fights with other girls, and that she carried herself in such a way that purposely outwardly conveyed a level of intimidation, or what she called, a “don’t mess with me” attitude. Despite Dorian’s passionate temper, she earned really high grades, held a steady job at a local movie theater, of which she was really proud, and was engaged in leadership positions in many extra-curricular activities at Park.

Dorian differed from the other ally critics I mentioned above, in that she didn’t ever want to exclude straight allies from the GSA, but she fits in this discussion because although she never openly criticized allies in her GSA, she did discuss allies in a more general way, as she saw their connection to the larger LGBTQQ movement, and specifically to herself. During one of the first
meetings of the year, when Dorian invited her GSA peers to share their coming out stories (see chapter 5), she shared her experience of telling her parents she was a lesbian:

Dorian is sitting at the front of the room with Lucas and Alexandria, and the three of them are facing the rest of the GSA. Betsy and Mr. Cruz are sitting to their left, along the side of the room. Dorian described a “weird family situation” in which she lives with her legal guardians, who are Methodist, and according to Dorian, her mom is “very Christian,” which worried Dorian. When she eventually told her mom she was a lesbian, her mom said, ‘I love you anyway.’ When she told her dad, he said, ‘Well…parents always want their kids to be like them, and I love women too!’ Dorian tells this story with a dry sense of humor, lowering her voice to imitate her dad’s matter-of-fact tone. Most people in the room laugh at her dad’s reaction. Dorian then shared with the club that she has a “super liberal aunt” to whom she felt comfortable confiding, and elaborated: “I’m kind of an accessory to my aunt for her liberal agenda, because she’s crazy liberal!” The rest of the students giggle (field notes).

In our interview, I asked Dorian if her experience with her aunt translated into general feelings she had about straight people who claimed to support the LGBTQQ community.

Well…certainly allies like my aunt…Like I know she supports me, but she also is kind of like crazy. She’s very liberal and in the case of my aunt, her son is half black, and she’s married to a black man, and she likes to rant about everything, and she’s insanely liberal, and we just used to poke fun of her because she’s just one of those stereotypical liberals; just kind of like why liberals like…when Fox news talks about the liberal agenda, they’re talking about my aunt, and I guess like when I told her [about being a lesbian], I could imagine her going around and being like, ‘this is my lesbian niece, look how liberal I am!’

Dorian recognized a tendency in straight allies to objectify LGBTQQ youth, for their own gratification of appearing what she identified as “liberal.” Although she was someone who strongly argued toward a more left-wing agenda herself, whenever politics and equal rights surfaced as topics in the GSA meetings, clearly, Dorian’s feelings about her aunt, who she knew would be supportive of her sexual identity, detailed her belief that she was an “accessory” or a
“thing” or a fetishized commodity that could be used to make her aunt look more appealing to others who campaigned for similar liberal agendas.

*The Meanings of ‘Ally’ for the Straight Ally Critics*

In my interviews, I asked each student to define what it means to be an ally, and in my previous chapter, I emphasized the answers of the “pro-ally” students who defined allies as a necessity for the strength of the GSA. However, for Rose, Taylor, and Fairchild, their understanding of the ally in the GSA was largely shaped by their dissatisfaction with ally participation in an LGBTQQ space. According to Rose:

An ally is obviously someone who supports the cause when here should be no question behind it. They expect brownie points or a trophy for showing that they can accept people, which is really…uh, just being a decent human.

Rose was frustrated with what she perceived as allies seeking rewards for being a good person. She believed that all non-LGBTQQ people had an inherent responsibility to support their LGBTQQ peers and to condemn homophobic actions. None of these activities should be rewarded; for Rose, they should be an expected and a taken-for-granted part of everyday social interactions.

Taylor wasn’t as dismissive of allies as Rose, but she constructed allies as typically misguided in their role as a member of a gay-straight alliance. According to Taylor: “[Some] allies will often be really, really into talking about all of the issues all the time and not know what they’re actually talking about.” As I discussed in the previous chapter, regarding the open
invitation to participate in group discussions, Taylor discredited ally involvement in these discussions. She didn’t always feel like allies could relate to the topic of discussion, like homophobia or bullying against LGBTQ youths, and despite their ignorance, allies still discharged advice and thoughts on experiences with which they could not relate. As I addressed in the previous chapter, the assault against Kate in the nearby park on Halloween and her revealing of her experience in the GSA meeting translated to a scenario in which straight allies felt entitled to give Kate advice on how to deal with the incident. Liza and Betsy pressed Kate to be more involved in reporting and following through with the administration to encourage action to discipline the perpetrators.

At a meeting in October, 2012, Betsy talked about her nephew who is 10 years old, and attending a local elementary school. He’s constantly being “picked on” because he likes to wear girls’ clothing, and according to Betsy, “acts like a girl.” Betsy tells the club members that she “knows” her nephew is gay, and they’ve “always known.” Betsy opens up to the room, soliciting advice on how to deal with this situation because she fears for her nephew’s safety and self-esteem. Dorian told Betsy that her nephew’s parents should “talk to him in a child-appropriate’ way about the bullying.” Mr. Cruz responds, “It’s about sexuality; it’s about identity.” Betsy interjects, “Do you think his parents need to talk to him about his sexual identity?” Mr. Cruz confidently answers, “It’s HIS sexual identity; not theirs! He should be able to talk about it in his own time.” Betsy, ruminating on Mr. Cruz’s confident answer cautiously mutters, “yeah…”. Two straight ally girls, Sadie and Liza raise their hands to offer their advice on how to deal with the bullying, and agree that the boy “should learn some skills to stick up for himself.” Again, as evidence to Taylor’s accusations, straight allies insert their advice about issues from which they have no experience. More significantly, however, in both of the above
scenarios, straight allies put onus on the LGBTQQ young person to deal with the situation in a particular way. Rather than thinking more deeply about issues of homophobia, and charging adults to protect youths from homophobic bullying, straight allies articulate their advice in a manner that ultimately “blames the victim” for not defending him or herself (Pharr 1997). According to Suzanne Pharr, “blaming the victim” functions as a way to disguise the responsibility of the oppressor (1997). In these scenarios where marginalized youths were charged with speaking up for themselves, heterosexual privilege retreated from visibility once again.

For Fairchild, the term “ally” was problematic: I don’t like the term [ally] because I think they’re really misunderstood…most allies. I get that you support everything and everything, but like generally speaking, I wouldn’t use the term ‘ally.’” I asked Fairchild what term she would use to instead of “ally,” and she replied:

I’m not quite sure…(looking away and struggling to find the right word), because it almost seems like we’re implying that there’s something maybe…special…about being an ally, when really it’s just a normal accepting person. It almost seems like by calling themselves allies, they’re sort of looking for some sort of…not attention but sort of like acceptance from people.

Fairchild struggled to find the best words to discuss allies. She was puzzled by such an emphasis on this group of people who were, in her view, simply acting in good faith toward their peers, acts that should not require accolades.

Rose, Taylor, and Fairchild identify the ally with privilege, and criticize the ways in which ally discourse is deployed, frustrated by the notion that in a space meant to empower a marginalized group of young people, allies seemed to expect and often received some of the power resources in the form of praise, acknowledgement, and appreciation. This, in turn,
decenters the lives of already marginalized youths and subverts their position in a space originally designated for the acceptance of all sexual and gender identities

Straight Allies and the Positioning of LGBTQ Youths as “Others”

The conceptualization of Othering has been widely studied and theorized in sociology. Marx developed the concept within his theory of fetishization. Marx (1978) argued that like inanimate objects, human beings are commodities, where we objectify each other in such a way that we assign meaning to one another based on the social provisions we believe others may offer us (Marx 1978). Similar to the ways in which we assign value to the products of our labor, people assign meanings to others, with whom they share relationships, and those ascriptions are grounded in those social processes. According to Marx, the meanings one associates with an object has “absolutely no connection with their physical properties, and with the material relations arising therefrom (1978: 321). In other words, when one objectifies a person, who that “other” is, or how he or she experiences life isn’t at all significant to the person who is objectifying him or her. This “fantastic” form of the relationship to the objectified person, is what Marx conceptualizes as fetishism (1878). That relationship is inherently constructed in a context of inequality, where someone from the privileged social majority has the power to assign meaning that consequently disempowers the “other” from the marginalized minority.

Fairchild, Taylor, Rose, Alexandria, and Dorian each shared narratives in which they believed straight allies exploited LGBTQ youth for their own personal gains. For Taylor, that fetishization was in the form of tokenism where a straight ally constantly draws attention to having a “gay friend”; for Dorian, she was the “accessory” for her aunt’s liberal agenda, and for
Rose and Fairchild, who actually labeled straight ally behavior as fetishization of queer people, ally participation in the Gay-Straight Alliance manifest as a way for allies, who perhaps unknowingly and unintentionally disempowered and dehumanized LGBTQQ youth in a club at which its leaders promote a safe space marginalized youths. Because ally presence is never weighed in meetings, and allies are never charged with specific responsibilities, students like Taylor and Rose may continue to attend meetings sporadically and only if they arrive with a guarded presence. Still, youths like Fairchild may abstain from participation completely, and I concluded that many more young people, like Fairchild, were likely rejecting the GSA as just another space enabling straight privilege. Because of this privilege, straight ally critics identified a connection with being an Other in a perceived safe space.

**Criticizing the Ally Discourse**

Alexandria, Taylor, and Dorian took a softer stance, than Fairchild and Rose, in criticizing allies: believing that the GSA needed allies, but that their motives for identifying as allies, and promoting a social role within the club should be checked. At the second meeting in the fall of 2012, Dorian directly addressed the allies in the GSA, in what was the only discussion about heterosexual privilege that I witnessed in the entire 14 months. Looking at her peers, she said, “When you’re an ally, you need to check your privilege. You need to realize that you have privileges you’re your friends might not.” Alexandria nudged Dorian and said “Tell them what privilege is.” Dorian continues, “Privilege is not worrying that you’ll be kicked out of your house by your parents because you’re gay.” She added the story of her friend who was gay and afraid of going to the locker room because he didn’t want to be judged. Lucas reinforced the
notion that privilege was the ability to get married. That day, 30 kids were in attendance, and none of them offered any additional remarks about privilege, nor asked any questions. After Dorian’s brief clarification of ally privilege, Sadie raised her hand and offered, “My dad is an attorney and an influential member of the democratic party.” She then offers to connect any club members with her dad. The irony of Sadie’s comment about her privileged status on the socioeconomic ladder, juxtaposed with Dorian’s attempt at positioning allies in the GSA only a moment before, could not escape me. After Dorian’s attempt to bring light to privilege, Sadie stepped in to reinforce it by reminding students that she had access and others did not.

Alexandria, described allies as young people who are usually in the club without understanding the complexities of sexual identities:

I think they’re [the heterosexuals] trying to get into the community, but they think it’s just “gay,” “bi,” “straight.” I think they really sort of forget about the trans people and things like that. You know, I’ve had people come up to me and ask me like, “How do you fit outside the gender binary?” and it’s like, “OK! Sit down, I can tell you this!” But they’re sort of close minded about it I guess. It was like sort of the more preppier privileged white people. I don’t know any other way to put it.

Alexandria, thought that the straight students of the Gay-Straight Alliance were unaware of and even closed off from a comprehension of the social constructions of gender and sexuality. She believed that the straight allies perceived that all people fit within a neatly packed box, and that it was her obligation to educate the allies about thinking beyond those gender constrictions. Alexandria often told me that she was concerned with educating allies; if they were there for one reason: to look good, then minimally, queer students still had the opportunity to educate allies to resist falling into compulsory subscriptions to this heterosexual-homosexual binary:
Alexandria: Maybe I’m a bit more close-minded about it because I’ve seen how they can be like, “Oh yeah! I’m in here to look good…!”

Amie: Why do you think it makes them look good?

Alexandria: Oh, it makes them look compassionate! I have friends who run the Race for the Cure just to look good to all the ladies that run it and I’m just like, “Bro, just stop!” I mean people do things to make them look good, and everyone just wants…everyone just wants gratification from somewhere, whether it be from themselves or from other people. You can’t blame ‘em because society is just telling them, “Oh, you’re not perfect. You’re not this. You’re not that.” But if they can feel good about one thing, I don’t blame ‘em.

Alexandria illuminates a contention with the oversimplifying practice of subscribing to the heterosexual/homosexual binary that diminishes the fluidity of sexualities and confines identities into one supposedly unifying category. Scholars would agree with Alexandria’s frustration. According to Sasha Roseneil (2002), “In common with other poststructuralist understandings of the exclusionary and regulatory nature of binary identity categories, queer theory rejects the idea of a unified homosexual identity, and sees the construction of sexual identities around the hierarchically structured binary opposition of hetero/homosexual as inherently unstable” (29).

For Alexandria, allies may join the GSA because they were fulfilling a social expectation of being a compassionate person, which to her, wasn’t necessarily the best reason for joining, but nonetheless, she saw their willing participation as an opportunity to educate straight people about the experiences of queer youth. Ideally, straight allies would discuss the limiting practice of generalizing others into what’s perceived as a homosexuality community in solidarity. Through the practice of placing LGBTQQQ youth into the “gay” category of the GSA, straight allies inherently one-dimensionalize their peers.

Alexandria, Taylor, and Dorian tolerated the presence of allies in the GSA, but Rose and Fairchild held stronger views of allies, expressing a desire to have an LGBTQQQ or Queer Student
Club that did not include allies at all. Fairchild, refused to attend all GSA meetings, and would only participate in a club if it were an LGBTQQ or Queer group without an invitation to allies. It is important to add here too that Rose, Fairchild, and Taylor, in addition to Alexandria, who was critical of but who was ultimately “pro-ally”, claimed that they had several friends who refused to ever go to a GSA meeting because of the presence of allies. Alexandria identified those students as being under the “trans-umbrella” or transgender and articulated that they felt that allies and gays had too much power in the GSA. Unfortunately, I was unable to connect with any of these students despite Alexandria’s offer to ask them to contact me.

For the anti-ally students, Rose, Taylor, and Fairchild, allies at the GSA meetings made them question whether or not they could trust someone who could not understand the depths of their experiences as an LGBTQQ young person. Rose, a 17 year old girl who self-identified as queer expressed in our interview:

Rose: I know it’s supposed to be a gay-straight alliance, but sometimes I feel overwhelmed by the amount of power that straight allies have. It’s actually quite disturbing.

Amie: What is that power? How do you identify it, or how do you see it?

Rose: I would actually, umm…articulate it as a minor fetishization of queerness and homosexuality, of course exhibited among adolescences looking for a way to be different or unique. Perhaps they see being queer as definitely being different, but of course not understanding the negative side that can come.

Amie: Not understanding the realities of what queer youth experience? Is that sort of what you’re saying?

Rose: yeah.
Rose’s conceptualization of the ally exuded some annoyance at the presence of students she believed were at the GSA to compound their own privilege, to the detriment of the LGBTQQ youth who should have the right to be a part of a community of people with whom they can relate. She clearly identified allies as possessing a measure of power within the group, and that bothered her enough to inhibit her from attending meetings more than once a month. When she did go, she claimed she was only there to support one of her friends who was one of the GSA student leaders.

The construction of allies as a necessity for the strength of the GSA, and the stories that allies themselves shared during open forum style meetings fed the tension among anti-ally club members. My research revealed that although most students convicted themselves to the perceived strength of allies, participant observation often illuminated a reinforcement of heterosexual privilege when club members, GSA presidents, and teacher sponsors discussed allies. The GSA was yet another place where allies could exercise power, whether it be through the ascribed privilege of being an expert on how to deal with LGBTQQ issues, as was the case in Kate’s story in the previous chapter, or through the embedded belief that allies only strengthened the GSA.

Allies and the Safe Space

Fetner et al. (2012) explore the concept of safe space in their research of high school gay-straight alliances. According to Fetner et al. (2012), safe spaces are places that are free from hostility and in turn, produce a level of comfort for its members so as to encourage social support
and activism. In the GSA at Park, Mr. Cruz, Betsy, and Ron make a consistent effort to construct the club as a safe space. Mr. Cruz and Betsy, who are the most visible teachers at the meetings, regularly ask students if everyone feels safe. Mr. Cruz routinely asks students if there are any issues at school that the group should be aware of. They also encourage students to share their fears and frustrations about any family issues that might be affecting them.

When Mr. Cruz and Betsy asked students if they were feeling safe, students often took the opportunity to share any recent experiences. During our interviews, I asked students if they felt safe in the GSA, and almost all of them answered in the affirmative. For most students, the GSA was a space that was free from judgment. While the overwhelming majority agreed, Rose felt that despite being able “to hold my own,” she was concerned about any of her peers coming out for the first time in the GSA, worrying that “allies would be all over them.” Rose assumed that allies would think someone coming out in the GSA “would be so adorable,” which to her was mocking the seriousness of such a sharing of trust. Three other students claimed that they felt safe in the GSA, but that they still didn’t feel completely comfortable coming out to their fellow club members. For students like Rose and Taylor, the GSA was not a truly safe space because they believed that allies did not comprehend the responsibilities of their position of power. Taylor feared that coming out in the GSA would give allies permission to gossip about her, and they would then be the ones “telling her story” to the school. She adamantly desired to be the one to disclose her sexual orientation on her own time. She feared that offering too much personal information in the GSA would hasten the reveal of her story. Consequently, the GSA was a space where Rose and Taylor felt disempowered within their own community.
Discussion: LGBTQQ Allies for Straight People?

Rose, Taylor, Dorian, Alexandria and Fairchild each revealed a different side to the discourse of straight allies, one in which youth who embody a marginalized position on the lower rungs of the hierarchy of sexualities, are disenchanted with the behaviors of allies and the privilege that those allies carry into the GSA. For Rose, Fairchild, and Taylor, allies tend to fetishize LGBTQQ youth. The Marxist standpoint posits that objects become commodities as we assign that meaning to said objects (Marx 1978). That fetishization is then constructed within a relationship of power, where the “othering” is done by those who inhabit privileged lives and identities. In the context of the Park GSA, ally critics illustrate their awareness of this fetishization of the LGBTQQ community. Similar to literature on racialization and objectifying the “other” that suggests that privileged whites exploit marginalized people by constructing them in their minds as less than human, and thus unable to threaten the power of white privilege (O’Connell Davidson and Taylor 2007), non-straight identifying youth have emerged as a dehumanized “object” to their heterosexual peers. In the process of “othering,” those with privilege justify their power-driven actions by distancing themselves from the individual over whom they exercise that power. In Rose’s, Dorian’s, Taylor’s, and Fairchild’s experiences, they were “things” or objects used by straight people to demonstrate tolerance and compassion, characteristics often revered in contemporary culture. Rose’s experience with feeling objectified led her to conclude: “It’s like a puppy or a trench coat. I’ve always wanted a 32 Excalibur, but that doesn’t mean I’m gonna treat my friends like that.” When I asked Rose to elaborate on her analogy, she clarified that puppies and trench coats are nice things to have, and things that a lot
of people want, but that we shouldn’t be treating people like these objects. People shouldn’t reside in the same category as a thing that one covets. For Rose, being a non-straight identified person often felt like an open yet unintended invitation for pity and chastising by privileged straight youths, who saw her as weak, powerless and unsure of herself. Contrary, Rose was far from insecure.

Straight allies have emerged in a historically significant period in which political discourse rampant in public schools and even in colleges, emphasizes the importance of diversity, assimilating all identities into a melting pot of tolerance. I argue that this paradigm informs ally participation in the GSA, connects to the criticisms of straight allies by LGBTQQ youths. Rose and Fairchild felt so alienated by straight ally participation that they desired a queer-only space, a place designated solely for youths who do not conform to hegemonic prescriptions of gender and sexuality. Their disenchantment begs for a rethinking of creating spaces open to everyone such that people with privilege have the opportunity to exercise power over people without it, in the name of diversity and sameness. Fairchild’s thoughts about straight allies might guide a larger discussion of the ways in which we articulate diversity generally:

Well, I think generally, that allies of gay rights are being a male feminist I guess…I don’t think they really should be in the film talking. I think the way they can help us is that they can influence other straight people to stop being homophobic, like if you see a straight person doing something homophobic, call them out on it. But if you want to talk over, you know, a gay person, I don’t really support that because my idea is that allies should make their own spaces you know, make it so that they’re accepting and not, you know, talking over the community they’re supporting.

Similarly, Rose strongly believed that the GSA should morph into a more exclusive, Queer Student Alliance, where straight-identified students were not invited to be a part of the
club. When I questioned her perception of the possibility of such a club, she drew the conclusion: “Of course, that would never happen (annoyed). I mean, obviously, someone would throw a fit…” I pressed Rose on why she thought the Black Student and Latino Student Alliance clubs were allowed to be exclusive. In other words, the Black Student Alliance was not the “Black-White Student Alliance.” Rose responded with sarcasm and a nervous laugh, “That’s a good question…That’s a damn good question!” Rose’s anger toward allies and their participation in the GSA speaks to the larger issue of privilege in a GSA. If the premise of a GSA is to create a safe space for LGBTQQ youths and their straight allies, and we know that some students feel a level of indifference toward allies, like Celeste, Lily, and Mark, or a deeper distaste for allies like Rose, Fairchild, and Taylor, what then is the GSA really accomplishing when it actively encourages straight allies to participate in their meetings? I argue that the result is stifling marginalized identities further, and replacing them with a discourse of “sameness” that conforms to heteronormativity.

Rose and Taylor claimed to know several non-straight identifying peers who refused to join the GSA, and Fairchild was indeed a queer-identified young person who refused to go to GSA meetings at Park. For these youths, the Gay-Straight Alliance is not the safe space in which they feel in control of their own story telling. For them, it is a space where they are objectified in a public forum, where straight youths, many of whom are strangers, have unfettered access to their lives. Despite my small sample of ally critics, I argue that if even one student who does not identify with the straight community feels unwelcomed in a space created specifically for the safety of LGBTQQ youth, then we all need to rethink the purpose of the GSA, and perhaps that translates to transforming the Gay-Straight Alliance as it currently exists,
no longer placing such a heavy emphasis on straight allies, and allowing LGBTQQ young people to create their own spaces free from the reinforcement of heterosexual privilege.

In this chapter, my aim was not to argue that the Park GSA should dissolve completely, nor that organizations like GLSEN are obsolete or entirely harmful to LGBTQQ youth. Rather, my fieldwork and interviews lead me to conclude that GSAs and national organizations that strive to hear the voices of marginalized youths need to rethink and even revise the ways in which they construct language and practices involving straight allies. Although my findings clearly illuminate many LGBTQQ youths who want straight allies present at meetings, still, there were several students who rejected GSA practices because of their failure to charge straight allies with appropriate responsibilities, like acknowledging and checking their heterosexual privilege. I ask then, for whom does straight ally participation benefit? Taylor’s answer to my question probing the reasons for straight ally participation might answer this: “The support from our allies is I guess important for people who don’t initially respect the gay community, and then there are the allies who are straight but do support [the gay community], so it’s showing that you don’t have to be gay to support the community.” In light of Taylor’s position, might we consider the role of allies to be in direct connection with contributing to changing the negative attitudes of straight people, rather than as essential for LGBTQQ youth strength?

In the next chapter, I explore the role of gender as it manifests in straight ally participation in the GSA.
Chapter Seven

“I’ve always wanted a gay family member”: Gendered Allies and Alliances in a High School GSA

In fall 2012, Celeste came for an interview with me. This was her first year participating in the Park GSA, and she was an active member—coming every week, and participating in discussions around LGBTQQ issues. She was the only girl who did not claim both heterosexuality and ally identities. She claimed “Questioning” as a sexual identity—admitting to lacking experience with sexual or romantic relationships that would lead her to label her identity as something else. Celeste told me she participated in the GSA because her mom came out as a lesbian, and Celeste and her sister spent half of their time between her biological parents’ homes. Her dad wasn’t entirely supportive of her mom’s identity, but Celeste loved her mom’s girlfriend. As we sat outside a local school, where she had conductor’s practice for the city orchestra on a cool autumn afternoon, Celeste and I talked about the role of allies in the GSA, and like in each of my interviews, I asked her if she thought that more girls or boys participated as allies in the GSA. She identified girls as the typical ally, so I asked Celeste why she thought girls were more comfortable being allies:

Because of the femininity thing…because girls are a lot more empathetic and um…I don’t think girls are necessarily teased more, but I think they just…or some girls, they just know what it’s like to be bullied. I think it’s a bit of a “mom thing.” Right? Like they see bullying and I can’t…and I don’t like the sight of it so they just want to do their part in preventing it or it’s because I think there are a lot more gay guys so a girl’s best friend will often be a gay guy; like if a girl has a best friend who is a guy, he’ll most likely be gay, so I think that girls just kind of accept that.
Celeste’s response to my question speaks to the connection between gender and being an ally in the GSA. Of the 16 girls I interviewed, 5 identified as straight allies. 2 of the 7 boys I interviewed identified as allies, one straight and the other straight but “open to a homosexual or bisexual relationship.” Throughout the year, several girls would come to GSA meetings, introducing themselves as allies or supporters, while I only observed one other boy who identified as straight and an as ally. Research suggests that straight allies in LGBT movements are typically women (Goldstein and Davis 2010; Montgomery and Stewart 2010; Russell 2011; Stotzer 2009), and studies done on GSAs reveal the same gender disparity in straight ally participation (Miceli 2005; Stotzer 2009). The Park GSA looked similar to these studies describing the demographics of GSAs where girls largely outnumbered boys in terms of identifying as allies. In this chapter I analyze the constructions of gender within the ally identity in the GSA. I explore the relationship with being a girl and declaring an ally identity in the GSA as it relates to constructions of power and inequality. I also theorize the reasons for the lack of ally-identifying boys in the GSA. I argue that the constructions of gender for ally girls may be situated within the larger contexts of the ways in which girls are sexualized and marginalized institutionally. On one hand, the GSA’s openness to exploring the meanings of marginalized sexual identities gives girls a space in which to feel free to think about sexuality in their own lives. On the other hand, the GSA manifested as a space in which girls, who identified as allies, were subject to the restrictions of heterosexual privilege that strained the relationships between straight ally girls and lesbians or queer-identified girls, and I explore what this means for gendered relationships in the GSA. At first, these conclusions seem contradictory; the GSA as a space that both empowers and disempowers straight girls. However, in a space that preserves
heterosexual privilege, and neglects to examine that privilege, the GSA also emerges as a space that conceals girls’ experiences with the disempowering nature of heterosexuality.

Why Straight Girls Joined the GSA and Straight Boys Didn’t

When asked, all of my interviewees believed that the majority of straight allies in the GSA were girls. Indeed, my sample of interviewees included 7 girls and two boys who identified as allies, with one of the girls and one of the boys exploring sexuality outside of being straight. Also recall one boy who participated in the GSA in the Fall of 2012, Curtis, who signed up to interview several times but didn’t show. On Coming Out Day, he wore a sticker declaring a straight identity. Otherwise, girls were overrepresented in the role of ally in the Park GSA.

In my interviews, I asked student why they believed girls were more likely to attend GSA meetings as an ally, than boys. Their answers typically confirmed Celeste’s conclusions that because girls were stereotypically more compassionate about people’s feelings and defending civil rights, joining a GSA fits within their role as girl and as feminine. According to Alexandria:

Well, again, it sort of gets down to the aspects of femininity, being very compassionate to other people. I think that’s where a lot of it comes, then…it’s just compassion for…for other members of the human race and fighting for their rights. I’m sure a lot of those girls that are there will not just identify, not just being an ally to the LGBT community, but I’m sure that they would be allies to a lot of other communities as well.

Alexandria, although she qualifies as an ally critic in the previous chapter, still illustrates the complexities of straight allies. Like Celeste, she viewed girls joining the GSA as part of what it
means to be feminine—to help others in need. Lucas also identified girls as possessing the
ability to go to the GSA to support their friends, telling me, “Maybe because they’re [girls] OK
with it. A lot of girls have friends who are gay and they’ll go to support them. They’re more
OK with being an ally. They don’t really feel like they’re gonna be judged about, ‘Wow! I went
to the GSA!’”

When I asked participants why girls might feel more comfortable joining the GSA than
boys, the majority articulated constructions of masculinity in opposition to femininity, citing
homophobia, and hegemonic notions of what it means to be a boy in high school. According to
Fairchild, “Guys are always um…peer pressured into not being gay, a.k.a. not being feminine
and stuff like that…” Liza believed that boys didn’t join the GSA for similar reasons:

Because in high school, boys are so afraid of the image that they give off that I
think that a lot of boys are scared that if they come to the meetings people start
spreading rumors that maybe they’re gay, and for a lot of the guys who are very
into their masculinity and into being a man, are afraid of having anybody think
that they are not necessarily homophobic but they’re so concerned about their
image that they’re afraid to give off anything that wouldn’t be something they’re
trying to be.

Fairchild, and Liza speak to what C.J. Pascoe conceptualizes as the fag discourse, where boys are
so intimately tied to dominant constructions of heteronormative masculinity, any deviation from
that identity subjects the boy to punishment for not being masculine enough, or worse, for being
feminine (Pascoe 2007). To participate in the GSA, for a straight boy, would mean that he was
taking on the feminine characteristics of being compassionate and emotionally supportive, as my
participants described girl allies above, and thus a reason to earn the “fag” epithet. Considering
Pascoe’s fag discourse is not to say that straight-identified boys who are participants in the GSA
must be gay but in the closet, although as we’ll see below, people assumed boys who “hung out”
with gay people were assumed to be gay, but that participation in a space that straight girls
In our interview, Johnny replied to the question of the disparity in boy and girl ally participation by answering, “because the girls…they won’t get bullied like the boys. Well, like if a boy goes they’re going to tease him and be like, ‘Oh! He’s gay!’ but if a girl goes, they’ll say she’s a supporter.” Alexandria affirmed Johnny’s observations:

> Men in society are taught that they have to be masculine. They have to show their straightness all the time, and being part of…a GSA makes their friends…or makes them insecure in their own masculinity. Because it’s like, ‘You’re in that club? Dude, you’re gay! You’re a faggot!’ (she furrows her brows and lowers her voice into a crackly tone, as if to imitate someone who is denigrating an Other). On Coming Out Day, I heard so many people say that.

Lily described similar reasons for straight boys abstaining as allies:

> Because I feel like girls could just say, I’m hanging with my gay friends or something like that and people wouldn’t care as much, but if a guy went in…God! That would be really hard (giggling)...I feel like if a straight guy went in, and was like, ‘I’m gonna chill with these gay people, that guy would get harassed.

I asked Lily if she thought people would think that straight boy was gay and she quickly responded in a direct, “yeah. Yeah!” I asked her why she thought that, and she replied:

> I think that they would think...I guess it’s kind of like the whole double standard with guys...like girls kiss each other on cheeks, hold hands, and give hugs, and shit like that. Guys don’t do that as much; they don’t express it as much. It’s I guess if you like went in, like just a guy, it would be kind of like really awkward and guys would be like, ‘Whoa, Dude! Wanna tell us something?’

Lily, Alex, and Johnny speak to the fragility of heterosexual maleness, where membership to a socially acceptable masculine identity depends on the ways in which boys perform their masculinity and deploy a heterosexual face at all times (Allen 2005; Bourdieu 2001; Chu 2004; Connell 1995; Connell 2005; Corbett 2001; Gilbert 1998; Pascoe 2007). Boys who deviate from
hegemonic constructions of masculinity are often shamed by peers to conform to these gendered scripts. To participate in the GSA as a straight boy would open a myriad of opportunities for those who subscribe to dominant notions of masculinity to subject the boy to ridicule. These gender practices purposefully police boys into conformity to masculine norms.

If my interviewees thought that straight boys feared attending GSA meetings because people would presume they were gay, I asked them if they would assume boys who joined the GSA were gay, and several participants admitted to presuming a straight boy’s sexuality as nonconforming. According to Johnny, boys who joined the GSA who didn’t declare their sexual identity, “most of them are in the closet.” Chris self-identified to me as a bisexual boy who didn’t publically identify his sexuality in the meetings. When I interviewed Claire, and asked her about the lack of straight boys participating in the GSA, she remarked,

I think boys are afraid. I’ll tell you something… I think Chris is like bi[sexual] or something. I talked to him. I haven’t asked him, but I feel like he’s more on the spectrum and that’s why he’s going to GSA, but I don’t know… That’s what I think, but I could be wrong because guys don’t want to be put as ‘gay’ and feel awkward being around gay guys because they don’t want to be hit on and girls are more like, ‘Oh, whatever! Just like, be who you are.’ Girls aren’t judged harshly on going.

Dorian conveyed similar thoughts when I asked her why straight boys are largely absent from the GSA:

It’s wrong for men to be like, feminine. So they don’t wanna like go to the GSA, and then people think, “Oh! You’re going to the GSA; so you’re gay. And then they become more effeminate and less of a man, so it’s kind of like…it takes down their masculinity.

I asked Dorian if she thought people outside of the GSA assume that guys who go to the GSA are gay, and she replied, “I think a lot of people probably do.” I then asked if she thought people inside the GSA felt the same, and she responded:
I think at first they probably do, which is why I like to the introduction thing, so people don’t necessarily get too mixed up, and we understand that there are…like are guys in there who are allies. Like sometimes you assume things about people…

Dorian tried to overcome the stereotypes associated with boys who participated in GSAs by having everyone introduce themselves at the first meeting, and disclose their sexual identity and preferred pronouns with which they preferred to be addressed by others. However, despite her attempts, assumptions made about boys’ sexuality overruled their declarations of being an ally. Despite claiming an ally or “supporter” identity, other students still assumed that boys who went to GSA were not straight. That people both within and outside of the club assumed boys who joined were gay or and/or feminine, I argue, reified boys legitimate boys fears of joining the feminine friendly space.

The concern over joining the GSA didn’t manifest the in the same ways for girls. Apart from Sadie fearing her participation in Coming Out Day would provoke teachers and peers to question her sexuality, straight girls were typically free to join and participate in the GSA without an assumption of their sexual identity by others. In fact, club members assumed that girls who identified as allies were straight, as I discussed in chapter five. In this space, straight girls who joined the GSA were there to express their feminine traits of compassion and sensitivity toward marginalized groups of young people. Contrary, students believed straight boys were there because they were still in the closet. The gendered construction of allies suggests that the GSA is a space where straight girls may participate more freely, as it is already a woman-friendly space. However, for boys, the reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality, which privileges dominant masculinities, assigns a deviant status to their membership in this particular space.
Holden’s participation in the GSA, as one of the only self-identified straight boys, suggested that he subscribed to what Anderson (2006) calls “inclusive masculinity.” Anderson’s (2006) research reveals a commitment to a masculine identity in which men who participate in cheerleading, typically associated with being a woman’s space, reject criticisms that they are not masculine enough. In other words, these men acknowledge cheerleading as a woman-centered sport and embrace the feminine aspects of cheerleading. They might participate in traditionally feminine stunts, and tend to be less homophobic than the “orthodox” men who argue that cheerleading is indeed a masculine sport, and tend to hyper-masculinize all aspects of cheerleading be devaluing the role of women and gay men who participate (2006). Holden, who claimed he was not homophobic, did admit to participating in protests to support gay rights, and assumed he would intervene on behalf of “a gay kid” who was being bullied. As the only straight boy in the GSA at all times he attended meetings, he constructed a masculinity that was inclusive of straight girls and LGBTQQ identities. I argue that in the Park GSA, straight boys would have to embrace an inclusive masculinity, for the majority of the participants in the GSA were straight girls, and LGBTQQ minority youth, groups about whom orthodox and hegemonic masculinities are deeply critical.

Because most of my research participants believed that straight boys were typically underrepresented in GSA meetings due to the assumption that boys who participated in Gay-Straight Alliances must be gay, or “in the closet,” and thus, not straight, straight boys who might
join a GSA would inevitably considered the stereotypes their peers might attribute to their association with predominantly female and queer youth. Holden exhibited an ambivalence to the perceptions others had of him. This sense of self in which he rejected the impact of possible accusations questioning his “straightness” allowed him to participate in a space in which he was the numerical minority (Chu 2004).

Gendered Responses to Assault and Harassment: The Cases of Stella and Kate

In the last chapter, I discussed the ally critics, who, with the exception of Sean, were all girls, specifically lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identifying girls. Herein, I bring the discourse of gender into this conceptualization of the straight ally. Because ally typically connotes “straight girl” in the Park GSA, we can uncover some of the tensions that exist between straight ally girls and lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identifying girls. I illustrate this through two of the stories that developed in the GSA.

Stella

During the first year of my research, in which I entered the school just after Winter Break in January, I met with Mr. Cruz before I attended my first GSA meeting, to brief him on my study. During our meeting, Mr. Cruz told me about a student named Yvonne, a Black young man who preferred to come to school dressed in drag and also wanted people to call him Stella. Mr. Cruz told me that just before we met, the principal (who left before Mr. Brown became the
head of the school), judged it a necessity for Yvonne’s guardian to know that he was leaving the house as Yvonne and then using janitorial closets at school to dress as Stella. Mr. Cruz was quite angry that the principal felt compelled to call Yvonne’s guardian, whom he identified as his lesbian aunt, who didn’t want Yvonne “dressing like a fairy.” Mr. Cruz disagreed that the aunt needed to know about Yvonne’s harmless behavior. The principal attempted to comply with the aunt by promising to call her if Yvonne dressed in women’s clothing again, and by forbidding Yvonne to dress as Stella completely. Mr. Cruz felt like he had succeeded in this situation by convincing Yvonne to come to GSA meetings for support, because he was clearly struggling with his home life.

At the first GSA meeting I attended for my research, Yvonne entered the room right after I introduced myself. He was wearing dark jeans and a white t-shirt with a gold necklace of the name “Stella.” He sat with Claire, with whom he seemed very close in my earliest observations. Stella or Yvonne would only come to the meetings with Claire, and sometimes, only if Claire left the meeting and brought Stella or Yvonne back with her. At a meeting on April 12, 2012, shortly after the meeting began, Claire came running into the classroom, nearly breathless, ecstatically shouting, “Stella is here! Not Yvonne, Stella! Stella! Stella!” Clearly, Claire was excited about her friend coming to school as Stella, defying the orders of the school administrators, though Mr. Brown was the new principal who did not set the restrictions on Stella’s presence at school. Mr. Cruz and Betsy had been pushing Yvonne or Stella to come to GSA meetings out of concern for his or her safety. Attendance at the meetings was a way for Yvonne or Stella to check in.

Shortly after Claire’s announcement, Stella came in, wearing a long straight dark colored wig with subtle blond highlights. She wore a navy blue floor length and fitted sleeveless gown

154
with carefully applied makeup. Standing in front of the stage, facing the rest of the students and beside Mr. Cruz, Stella talked about herself in the third person. Earlier in the day, she was caught changing in the closet from Yvonne to Stella, and she began to open up to the group about her experiences. She told the group that her family wants her to go to counseling because they think she’s “too emotional.” However, she doesn’t want to go because she acknowledged, “I know who I am.” Mr. Cruz interjects, looking at Stella and then at the rest of the students, “All of us need counseling.” He encourages Stella to get counseling so that she can learn how to more effectively deal with her family tensions. Sitting beside Stella are two friends—friends in addition to Claire, who sits in a chair facing Stella. I’ve never seen the two friends with Stella, two girls who are supporting her by clasping her arms. Neither of the two girls spoke during the meeting. Stella continuously stroke and rearranged her hair. I had to move myself to be closer to the students, as they were speaking softly. That day I chose a chair on the floor in the space between the stage and the first row of benches. The room was quiet, everyone focused on Stella, waiting for Mr. Cruz to offer some comforting wisdom, but stress and fear lingered.

Ten minutes after Stella arrived, a female assistant principal walked into the room and gave Mr. Cruz a piece of paper, and then promptly walked out; it was a reminder that although this was considered a “safe space,” it could be invaded at any moment. Mr. Cruz opened the note and looked at Stella, confirming that the principal “wants to talk to you.” Mr. Cruz recommended that Stella “change back into Yvonne, and then go talk to her.” He then adds, once again, that Stella should go to a counselor to “learn how to navigate your life…this really hard thing. Mr. Cruz looks at Stella and tells her that her family is concerned for her safety, “so the school is complying with your family.” One student raised her hand and questioned, “what about girls who dress as boys?” Nobody offered a confident argument for why that was OK, but
Stella wasn’t. One student replied, “Stella is big and you can’t miss Stella.” Claire, angry, reenacts the entrance of the principal and becomes angrier as she analyzes the body language of the administrator who “did not even look at Stella.” She thought that was disrespectful. Claire, frustrated, replies to Mr. Cruz while Stella is still sitting there: “She doesn’t take this seriously!” Stella doesn’t say anything, but gets up to leave the room, and Claire asks if she can have her bra back. Mr. Cruz tells Stella, “Take care of yourself, honey.” Both Mr. Cruz and Claire seem defeated, when Mr. Cruz says, “Let’s just be supportive of her.” Stella returns in the more masculine clothes of jeans and a t-shirt, out of the blue dress, and hands Claire her bra before silently leaving the room to go talk to the assistant principal.

Claire’s involvement as Stella’s friend illustrated a way in which a straight ally girl felt compelled to support her gay male friend. Claire was relentless at trying to bring social justice for Stella. She was constantly concerned about Stella’s safety in the boys’ bathroom. As I mentioned in chapter five, she solicited 70 signatures from her peers at Park for a unisex bathroom, at which she ultimately failed that year.

In my interview with Claire, I asked her how she met Stella, and she replied:

I saw him around, well I saw the actual Stella last school year, and I was like, ‘Oh she’s pretty cool; she’s gotta be like really brave to go around school like that. It was last year. I would go to him and give him a hug, but then me and him ended up having an art class together this year and sat together, and we just gossiped all art class. First semester, we had third period Art, and I always would get really upset with him…well not like with him, but for him about the situation that was happening [the principal calling his aunt].

Claire then told me that Stella asked her to go to the GSA meetings to support her, and that’s how she started going to meetings. In that art class, Claire told me that there were football players who were constantly harassing Stella, using homophobic language. Although Stella
didn’t want to tell the teacher, Claire told me that she did and the boys were suspended from the football team for the rest of the season.

Kate

I concluded chapter five with Kate’s experience during her P.E. class, jogging in the park in which she was physically assaulted by two ROTC boys who called her a faggot and held a lighter to her face. A week after that attack, she came to the GSA meeting and shared her story, telling the club members that she confided in her teacher who promised to tell the deans at Park, but she had not heard of any action being taken against the perpetrators. You’ll recall in that meeting that Liza and Betsy both told Kate that she needed to “make a bigger stink!” and “you need to be involved,” both comments relieving straight allies from any responsibility to bring Kate some justice. Kate never returned to the GSA after that meeting, and I asked Lucas, an ROTC leader if he knew of any action taken against the two boys who attacked Kate, to which he responded in the negative. He did not know the identities of the two boys either. Kate was a lesbian girl who came to Park after a year at a private Catholic high school. At her previous high school, she was repeatedly sent home for violating the girls’ dress code by wearing pants instead of skirts, and determined she was kicked out of the school for failing to comply with gendered norms for girls. For her sophomore year, Kate moved to Park High School, where her brother was a senior star of the football team. She thought the school would be a safer and more accepting place for her.

Kate’s and Stella’s stories shed light on an issue with girls’ participation as allies as they relate to their connection with lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identifying girls. On the one hand, we see that Stella, a gay-identifying boy who likes to dress in drag, and on the other, Kate is a
lesbian girl, physically attacked in a park during a class. Stella was widely supported by Mr. Cruz, who became involved in alerting the principal of his disapproval of the administration’s choice in contacting Stella’s aunt. Stella also had the support of Claire, a straight ally girl who spoke out against homophobia and what she perceived as discrimination against Stella’s right to use the girls’ bathroom, which Claire uncovered as a right of Stella’s in the research she claimed to do for her friend. According to Claire, Stella was protected, by law, to use the bathroom that matched her gender presentation. Thus, when Yvonne presented as Stella at school, she should have been permitted to use the girls’ bathroom. Because she could not get the school to comply, Claire created a petition to open a unisex bathroom. Although Claire was no longer at Park, the following year, Mr. Cruz succeeded at convincing the school to designate a unisex bathroom in the Health Office for anyone to use, after Johnny’s parents were informed of his choice to appear in drag at school. Kate was left alone to fight her battle over being attacked in what Lucas articulated as “bordering a hate crime.” What then do these stories tell us about straight ally girls?

I argue that straight ally girls felt indifferent to lesbian needs because their relationship toward lesbian girls challenges the legitimacy of heteronormativity, a hierarchy of power in which straight girls are subjected to disempowerment. Lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) girls do not offer straight girls an opportunity for upward social mobility. Straight girls already have heterosexual privilege over LBQ girls as LBQ girls occupy the marginalized status of both girl and non-heterosexual. However, gay boys embody the marginalized identity of gay but they still have male privilege, to which straight girls have access in their relationships with them. Researchers have identified characteristics of women who have friendships with gay men, and have identified the term “fag hag” used by gay men as a way of labeling women who seek out
and participate in relationships with gay men (Castro-Convers, Gray, Ladany, and Metzler 2005; Maddison 2000; Moon 1995). What scholars have found is that women who seek relationships with gay men often identify their ability to connect with someone who also inhabits a marginalized identity, yet still has access to privilege. Moon (1995) argues that the term “fag hag” can be used as both an insult and with no intended offence. The term is also historically situated where older gay men, who came out in the 1970s, identified straight women who only associated with gay men, and perhaps sought sexual relationships with gay men, as fag hags (1995). In contemporary gay culture, Moon argues that “fag hag” is associated with women who spend a lot of time with gay men, but not for seeking a sexual relationship (1995). In my research, Taylor acknowledged the relationships between straight girls and gay boys: “A girl’s gay best friend…shopping to squeal about shoes with…I’ve never seen a man be like, ‘this is my lesbian friend.’” Taylor recognized the propensity for straight ally girls to connect with gay boys, believing that straight girls “tokenized” gay boys for their own needs. To Taylor, some allies in the GSA viewed gay boys as a token, about whom they liked to announce their relationship. Allies who view gays as tokens highlight the stereotypes that society assigns to feminine gay men, particular their presumed affinity for shopping, fashion, and relationship advice. These perceptions of gay boys construct them within a one-dimensional identity. Taylor interacts frequently on Tumblr, which is a social media website on which many high school students participate and share personal narratives, and seek advice. In her experiences on Tumblr, Taylor noticed that girls will often post about their relationships with gay men: “Like when they’re saying something, they’re like, ‘Yeah, I’ve always wanted this gay family member!’ and the whole like, ‘Guys are great for shopping and advice on cute guys…’. I guess it’s more about gay men than lesbian women…they’re more the token, I guess, gay person.
Maddison (2000) argues that straight women’s relationships with gay men may be conceptualized as heterosocial relationships where gay men and straight women seek relationships with each other that are both dissenting and reinforcing the gender hierarchy, in solidarity. By fostering relationships with each other, straight women and gay men are “trading cultural currency” with each other—each offering access to privilege (2000). Simultaneously, Maddison argues that gay men may fall into the confines of male homosociality or normative, misogynistic heterosexuality, by exploiting women’s stereotypical cultural capital of motherhood, caregiving, and commitments to male partnership, oppressing women, while straight women may criticize the standards of femaleness of gay men (2000). Perhaps most important, Maddison argues that gay men-straight women friendships rely on the suppression of lesbian identities for the maintenance of their relationships. The risk of being a lesbian threatens to alter the ability to trade cultural currency. According to Maddison, lesbophobia, or fear of lesbians, also feeds the hegemony of heterosexuality because it promises women for men only.

Literature exploring the relationships that straight women have with gay men enlightens my findings that straight ally girls abandoned their role as ally when a lesbian girl needed them, because it suggests that straight ally girls may perceive lesbians as threatening to their femininity and as an obstacle to the accumulation of privilege. Rose identified straight girls’ neglect of lesbian, bisexual, and queer girls: “As a Queer woman, I can notice that there are allies who are much more hostile towards me than they would be a gay man.” While literature suggests that gay men and straight women seek relationships with each other for mutual gains (Castro-Convers, Gray, Ladany, and Metzler 2005; Maddison 2000; Moon 1995), Rose and Taylor’s interpretations of those relationships are much more complex to lesbian, bisexual, and queer girls.
For straight girls, who are already marginalized within the very category of what it means to be a woman in the hierarchy of heteronormativity, lesbian girls cannot provide them with any more access to that privilege, or out of their oppression by larger institutions. Consequently, straight ally girls’ failure to support and advocate for Kate, a lesbian girl, shielded the school from its responsibility to protect her from assault. That is not to say that straight ally girls were entirely to blame for the lack of action on behalf of Kate, but rather that the structures of heteronormativity that foster relationships between gay boys and straight girls inherently insulate lesbian, bisexual, and queer identifying girls from recognition and institutional protection against homohatred. Therefore, a reliance on straight allies in the GSA, an identity occupied by mostly straight-identifying girls obscures the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality uniquely oppresses lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identifying girls as well as straight girls.

Discussion: Do Straight Girls Need the GSA?

Straight girls in the Park GSA admitted to joining the GSA for reasons I outlined in the discussion in chapter 5. However, in this chapter, I explored the deeper meanings of the GSA for straight and questioning girls who identify as allies and the ways in which the LGBTQQ club members, particularly lesbian, bisexual, and queer identifying girls perceived ally girls. While research tells us that straight allies join GSAs for a number of causes linked to supporting their friends or learning more about LGBTQQ experiences (Goldstein and Davis 2010; Stotzer 2009), or for personal convictions of justice, an awareness of entitlement, or a need to fulfill personal moral principles (Russell 2011), I argue that the decision for straight girls to join the GSA is
grounded in social constructions of gender. In the context of the GSA, girls are compelled to become a part of a social club that both reinforces their marginalized position in the gender hierarchy—below men, but above lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, and also empowers them in an institution that has historically stifled girls’ sexuality—the school. The GSA also offers an avenue toward upward social mobility for straight girls, where being a part of the GSA brings the possibility of praise for “being compassionate” or in fighting for the rights of others—qualities that spruce up a college application resume. However, as we have seen, this upward social mobility relies on the abandonment of lesbian and queer identified girls, who, as we’ve seen in the previous chapter, are further marginalized by and disenchanted with the GSA and its reliance on straight allies.

I asked Claire what she liked about participating in the GSA:

I don’t know…I just like it because…I just feel like open, like that just the place where you’re open. I like that. And, other clubs…I don’t feel like…it’s more like you’re focused on like a certain idea, like [the club] “Hate Not Allowed.” I tried going there and I didn’t feel the same, like I could just connect and I went to a few other clubs and it’s more of just a focus on the main idea of something, but in the GSA, I feel like it’s just really broad…anybody, any problems; anyone can go there. It’s a safe…as opposed to just a bunch of rich white kids doing this for college. GSA is more about we need it. I think I need it because I need a place to go and talk to and listen to other people’s problems…just kind of makes me feel better.

Claire claimed to need the GSA for herself. For her, to be in the GSA seemed like an escape from her past challenges of dealing with abusive, drug addicted parents, and being homeless as a teenager. To be at GSA meetings, listening to peers who were forced to deal with unsupportive parents, Claire could feel like she belonged. For Claire, the GSA provided a safe space in which
she could feel somewhat normal for having to deal with so much turmoil in her own home. Perhaps no other student organization offered that opportunity.

When Taylor argued that straight girls like gay boys because they were friends with whom they could shop for shoes, she seemed annoyed that straight girls sought gay male friends. I asked her if she thought the friendships made girls feel safer than having relationships with straight boys, and she replied, “I guess so, because then they can feel like it’s not going to threaten their femininity.” Taylor acknowledged that straight girls are embedded in a gender hierarchy that privileges men over women in heterosexual relationships. By engaging in heterosocial relationships with gay boys, straight girls had the opportunity to have relationships with men that weren’t based on their sex-love or sexual objectification (Maddison 2000).

Roseneil’s (2002) work may also inform this discussion about straight girls who ally critics in my study argued are fetishizing LGBTQQ youths. For Roseneil, queer has been “valorized” in mainstream society, in popular culture and in the media (2002). For girls who face the daily critiques of gendered culture and strict adherence to social norms of proper female behavior like dressing to avoid attention from boys and refraining from “slutty behavior,” the Gay-Straight Alliance offers a woman friendly space where fluid identities are embraced, and participation implies that one is at least open to accepting non-heterosexual identities, where being queer is celebrated. Further, in the GSA, straight girls can have relationships with gay boys without the constraints of heterosexual guidelines, nor the fear of sexual objectification by their male friend. Roseneil’s discussion of the ways in which underground queer dance clubs in Britain have bourgeoned into a cultural phenomenon, now highly visible spaces where young people of all sexual identities go to explore their desires with little risk of retribution speaks to the attraction that straight girls may have to participate in a queer friendly space, like a GSA.
Girls’ relationships with each other may also play a role in the tensions that exist between straight identifying girls and queer identifying girls, and reinforcing the GSA as a space that straight girls may actually need as a place that allows them upward mobility in a gender hierarchy that often silences and objectifies them (AAUW 1999; Bettie 2002; Brown 2003; Hamilton 2007; Kessler, Ashenden, Connell, and Dowsett 1985; Martin 1996; Orenstein 1994; Thorne 1993). According to Lyn Mikel Brown’s research, girls exist between two contradictory realities, where on the one hand, they claim to want and need close relationships with the female peers, and on the other, because they are constantly navigating a social world that silences their voices, and characterizes their worth by the look of their bodies, girls are taught to distrust one another because they must compete for a finite amount of power allowed to girls and women by a patriarchal society (2003). Brown argues, “In a sexist climate, it’s also simply easier and safer, and ultimately more profitable for girls to take out their fears and their anxieties and their anger on other girls than on boys or on a culture that denigrates, idealizes, or eroticizes qualities associated with femininity” (2003: 6). In the Park GSA, straight girls, who constituted the majority of allies on the day Kate shared her story may have been reluctant to advocate on her behalf out of the possibility that doing so wouldn’t bring any benefits back to them. Contrary, supporting gay male friends offers girls the close relationships that Brown argues girls desire without the threat of dominance through heterosexuality, nor the need to compete for a voice over privileged straight boys.
Chapter Eight

Conclusion: Rethinking the Straight Ally

According to McIntosh, “Power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it
is, in fact, permission to escape or dominate” (1988: 349). In the GSA at Park High School, the
power of allies, an unearned privilege, is almost always constructed as a necessity for the
strength of the LGBTQQ community. Yet, as McIntosh stresses, we cannot simply take this
power for granted as essential to the advancement of social equality of sexual minority youths.
Nor should we continue to shield schools from a responsibility to examine this power.

As Adrienne Rich (1980) argues in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian
Existence”, lesbian women who do not depend on men for love and companionship “must be, in
functional terms, condemned to a more devastating outsiderhood than their outsiderhood as
women” (1980: 323). I have argued in this dissertation that subscriptions to a compulsory
alliance, created from heteronormativity in our society, seeps into the ways in which sexual
minority youths think about their ability to create social change for LGBTQQ youths. Adding to
Rich (1980), I conclude that the construction of the compulsory alliance as an essential tool for
access to power for LGBTQQ youths ultimately stifles their autonomy, and deepens their
outsiderhood in a heterosexist society. Because so many of the GSA participants: straight allies,
teacher sponsors, and self-identified LGBTQQ youth constructed allies within a context of
unexamined and unearned power as a necessity for protection and to maintain a social legitimacy within the school, heterosexual privilege remains intact, unchallenged, and invisible in the gay straight alliance. The overemphasis of allies as powerful, and the failure to address heterosexual privilege within this context of power recreates the oppression of the closet. Further, the gendering of allies as straight identified girls contributes to tensions between and a unique marginalization of queer-identifying girls who feel alienated from a community that claims to support them.

When I asked Alexandria, a senior, who self-identified as an openly bisexual girl to discuss her thoughts about her peers in the GSA, she replied:

I think their heart is in the right place. They all try to help the LGBTQ+ community, but...a lot of them are just in there to look good. I feel like I’ve talked to a lot of them, and they’re just like, ‘Yeah!! You know…I like gay people!’ And then they talk about like...they don’t quite talk about it...just how their ideas are structured in terms of the gender binary-things like that. I don’t think they’re as open-minded as they could be, but otherwise, I think they’re just a lovely community to belong to. I love them so much.

Alexandria spoke to the complexities of the role of allies in the GSA. On one hand, she believed that allies were at the meetings with good intentions: to support their LGBTQQ friends, but on the other hand, she felt that allies were missing a comprehension of issues that LGBTQQ youth face in our society. Although Alexandria didn’t identify it in her own words, her response to my question alludes to my argument that heterosexual privilege is unexamined in the GSA. In the GSA at Park, allies have good intentions, but could never be the most affective supporters because they were never challenged with examining their own heterosexual privilege.
Limitations

My greatest limitation in this study is that although I ultimately discovered a small group of students who were strongly disenchanted with the presence of allies in what they perceived should be an exclusively LGBTQQ group, I only reached 3 of them for interviews. Because I was not permitted to conduct participant observation throughout the typical school day, I was unable to connect and build rapport with youth outside of the GSA. I had to rely on students within the GSA, with whom I had some rapport and legitimacy, to invite their peers with whom I had no contact to participate in my study. Rose did connect me with Fairchild, and informed me that she had another contact, but that friend had debilitating social anxiety and didn’t want to be interviewed unless it was an online questionnaire. I did not have permission from either my home university’s IRB, nor the school district’s review board, and nor did I have the time to go through an amendment process with the IRBs before the conclusion of my fieldwork. I discovered the anti-allies two months before my fieldwork ended, and by that time, overall participation in the GSA waned to less than 10 students at each meeting. Ultimately, I theorized about a small group who claimed there were many other individuals like them, but with whom I did not connect or observe. I saw no reason to disbelieve my research participants when there were insistent that their friends existed.

In my study, I honed in on the intricacies of one student organization that ultimately led me to unpack the complex interactions within that small but deeply layered space. Another limitation to my research may be that I did not look as critically at the structure of the school as an institution as may have been necessary. According to Epstein et al., schools as social
institutions, are central to the construction of heterosexuality (2002). Children spend large amounts of time in schooling, and children in secondary school are especially vulnerable to the pressures of performing heterosexuality, and are ostracized if they do not conform to heterosexual norms. Future research might look more deeply at the school-GSA relationships beyond the surface existence of GSAs as they translate to a safer overall school climate. Or, we might ask if GSAs simply exist in the high school because that is the space in which most young people negotiate large portions of their daily lives? Perhaps it’s more difficult to convince young people to meet in a designated queer-friendly space outside of their school campuses. In other words, are there more complex relationships at work between the GSAs and the formal and informal curriculums of heterosexuality? Does the larger school culture influence or shape the social processes occurring in the GSA? My suspicion is that indeed, the larger structural processes at work within the school impact the GSA in meaningful ways, but a measure of those impacts would have to consider the cultural and geographical context of the school itself.

In the context of GSAs the role of allies deserves considerable rethinking. Although most students in the GSA place a heavy trust in the necessity of allies, they too may not be recognizing heterosexual privilege. According to Berkowitz (2013), gay men who desire to have children often construct traditional gender roles within their families. For example, a gay father might embody a traditional feminine or mother role, like being the dominant caretaker and even identifying as the “soccer mom” (2013). Berkowitz argues that these adherences to traditional heterosexual gender roles are born from a heterosexist society that privileges parents for being in a heterosexual relationship as being better suited to parent young children. Similarly, for LGBTQQ adolescents who claim to rely so heavily on straight allies in the GSA or they risk losing legitimacy as a strong club for social change, I theorize that they are constructing those
beliefs within heteronormative underpinnings of the wider society. As the compulsory alliance is pushed onto them in the form of Ally Week, among others, LGBTQ youths are unable to see the ways in which their commitments to straight allies are embedded in heterosexism. For those students whose experience in the GSA is not one of safety, their GSA may not be functioning as it was intended: as a safe space for students to share ideas and stories free from judgment, and those students need to be heard as well. In both instances, the presence of straight allies shapes the meaning of the GSA for LGBTQ youths.

We must be careful, however to not place blame solely on straight identifying girls, for they too are subject to the gender inequality that exists in schools and in the larger society. Their reluctance to interact with and advocate on behalf of queer-identifying girls speaks to the powerlessness of lesbian and queer girls who cannot offer access to upward mobility for straight girls as gay boys can. Schools continually regulate adolescent female sexuality (Fine 1988), and girls’ access to upward social mobility (Brown 1998; Brown 2003; Thorne 1993), and participation in a GSA gives them the opportunity to use traditional female gender roles of nurturance and mothering in a space that is safe from the imposition of straight identifying boys. In a GSA, straight girls have privilege, and more than any other social group in the club—it is a woman friendly space, one in which they receive praise and intimate friendships with boys they may not experience outside of the club meetings. As universities place a heavy emphasis on diversity initiatives and inclusiveness, (Brint 1998; Ward 2008a; Ward 2008b), adding participation in a high school GSA, when one does not identify as a sexual minority youth, cannot hurt the chances of being admitted to college. In this context, given the challenges to accessing limited social resources, participating in a GSA seems reasonable for a straight identified girl.
Future Considerations

Future practices in GSAs might focus on the ways in which adult sponsors and student leaders can bring discussions of heterosexual privilege into their high school GSAs. In my interviews, straight allies never acknowledged their own unearned privilege, and in all 34 meetings I attended in 14 months, heterosexual privilege was a two minute discussion on only one occasion. During the first meeting of the year, Dorian, the new president of the GSA sat at the front of the room after everyone introduced him/herself, and said, “When you’re an ally, you need to check your privilege. You need to recognize that you have privileges that your friends might not.” Alexandria then asked Dorian to tell them what privilege is, and Dorian says, “It’s not worrying that you’ll be kicked out by your parents because you’re gay.” She then tells her peers that she had a male friend who “was afraid to go into locker rooms because he was gay and was afraid of being judged.”

The discourse of heterosexual privilege should not be a passing talk where one person mentions its existence and then never brings it to light again; this reinforces the invisibility of this privilege and lessons the perception of its power. Instead, the examination of heterosexual privilege should be frequently addressed in high schools and in GSAs. Rochlin’s (1985) “The Heterosexual Questionnaire” might be a great place to start. I do a classroom activity in my college courses where we read the questions as a class, and I’m struck at how many of my heterosexual college students have never considered these questions for themselves. I predict the same might be true for younger students.
As Miceli (2005) highlights the historical shift that gave birth to the GSA movement: from the early support group model, aimed at working with LGBTQ youth only, to the transition to the youth activist model of the GSA, where LGBTQ youth and their straight allies participate in cultural awareness of LGBTQ youth issues. I argue for a new transition to an LGBTQ only political group model in schools, where straight supporters of LGBTQ youth stand behind, rather than in front of or to the side of these young people. I argue that self-identified straight allies need to stop taking credit for their “ally” status, for this only serves to reinforce a heterosexual privilege, for which they already receive daily rewards and praise. This is not to say that straight people who want to support LGBT identifying youth, shouldn’t do so, but rather that for some GSAs, the role of straight allies need to be examined and restructured to give privilege visibility. In doing so, marginalized lives will come to the forefront and young people with straight privilege may begin to understand the structures within which they receive daily social benefits. The challenge for straight allies may be to stand behind rather than in front of LGBT youth who desire to tell their own stories.

I recognize that my suggestion may not work for all GSAs, as we know that geographic regions and certain micro cultures in schools would not even permit the existence of a GSA, because of pervasive cultures of homophobia and anti-gay bullying and violence, and homophobia. However, I do argue that the compulsory alliance and current ally discourse does not give sexual minority youths the space to explore their own ability to create change toward social equality. Nor does the assumption that LGBTQQ youths need allies for power encourage a dialogue about the consequence of compulsory heterosexuality that is so entrenched in our schools. Instead, the compulsory alliance stifles sexual minority youths and recreates the confines of the closet, another space dominated by heteronormativity.
Being a supporter should mean that one must fully acknowledge and recognize heterosexual privilege, and efforts should focus on checking one’s own, and combatting that privilege in others daily, rather than re-privileging an ally status, as I argue about GLSEN’s sponsorship of “Ally Week,” an offensive ritual for some of the students in my study. The language needs to shift from the LGBTQ community somehow needs allies, or they are unable to successfully fight against inequality, harassment, and violence on their own. By not analyzing heterosexuality, straight allies understand the world of LGBTQQ youth as only as they are deviants, or abnormal, as our society constructs heteronormativity (Ingraham 1996).

Through my observations and interviews, I’ve established a few suggestions that both schools and GSAs might incorporate into their practices. Perhaps straight ally participation should be limited to one meeting a month, or maybe they should only come if invited by an LGBTQQ student? Beyond the GSA, schools can establish what Lipkin (2005) identifies as a gay and lesbian curriculum in which all students in high schools learn about LGBTQQ experiences, not just in one elected month, (think: Black History Month), but rather as a completely integrated part of the entire school curriculum. Research suggests that incorporating LGBT friendly knowledge and practices into curriculum creates a safer school climate (Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013; Toomey, McGuire, and Russell 2012). Straight allies can also learn specific responsibilities of what it means to be an ally who is supportive to her/his peers. My research participants stated that they wanted support in the form of correcting homophobic behaviors, but not someone who would speak over or for them. And finally, GSAs can think about the language they choose to deploy both within and outside of club meetings. When GSA participants distribute stickers on Coming Out Day that read, “straight but not narrow” such a declaration takes away from the significance of a sexual minority youth’s experience of coming
out. Furthermore, the declaration reinforces the condition that although they are claiming an ally status, they are reminding everyone that they are indeed straight, and thus not sexually deviant. Many students, like Lucas and Sadie claimed that “straight people are just like gay people,” connoting sameness, yet there is still a desire to declare that one is not gay.

I cannot argue that anti-ally students exist in every school that has a Gay-Straight Alliance, nor can I generalize my findings to all high school GSAs, but ultimately, the ally critics who surfaced in my study, in addition to the other corroborating narratives I uncovered, revealed tensions with the presence of allies, and speak to a call for a deeper analysis of allies and their role in a GSA. Specifically, we need to question the ways in which we construct an ally discourse. Most often, allies are given a so-called free pass to enter a space in which they are automatically privileged, and may take for granted, or even expect that their privilege goes unnoticed, and unexamined. Coupled with the reinforcement of heterosexual privilege was the lack of discourse about heterosexual privilege. Group leaders missed opportunities to address straight allies as carriers of unearned privilege, and in a group of students who often struggle to establish their own havens of self-empowerment, their self-identified allies did not examine nor fully understand some of the truest needs of their LGBTQQ peers. As scholars have argued (McIntosh 1988; McIntosh 2012; Rich 1980), failure to acknowledge and examine unearned privilege as power actually reinforces that power.

It wasn’t until I left high school that I learned that Gay-Straight Alliances existed in schools. I desperately wanted to be a kid who could find a safe space in which I could share my fears about losing my uncle, and I wanted to be that ally, just like the ones I interviewed, who could “protect” gays from persecution. I wanted to protect my uncle. I was incredibly naïve, and although I came to identify and acknowledge my own heterosexual privilege, it wasn’t until I
did this study, that I realized I wasn’t confronting my own heterosexual privilege at its deepest levels. I had to accept that my desires to want to be a part of a Gay-Straight Alliance were born out of my own selfish wishes to “protect” others with my heterosexual privilege rather than to listen and criticize that my own privilege was part of a larger story of oppression.
Appendix A: Parental and Participant Consent Form

Northeastern University, Department of Sociology, Boston, MA
Investigator Name: Amie Levesque, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate
Title of Project: Student Culture in High School

Parental Consent Form

I would like you to take part in my research. The research is about student life in high school, looking at student interactions, relationships, whether or not students feel safe in their school, participation in school activities like sports, theater, and after school clubs, and what it means to be a boy or a girl in high school. I will be present in your school during this school year to do my research. If you and your parent(s)/legal guardian(s) agree that you may participate in the research, I would like to interview you for about 1 hour.

I will record the interview on audio tape and the entire interview will be completely confidential. Your name will not be on the tape. It will be labeled by a code name. I will not tell what you say during our conversation to your parents, teachers, principal, or friends of yours I may interview, unless I feel that you are at risk for hurting yourself or someone else. I will also write notes during the interview. These will be used to keep track of important ideas that you raise in order to help you discuss them more and help me to learn more about your ideas and you.

The interview will take place at a time and place of your choice: either at home (with your parents home, although not necessarily in the same area of the interview) or in a public place such as a park or coffee shop.

Some of the questions may be of a personal nature. For example, I may ask you how you describe being a boy or a girl, or whether or not you have a girlfriend or a boyfriend. The risks of the research are that you may find some of the questions personal and sensitive, and if your answers become known to other people, you might be embarrassed socially. I will take great care to make sure that nobody else finds out your answers. There is no benefit to you from the research. However, I hope the research will benefit society by showing how teenagers understand themselves and each other.

5 With approval from my home University’s IRB, I elected to not include Gay-Straight Alliance in any part of my consent form, for informing parents/guardians that their child participated in a GSA might have caused harm to or disapproval from a parent for a child who was keeping his/her participation secret from a parent/guardian. This is also reflected in the generic title of my project. GSA participation led some parents of my participants to question their child’s sexuality strictly because he/she revealed his/her attendance at a meeting. Because of this potential, several research participants did not tell parents they went to GSA meetings. Additionally, the Park High School District IRB required a complete revision of my initial consent form because school policy dictated that all school-to-family correspondence be written at a third grade reading level for ease of comprehension for all parents/guardians, thus some of the more specific details of my research were omitted for ease of comprehension. This consent form is that revised version that was subsequently approved by the Northeastern University IRB and distributed to parents/guardians and research participants.
After the research is completed, I may save the transcripts of the tapes and my notes for use in future research by myself or others. However, all materials will still remain confidential. Your name will not be connected with the transcripts if in any way they are to be used in the future by others.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to not take part, and may choose to not answer any questions, or may stop the interview at any time. Participating or not participating will NOT affect your grade or standing in your classes or school.

Parents, please be aware that under the Protection of Pupil Rights Act, you have the right to review a copy of the questions asked of or materials that will be used with your students. If you have any questions about the research, you may call me, Amie Levesque, at (303) 993-5221. The interview schedule is available to you and your parent(s)/legal guardian(s) upon their request. If you and your parent(s)/legal guardian(s) agree that you may take part in the research, please return a signed copy of this form to me at the time of our interview. You may keep the other copy for future reference. If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a participant in this research project, please contact Nan Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection at (617) 373-7570 or email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

I have read this consent form and

_____ I AGREE to take part in the research

_____ I DO NOT agree to take part in the research

Student’s Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

Printed Name: _________________________________________________________________

I have read this consent form and

_____ I AGREE to have my child take part in the research

_____ I DO NOT agree to have my child take part in the research

Parent/Legal Guardian’s Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

Printed Name: _________________________________________________________________
Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Amie Levesque: Final Interview Schedule

Dissertation Research: “Bullying, Gender, and Homophobia in High Schools”

Interviewer (Amie Levesque) will say the following: This interview is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate, nor do you have to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. If you feel uncomfortable and/or do not wish to answer a question, please say, “I do not wish to answer this question,” and I will go on to the next question. Please know that if I feel that you are in danger of hurting yourself or someone else, I reserve the right to offer you resources to seek immediate counseling. In the event that I feel you may hurt someone else, I am obligated to inform your guidance counselor. Otherwise, this interview is completely anonymous. I will not share your answers with anyone. I will assign a “fake” name to this interview and in my report afterward. Do you wish to proceed with the interview?

General

- Age
- Sex
- Grade
- Living Arrangements
- Parents’/Guardians’ Jobs

---

6 Interview questions are in no particular order (except for the first section of “general” questions, which I always asked first). Park High School required that I report any student who I felt might threaten the school or other peers to a guidance counselor. Ultimately, no student admitted to thinking about causing harm to oneself, the school, or someone else, so I made no reports.
• Religion
• Brothers and Sisters
• Race/Ethnicity
• How long have you been at Park High?
• How do you get to school each day?
• How long does it take you to get to school?

Self
• Tell me a little bit about yourself. How would you describe yourself?
• What kind of grades do you get?
• What kinds of hobbies do you do?
• Do you plan to go to college?

Defining Gender
• Describe what it means to be masculine/a man
• Describe what it means to be feminine/a woman
• Can you be both masculine and feminine?
• Do/Don’t you consider yourself masculine? Feminine?
  ○ Why/Not?
• Do your peer groups consider you to be masculine? Feminine? Both? Neither?
• Does your family consider you to be masculine? Feminine? Both? Neither?
• Do you feel pressure to be masculine or feminine?
  --from society?
  --from your peers?
  --from your family?
How did you come to your thoughts about masculinity/femininity/gender? Who taught them to you? Where do you learn about femininity/masculinity?

School Activities

What school-related activities/clubs do you participate in?

What role do you fulfill in these activities/clubs (i.e. sports/extra-curricular activities)? How would you define that role?

What are the roles of other students in the club, and how do you define those roles?

What do you think about other students who participate in this activity?

How did you learn about the activity/club you participate in?

Did a friend/teacher ask you to join? Join on your own?

Why did you decide to join the activity/club?

How long have you been a member of the activity/club?

How often do you attend meetings?

Do you attend by yourself, or do you go with friends?

Do you find that more girls or boys participate in this activity? How might you explain this?

Describe your experiences in the activity/club

Do you feel “safe” in the meetings? Why/not?

Do you act differently in the meetings than you do with your friends or family?

Do you feel comfortable at the meetings?

How so/not?

---

7 Although I only interviewed students who participated in the GSA, like my consent form, I did not mention the GSA in any of my questions on this protocol because parents/guardians were permitted to see the questions I was asking their children. In the end, no parents/guardians asked to see my interview schedule.
• What do your friends think of your participation in the activity/club?
• Have they been supportive of your involvement?
• Have they ridiculed you for your involvement?
• What does your family think of your participation in this activity/club?
• Have they been supportive of your involvement?
• Have they ridiculed you for your involvement?
• What do you like about participating in this activity/club?
• What is hard or challenging about participating in the activity/club?
• Why do you think this club is called “YYY”?
• Would you attend the club/activity if it had a different name?
• Do you tell people that you are in this activity/club?
  o Peers?
  o Friends?
  o Family?
    ▪ If not, Why not?
• Do you think Park High, as a whole, is supportive of students in this activity/club?
  o How so/not?
• Do you think the students at Park High are supportive of their peers in this activity/club?
  o How so/not?
• Are there any clubs/activities that you support, but you don’t go to meetings regularly?

Experiences at School/Perceptions of School Climate

• Describe your overall experience at Park High
• Do you like going to Park?
• What do you like about Park?
• Are there things you would change at Park?
• Have you seen incidents where students do/say homophobic things?
  o Can you describe them?
• Have you seen incidents where students do/say racist things?
  o Can you describe them?
• Have you seen incidents where students do/say sexist things?
• Have you seen incidents of bullying and/or other forms of violence at Park?
  o Can you describe them?
• Do you feel safe to express who you are, at Park? Why/Not?
• Have you ever been teased for expressing who you are? How?

Family Life/Life outside of school
• Describe your relationship with your family
• Do you feel like they support you in whatever you want to do?
• Do you feel like they put pressure on you to be someone else?

Conclusion
• Is there anything else you would like to add?
• Why did you volunteer to do this interview?
References


—. 2014.


Stotzer, Rebecca. 2009. ""Straight Allies: Supportive Attitudes Toward Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals in a College Sample"." *Sex Roles* 60.


