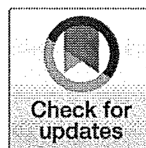
Qualitative Sociology (2019) 42:205–225
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9411-9

"I've Always Wanted a Gay Family Member!": Straight Ally Girls and Gender Inequality in a High School Gay-Straight Alliance



Amie Levesque[1]

Published online: 30 January 2019
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2019, corrected publication 2019

Abstract

Research on high school Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) focuses on these clubs as safe spaces for students of all sexual and gender orientations to gather, arguing that GSAs are usually associated with less hostile school climates. Less studied are the interactions among students in GSAs and the ways gender and sexuality intersect in this context. This ethnographic study bridges this gap, examining inequality along lines of gender and sexual identity. Findings show that straight girls are given a voice in the GSA, applauded for their support, and immune from critique of their ally work, however, some lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identifying (LBQ) girls are disenchanted with straight girls' participation. Some LBQ girls remain silent critics of their high school's GSA, or abandon it completely. This research suggests that within GSAs, the unconditional inclusion of straight allies may be reproducing the very inequalities such groups exist to dismantle.

Keywords Youth · Gender · Sexuality · Schools · Gay-straight alliances

At the end of a Monday lunchtime meeting, Mr. Cruz, an openly gay teacher-sponsor of the gay-straight alliance (GSA) at Park High School (pseudonym), asked students, as he often did, if anyone had any concerns in school: "Is everyone feeling safe?" Students nodded as they packed up their belongings for the next period when Sadie, who identified as a straight ally, raised her hand and shared her excitement about a revelation she encountered over the weekend: "I've been an ally my whole life, and over the weekend, my dad sat me down to tell us that my grandma is gay. I was so happy because I've always wanted a gay family member!" After Sadie shared the news of her grandmother, without commenting, students stood up as the bell signaled the end of lunch, and the meeting adjourned. Sadie's news to the GSA never returned as a discussion topic in subsequent meetings; indeed, I never observed the

✉ Amie Levesque
amie.levesque@du.edu

[1] University of Denver, Department of Sociology and Criminology, 2000 E. Asbury Ave, Denver, CO 80208, USA

critique of any ally at a Park GSA meeting. The timing of Sadie's reveal—as a response to an inquiry of students' perceptions of safety by Mr. Cruz—illuminated the complexities of being a straight ally in a GSA. On one hand, Sadie shared her affinity for her gay family member, interactionally suggesting that she approved of non-heterosexuality, but on the other, she seemed unaware that her approach to being an ally might be problematic. What then, is Sadie's role as an ally, and how does her and other allies' participation affect their lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) peers? I examine these questions through ethnographic fieldwork and interviews to explore the ways in which GSA participation by well-intentioned straight ally girls may have multi-dimensional consequences for their LGBTQ peers. Specifically, I address how what I call *the privilege of immunity from critique*—the ability to maintain a status in a given context, without the fear of criticism, disparagement, or exclusion—subverted gender hierarchies in the Park GSA by simultaneously 1.) allowing straight girls a voice, immune from open criticisms of their ally work, to advise their LGBTQ peers; and 2.) reproducing inequalities between straight and lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) girls.

Initially created in Massachusetts by a straight daughter of gay parents and her gay teacher, GSAs first emerged in the late 1980's as clubs within schools where LGBTQ youths, and straight allies could gather to explore issues and activism related to LGBTQ rights and challenges both in and outside of school. Research on high school GSAs focuses on their associated impact on school climates. Conclusions from quantitative studies argue that the presence of a GSA in a school leads to a less homophobic and safer school climate for LGBTQ students (Joseph Kosciw et al. 2008; Joseph Kosciw et al. 2012; Walls et al. 2010). In a qualitative study by Griffin et al. (2003), researchers found that GSAs had specific roles in schools: providing a support and counseling group, a safe space for youth, and as a vehicle for raising awareness of LGBTQ issues in schools. For GSAs, a safe space means that all students, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, may feel free to share their thoughts without ridicule. The safe space has different meanings for youths who join GSAs; some youth seek counseling and support, while others are looking for an avenue to promote awareness of and educate about LGBTQ issues (Fetner et al. 2012). Many young people who experienced a high school GSA felt empowered to be a voice for LGBTQ issues in society (Lee 2002; Miceli 2005; S. Russell et al. 2009).

Straight allies join GSAs for a variety of reasons, including supporting their LGBTQ-identifying peers and family members and promoting social justice (G. Russell 2011). The work that allies do once they are members of LGBTQ activist groups and how that work is understood by group members remains a deepening field of inquiry. Much of the research on straight ally participation in LGBTQ activist organizations focuses on adult groups, similar to GSAs, where straight allies are often the parents of LGBTQ-identifying children and adults (Broad 2002; Fields 2001; Mathers et al. 2018). According to Mathers et al. (2018), in a study of an adult LGBTQ activist group that includes and utilizes straight ally participation to gain legitimacy and increase awareness for LGBTQ rights outside of the organization, group members practiced privileging heterosexuality and sanctifying allies. For Mathers et al., the straight participants in Allied Pride, the organization they studied, "were intimately familiar with the dismissal of LGBTQ concerns and problems in the wider society and believed that the answer to these problems could be found in heterosexual advocacy" (2018: 843). One of the ways in which Allied Pride privileged heterosexuality was through the process of sanctifying allies, "defining them as the ultimate saviors for sexual minorities and the heroes that could one day provide sexual equality" (11). In giving straight allies the privilege of immunity from critique,

the Park GSA participated in a form of sanctifying allies in which advice and comments from allies were unconditionally accepted.

The limited research on ally participation in youth-led GSAs, positions straight allies as necessary for dismantling heteronormative practices and bullying in schools (Miceli 2005). According to Miceli (2005), "The [GSA] 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). Centering youth with a dominant sexual identity as leaders of an LGBTQ movement warrants a closer exploration of how straight ally youth participation impacts the GSA experiences of their LGBTQ-identifying peers.

Straight allies in adult-led LGBTQ movements are typically women (Goldstein and Davis 2010; Mathers et al. 2018; Montgomery and Stewart 2010; G. Russell 2011; Stotzer 2009), and high school GSAs reveal the same gender disparity in straight ally participation (LaMar and Kite 1998; Miceli 2005; Montgomery and Stewart 2010), as they did in my research. As gendered hierarchies exist in schools (Bettie 2002b; Brown 2003; Hamilton 2007; Martin 1996; Thorne 1993), GSAs are typically designed to offer spaces in which all students, including straight girls, may have a voice to speak about issues of gender and sexuality. My observations of the Park GSA reveal that this inclusion of straight ally girls, who carry the privilege of immunity from critique, complicated relationships within the club in gendered ways. Straight girls supported and protested on behalf of their "gay best (boy) friends" while alienating some of the LBQ-identifying girls. I utilize what Hochschild (2003) calls "magnified moments"—powerful episodes in our research that "stand out as metaphorically rich, [and] unusually elaborate" (2003: 16) to show the gendered and unequal responses to Kate's, Yvonne's, and Johnny's experiences in school. Kate was a lesbian girl who was assaulted during gym class and charged with navigating the Park administration on her own when she revealed the event to her GSA teacher-sponsors and peers. Yvonne and Johnny were two self-identified gay boys who dressed in drag and were widely and publicly supported by their peers and teachers in the GSA. In these three narratives, I show the unequal responses to gay and lesbian young people who participated in the GSA and the intersection of gender and sexuality in these events. I situate my analysis within the literature that intersects gender and sexuality in schools and straight women's participation in queer spaces to complicate straight ally girls' participation in a GSA.

Gender and Sexuality in Schools

Research on girls' gendered experiences in schooling agrees that relationships with their peers are situated in the context of social hierarchies that limit girls' social mobility and marginalize them (Bettie 2002a; Brown 2003). Within schools, girls struggle to negotiate contradictory and limiting expectations emphasizing physical appearance and passivity and placing them beneath boys in the social hierarchy. In Pascoe's (2007) ethnographic research, for instance, girls were subject to constant harassment and derogatory remarks in status games played among boys. A consistent finding in this research is that girls' agency and status is limited at school. For same-sex attracted girls, heteronormativity in schools is magnified; girls who do not embody heterosexual femininity are cast as outsiders and may struggle to fit in (Payne 2007; Wilkinson and Pearson 2009).

Although feminist literature encourages more nuanced ways of thinking about feminine identities as complex and multidimensional (Bettie 2002a; Butler 1999; Schippers 2007),

research in schools has consistently documented limited, heteronormative expressions of gender and sexuality for girls. Consequently, straight girls and boys may be ill-equipped to fully understand the privileges from which they benefit and how those benefits shape their relationships. Because GSAs can offer a space to explore meanings of sexuality when straight young people have so few avenues for understanding queer experiences (Epstein et al. 2002), further research is warranted to examine whether GSAs successfully engage in critical discourse of gender and heterosexual privilege.

Straight Women: Heteronormativity and Avoiding the "Lesbian" Label

Because emphasized femininity (Connell 1987) is defined by a gender performance in which women must reside in heterosexual relationships for men only, women who cross gender boundaries or associate with lesbian women are often challenged to prove their heterosexuality. Researchers argue that women who transgress gender boundaries (e.g. in playing team sports or engaging in homoerotic behaviors with other girls) must maintain a heterosexual identity to avoid what Bosson (2006) calls "identity misclassification." Women avoid the homosexual label in a variety of ways: by outwardly declaring heterosexuality, performing stereotypical gender norms, or by "Othering" women who embody transgressive gender or sexual identities. In Nielson et al.'s (2000) study of students violating gender norms, research participants constantly declared their heterosexual identity while transgressing gender boundaries. Similarly, young women who participated in collegiate-level team or intramural sports were often scrutinized for their participation in a "men's" or "lesbian-labeled" arena, and focused on proving heterosexual femininity by growing their hair longer or wearing makeup, off the field (Blinde and Taub 1992; Ezzell 2009). In Ezzell's study, female rugby players referenced "mannish lesbians" who played rugby on *other* teams, but were quick to reiterate that many of the women on their own rugby team were *not* lesbians (2009: 115). Another way straight identifying women avoid misclassification is by distancing themselves from women who embody masculinity, self-identify with or have been labeled queer, bisexual, or lesbian (Brown 2003; Hamilton 2007; Maddison 2000).

In spaces designated for LGBTQ people, research shows that straight women's Othering and distancing practices often marginalize lesbian women (Casey 2004; Hamilton 2007). Casey (2004) and Hamilton (2007) both found that straight women's encroachment on gay and lesbian public gathering spaces changed the meaning of those spaces for queer women; some no longer felt welcome, supported, or safe. In Hamilton's study, straight college women went to gay bars and participated in same-sex affection with each other, rendering "lesbian desire invisible, and [reconfiguring] it as a performance for men" (2007: 167).

Like Mathers et al. (2018), this research does not account for the relationships between LGBTQ and straight-identifying youths in schools, particularly youths who claim to be supportive of their LGBTQ peers and join a GSA as allies. As Lipkin (2005) acknowledges, research with LGBTQ people largely focuses on adults. In this article, I build upon the work of Mathers' et al. to address the complex and intersectional consequences of the persistent privileging of heterosexuality and sanctifying of allies in a youth-centered club. I suggest that the practices of the Park GSA complicated the relationships between straight ally girls and some LBQ-identifying girls in the club, recreating inequalities along lines of gender and sexuality among some of its members. Straight girls' privilege of immunity from critique, and the subsequent praise they received in the celebration of Ally Week shaped the experiences of

some LBQ girls, shifting the meaning of the queer-friendly space in ways that led to their private criticisms of or departure from the club.

Finally, in this study, I do not endeavor to generalize my findings to all GSAs in all schools. Rather, I examine the data I gathered as a case study at Park High School. I analyze the social processes of privileging heterosexuality and granting immunity from critique to straight allies as processes that may exist in any organization conducting activist work related to LGBTQ issues, particularly those organizations that may be structured similarly, and in a similar context as Park High School's GSA (see Becker 1990).

Setting and Method

Over two academic years (from mid-2012 through 2013), I conducted an ethnographic study with the GSA at a large urban public high school I call Park High School. Park resides close to downtown in a Midwestern city of over 500,000 residents, and the school is racially and socioeconomically diverse. The more than 2000 students who attend Park come from all neighborhoods around the city I call Parkview—from government subsidized housing complexes, to multi-million dollar homes. The local sociopolitical climate of Parkview tends to lean liberal, with school district policies that protect students from harassment and discrimination targeted at gender and/or sexual identity. The city of Parkview admires Park for its rigorous academics and diverse student body, and because of these characteristics, affluent parents in Parkview often choose Park High over private schools.

The Park GSA held weekly meetings, with approximately five to twenty students, during the lunch break in an inconspicuous classroom far from the front entrance of the school. Students gathered and told personal stories about being LGBTQ, which often included sharing successes and struggles with coming out, conflict with their families, and news about famous queer people in popular culture. Straight-identified allies appeared at every meeting and were invited, like every participant, to share their thoughts on LGBTQ student concerns. A large part of meetings was devoted to preparing for important dates like Coming Out Day or Ally Week: a week honoring allies.

Generally, student officers (president, vice president, and secretary) ran meetings with three adult teacher-sponsors—Betsy, Mr. Cruz, and Mr. Connors. Betsy, a white and straight-identified theater teacher at Park, started the GSA in the early 1990s to create a safe gathering place for gay and lesbian youths and their allies. Unlike Mr. Cruz and Mr. Connors, students addressed Betsy by her first name—many chose to spend their lunches with her, and she opened her office for them to heat their food in her microwave. During GSA meetings, theater students would briefly appear to say hello to Betsy as they passed her classroom—she was a popular and loved teacher at Park. Betsy told me that when she created the GSA, other students would throw rocks at the windows during meetings, and people left death threats on her home answering machine. Soon after she started the club, Betsy asked Mr. Cruz, a gay-identified Latino man, to be another teacher-sponsor. Betsy and Mr. Cruz, along with Mr. Connors (a white man who attended several meetings, but rarely spoke and never shared his sexuality) usually sat to the side at meetings.

Betsy and Mr. Cruz would sometimes introduce current news events about states proposing legalization of same-sex marriage or remind students of upcoming dates, like "Ally Week" or "Coming Out Day." Mr. Cruz attended meetings regularly and often checked in to be sure that students were feeling safe at school. Occasionally, he introduced Gay and Lesbian history,

discussing events like the Stone Wall Riots or the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but he encouraged students to lead the meeting. When student leaders and club members ran out of discussion topics, the gathering became less formal, and students turned toward each other to chat and eat their lunches.

I attended a total of 34 GSA meetings over 14 school-calendar months where I was mostly an outside observer. I occasionally participated in meeting discussions when prompted by participants, if they believed I had some academic knowledge on an issue related to gender or sexuality. I also observed two "Days of Silence" and a "Coming Out Day," during which students stood at the front of the school in the morning and promoted awareness of LGBTQ oppression and rights. During my observations, I engaged in countless conversations and informal interviews with students and teachers. All names and places are pseudonyms.

I conducted 23 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students—sixteen cisgender[1] girls and seven cisgender boys. Two students identified as multi-racial; five as Hispanic or Mexican, and 15 identified as white or Caucasian. Two boys self-identified as straight allies (one attended three meetings and the other only appeared at two). Four boys self-identified as gay, and one self-identified as bisexual. Four of the 16 I interviewed self-identified as bisexual; two identified as lesbian; two identified as pansexual[2]; one identified as questioning and an ally; five identified as straight allies; and two girls said they were queer. During my research, I did not meet any students who openly identified as transgender. I asked students about their individual roles in the GSA, and only straight-identifying students, and one girl who was "questioning" claimed to be "allies." Therefore, when discussing allies in this study, I am only referring to straight or questioning students (not LGBTQ students) who identified as an ally. This is not to say that allies cannot identify with non-straight sexualities in other contexts or studies, simply that they did not in my study.

Given the sporadic nature of attendance at GSA meetings, where some students came regularly and others appeared once and never again, I relied on a convenience sample and interviewed any willing students. All interviewees attended at least one GSA meeting at Park. I conducted interviews in public spaces like local coffee shops, and they lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. Because this project focused on the experiences of youths in a high school GSA, I relied on observations through ethnographic data gathering to glean an understanding of adult relationships with students in the club.

I transcribed all interviews and open-coded field notes and transcripts for emergent themes that appeared in my data (like the participation of straight girls, straight ally privilege, gender inequality, and LBQ girls' criticisms of allies), consistent with a grounded theoretical approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I focus my analysis on gender and sexuality, and although race is an important intersection of these identities, in my study, tensions between students did not reveal significant racialized interactions. GSA leadership consisted of white, Hispanic/Mexican/Latino, and multi-racial identities, and straight allies also identified as white, Mexican, and multi-racial. One outlying code involved the lesbian-identifying co-president of the club (Dorian) who was quite vocal at meetings, describing herself as "loud" and "masculine." Dorian's power in the club does not alter my conclusions about LBQ identifying girls feeling marginalized by straight ally girls; indeed, not *all* LBQ-identifying girls felt alienated by

[1] Identifies according to the gender they were assigned at birth

[2] Students who defined their sexuality as pansexual stated that they did not consider gender when they chose a partner. Instead, Callie, who identified as pansexual, stated, "[pansexual means] liking people of all genders. There's this one person I'm with that doesn't identify as cisgender and doesn't identify with their sex."

straight allies. Dorian was the only person in the group to publicly raise awareness of heterosexual privilege, and she was critical of her straight aunt who, according to Dorian, treated her like a "prop for her liberal agenda." Dorian also showed that despite bringing heterosexual privilege to the attention of the club at an early meeting, this discussion did not thread through any other meetings. Instead, Dorian participated in the sanctifying of allies as she led the group in its participation of Ally Week. Like her LBQ peers, Dorian's voice was still limited in its power to critique ally work.

As a straight-identifying, cisgender adult woman and feminist, I recognized that my privileges (adult, cisgender, straight) might impact LGBTQ-identifying youths' willingness to share their stories with me in an interview. Sexuality, unlike race, gender, and age, which may be outwardly visible on a person, may be an invisible identity, and in a GSA where students were encouraged to share their sexual identity with everyone else, I believed they had a right to know about me as they decided if they would participate in an interview. I introduced myself as a PhD student, doing research about the experience of being in a GSA today. On two occasions, I mentioned that I identified as a straight woman, and had recently experienced the death of my 47-year-old uncle and godfather, one of the most important men in my childhood, a gay man who also had HIV. When I learned of my uncle's HIV diagnosis in the 1980s, I was only in 5th grade, and I thought his death was imminent because any time I heard about HIV/AIDS, it was always linked to a public narrative of gay men dying. I remembered learning somewhere that GSAs existed at some high schools, and hoped that one would start at mine, but it never did. I shared with students that I wondered why people might join a GSA and what it would be like to participate in one. To students, I never claimed to be an ally—I was trying to learn much more about what it meant to be an ally, and what LGBTQ students might think about straight ally participation in their own GSA. I would leave it up to them to decide if they believed I was an ally to them or not, or if the ally label even mattered to them at all.

During the first year of my research, I conducted only seven interviews, but attended meetings and sat to the side, listening, and making small talk with group members in an attempt to build rapport. In the second year, I interviewed Dorian, and at the next meeting when I again announced that I would like to interview willing students, Dorian added, "You should do an interview with Amie; it's really fun, and you get to talk about yourself for an hour!" Dorian's vocal approval of her interview experience immediately prompted 12 more students to offer their time for interviews.

Straight Ally Girls and the Absence of Straight Boys in the GSA

On Coming Out Day, I returned to Park for the GSA's Coming Out Day party in which 14 students gathered for shared pizza and soda. There, Alexandria had painted a "Pin the Tail on the Rainbow Unicorn" game set up on the wall for the students. She proudly encouraged her peers to play the game during the meeting. The meeting was informal, without adult leadership, and students sat in various groups, chatting amongst each other. A boy named Curtis attended the lunchtime meeting for the second (and last) time, wearing a sticker on his chest with the words: "Open supporter, but straight" written in marker. He roamed around the room, grabbing a slice of pizza before he joined Dorian and Alexandria who were sitting on the stage at the front of the room. Curtis was the only GSA attendee at the party I saw who qualified his portrayal of being an ally with a *but straight* written on his sticker. The only other allies in attendance, Sadie, Liza, and Carrie all wore stickers that read, "I'm an Ally." Curtis's attempt

to be supportive of his LGBTQ peers demonstrates a perception that identifying as an ally, and as a boy might render him *not* straight in an LGBTQ friendly space. According to Broad (2002), straight parents in a national organization designed to support their LGBTQ children and adults show similar approaches to ally work. Literature from the organization in Broad's study highlights ways in which allies can challenge heterosexism and homophobia, and claims that supporting gay rights while still identifying oneself as straight does *not* signal distancing from heterosexism and homophobia (2002). Broad argues, "…being outspoken about gay rights while proclaiming your heterosexual self means you are promoting, not challenging, homophobia" (2002: 326). Nobody in the room openly criticized Curtis for his approach to being an ally on Coming Out Day. As an ally, Curtis had the privilege of immunity from critique; however, his brief attendance at a couple of meetings was a common theme in my observations of straight identifying boys in the Park GSA: they rarely attended meetings. Leo, a boy who identified as an ally and "straight, but open to a gay relationship" attended the most meetings, and only three.

In interviews, I asked students why they believed girls were more likely than boys to attend GSA meetings as an ally. Student responses and my observations highlight discursive practices in which the broader gendered processes from Park High School co-occurred in the GSA itself. Student answers typically reflected what Connell (1987) calls emphasized femininity: girls were allies because of stereotypical gender characteristics like nurturance and compassion. According to Alexandria, a 17-year-old bisexual girl and secretary of the GSA: "It sort of gets down to the aspects of femininity, being very compassionate to other people….for other members of the human race and fighting for their rights." Alexandria illustrated the gender of straight allies. She viewed girls joining the GSA as part of what it means to be feminine. Lucas, an 18-year-old gay boy and the vice president, also identified girls as the typical ally. "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 than boys in joining the GSA, the majority articulated constructions of masculinity in opposition to femininity, citing homophobia and hegemonic notions of what it means to be a boy. According to Fairchild, a 16-year-old queer identifying girl: "Guys are always um…peer pressured into not being gay, a.k.a. not being feminine and stuff like that…". Liza, an 18-year-old straight ally, shared a similar view: "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." Fairchild and Liza speak to what Pascoe (2007) calls "fag discourse"—boys are so intimately tied to dominant constructions of heteronormative masculinity, they are continually policed by their peers for any and every transgression. Straight boys' participation in the Park GSA was seen as tantamount to identifying with compassion and being emotionally supportive, and thus "femininity"—and as my participants described girl allies above, thought to logically provoke "fag discourse." Considering Pascoe's fag discourse is not to say that all straight-identified boys who are participants in the GSA must be gay but in the closet; although, it was popularly assumed at assumed at Park—as I illustrate in more detail below—that boys who "hung out" with gay people were also gay.

Johnny, a 14-year-old boy who self-identified as gay and often dressed in what he called "drag" or women's clothing, confirmed the gendered disparity in 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!' On Coming out Day, I heard so many people say that.

Lily, a bisexual girl, 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 a straight-identified boy in the GSA was gay and she quickly responded, "Yeah. YEAH!" When I asked why, she shared:

> 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 masculinity, where membership depends on the ways in which boys perform masculinity and consistently deploy a heterosexual face (Chu 2004; Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Corbett 2001; 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 create numerous opportunities for ridicule from those who subscribe to dominant notions of masculinity.

Beyond the institution of Park High School, I explored the potential judgments against a straight-identifying boy joining the GSA, and asked my interviewees if they—as GSA participants—would assume boys who joined their club were gay, and several admitted to presuming a straight-identifying boy's sexuality suspect. For boys who joined the GSA but did not declare their sexual identity, Johnny told me, "Most of them are in the closet." Another boy, Chris, self-identified to me as bisexual but was not public about his sexuality at meetings. Chris told me that he hooked up with boys at parties when he was drunk, but only dated girls:

> It's only socially acceptable [hooking up with boys] when you're drunk. It's the way it happens in high school, so people are like "Oh! You're straight! You just had a few too many drinks, like whatever…" And then…I don't know…people expect me to be like this really preppie, like superficial kid, based on what they see on the outside. Park is like…the more well-known you are, the more people just like to talk about you and have these false ideas about you.

Chris knew that people assumed his straight identity was a cover for his same-sex desires, and that clearly frustrated him. While Chris's comments above demonstrated assumptions by students throughout the high school, his GSA peers also made the same assumptions about him. When I interviewed Claire, a straight ally, 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.

Claire's assumption of Chris's sexuality, and that he was withholding it from the club confirmed that even within the GSA, participants labeled boys' sexuality despite missing evidence. In a space where sexual and gender diversity were encouraged, boys' masculinity remained heavily scrutinized.

Dorian, a senior girl, and self-identified lesbian who was the president of the GSA articulated similar thoughts about boys joining the GSA, telling me it would "take down their masculinity." I asked Dorian if she thought people outside of the GSA assume that guys who attend meetings 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 do 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 introductions at the first meeting and encouraging participants to disclose their sexual identity and pronouns by which they preferred to be addressed. Despite her attempts, however, assumptions made about boys' sexuality overruled their declarations of being an ally, as they did for Chris.

At a meeting toward the end of my research, sitting behind Lucas, Celeste, and Chris, I observed an interaction between them. Chris was busily engaging with his phone, which was not an uncommon sight to see among students at any GSA meeting. He leaned over to Celeste, making his screen visible to her and quietly asked, "Do you think this guy is hot?"

> Celeste: (seemingly unimpressed) He's OK…
> Chris: (immediately pulling up another picture of another boy): Do you think *he's* hot?
> Celeste: (still unimpressed): He's OK…
> Chris: Because I've literally hooked up with him like 30 times.
> Lucas abruptly interjects: Wait! You've hooked up with him 30 times and you're not in a relationship?!
> Chris: No, I've never dated a guy, only girls.
> Lucas: Why have you never dated a guy? Have you ever been asked?
> Chris: I've been asked, I just haven't had a relationship with one.

With a puzzled look, Lucas backed off without asking another question.

That people both within and outside of the club assumed boys who joined were gay, worked to reify boys' legitimate fears of joining the feminine friendly space. Thoughts about boys who joined the GSA mirrors Bridges' (2010) work on men who dressed in drag to raise awareness for violence against women. Many of the men Bridges encountered demonstrated some angst about deploying a non-straight identity while dressed in feminine clothing. In both Bridges' work and in the Park GSA, organizations aimed at promoting awareness of gender inequality have the potential to reinforce those inequalities when they do not offer opportunities to deconstruct gender inequality and heterosexism.

Apart from Sadie, a straight-identified ally who demonstrated some angst about being a GSA member, telling me she feared participating in Coming Out Day would provoke teachers

and peers to think she was a lesbian, straight girls were typically free to join and participate in the GSA to support those who allies Liza and Claire identified as their "gay best friends." This gendered and heteronormative understanding of allies among GSA participants suggests co-occurring gendered processes situated both within the club and broader institutional forces at Park High School. As student participants suggested above, the Park GSA was a space where straight girls may participate more freely than straight boys. Their participation was not viewed as inconsistent with their gender or (hetero)sexual identities as Claire and Liza shared that they joined to support their "gay best (boy) friends." However, for boys, the reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality, which privileges straight masculinities, assigns a deviant status to boys' membership in this particular space. My findings are consistent with what Nielson et al. (2000) found in their 15-year study of gender norm violating behaviors where men and women who crossed gender boundaries encountered heterosexism: gender disruptive men were assigned homosexual labels, while women were heterosexualized in these scenarios. In the Park High GSA, "ally" identities were gendered and sexualized in ways that inhibited straight boys from attending meetings and obscured straight girls' marginalization within gender hierarchies that existed at Park High School more generally. Students in the club believed boys who violated gender norms by associating with LGBTQ people were assumed to be gay while girls were presumed straight and essentially feminine.

Straight Ally Girls and the Privilege of Immunity from Critique

As institutions like schools practice gender norms and heteronormativity that maintain status hierarchies among youth, the Park GSA offered a space where straight girls could have a voice. All of my female interviewees told me they witnessed sexism at Park High School, outside of the GSA, yet all straight ally girls told me they felt safe *inside* the GSA. Although straight girls shared reasons for joining the GSA like wanting to support their LGBTQ friends or raise awareness for LGBTQ issues, the GSA did not afford them opportunities to examine their own straight privilege within the club or their marginalized gender status as girls in high school. Rather, the Park GSA granted straight girls further privilege through immunity from critique of their participation as allies. Similar to what Mathers at al. define as "sanctifying allies," a process through which members of LGBTQ organizations grant straight allies "elevated moral standing," the Park GSA regularly, and openly, promoted straight allies as a source of power and legitimacy for the club, without acknowledging ways that allies might improve on their ally work more generally (2018: 855).

The Park GSA allowed straight allies unconditional access to its meetings and often acknowledged them for their support. At gatherings, straight-identifying allies were privy to the shared stories of their LGBTQ peers. On four occasions, students were encouraged by student leaders and teachers to share their "coming out stories." Scholars understand Coming Out stories to be dominant narratives among those within LGBTQ communities (Murray 1996; Plummer 1995), and these stories include a variety of experiences. For some Park GSA members, their coming out stories were filled with moments of validation and love from their families, while for others, coming out was a time of fear and loss of security at home. Each time the GSA leaders asked students to share coming out stories, straight students were allowed to listen. Lacking from discussion was the significance of telling such stories in the LGBTQ community and the connection between LGBTQ youths' experiences and heterosexual privilege more broadly. While straight allies never

shared a coming out story, teacher-sponsors missed opportunities to revisit Dorian's insistence that straight allies "check [their] privilege," from the first meeting, and situate coming out stories within a broader historical context of heterosexual privilege and homophobia. Thus, in this context, straight girls' heterosexual privilege remained invisible and unchecked in their access to LGBTQ stories.

Although straight privilege was not discussed openly in GSA meetings, straight ally participation was widely celebrated. In both years I observed GSA meetings at Park, club leadership promoted Ally Week as a way to sanctify allies (Mathers et al. 2018) and encourage LGBTQ students to openly show their gratitude for ally support. I draw on Kenneth Kolb's (2014) concept of "progressive merit badges" earned by victims' advocates to illustrate the ways in which the Park GSA rewarded allies participating in the club.

Progressive Merit Badges

Kenneth Kolb's study of domestic violence and sexual assault victims' advocates and counselors reveals that rather than earning a higher salary, employees earn what he calls "moral wages" or "a form of symbolic compensation" given to those who do work to improve the lives of individuals from marginalized groups (2014: 16). These moral wages produce a sense of satisfaction that one is being a caring and compassionate person. For the men who engage in sexual assault victims' advocacy, these moral wages appeared in the form of earning "progressive merit badges," or "the ways members of privileged groups can accrue symbolic credit by virtue of their 'special affiliate' status with progressive causes or organizations" (2014: 146). While the Park GSA allies were not financially compensated, as the advocates and counselors in Kolb's work, the concept of progressive merit badges is valuable to analyzing Ally Week at Park.

During both school years I attended GSA meetings at Park, the club celebrated "Ally Week": a week during which allies are encouraged to wear identifying stickers. Betsy started one January meeting asking:

> "What could we do for Ally Week?"
> Dorian: Thank allies, I guess…(turns to look at peers); If you don't thank at least one person, I will be disappointed!
> Lucas: Unless you're an ally, then pat yourselves on the back.
> Betsy: Please remember to thank our allies! We get our power from our allies!

Betsy's command to the GSA participants centered ally power in the GSA by claiming allies' right to be acknowledged for supporting LGBTQ youths. Her declaration also implied to LGBTQ youths that they should never take that ally power for granted; it could always be withheld. Additionally, Betsy's comment also privileged heterosexuality—the GSA was powerless without its straight allies. Her commands, in addition to comments by Dorian and Lucas, are a form of what Mathers et al. call "sanctifying allies," wherein straight allies are revered for their privilege (2018). The recognition allies received from LGBTQ students takes the form of progressive merit badges; straight allies continued to accrue that symbolic payment simply for identifying as an ally (Kolb 2014).

The recognition of Ally Week frustrated Rose and Fairchild, two queer-identifying girls who ultimately refused to participate in the GSA. Rose attended several meetings during the first year of my research, and then did not reappear until near the end of the following school year. When I asked Rose to describe her role in the GSA, she replied:

> um…hmmm…I don't really think I really fulfill a role other than the occasional rocking of the boat. I don't really agree with the way it's run…Of course it's my good friends who run it…It's not necessarily the leaders as it is the other members themselves.
> [Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?]
> I know it's a gay-straight alliance, and I know that there are people who are supposed to be allies, but you feel overwhelmed by the amount of power that straight allies have.
> [Interviewer: How would you define an ally?]
> An ally is obviously someone who supports the cause when there should be no question behind it. They expect brownie points or a trophy for showing they can accept people, which is really just being a decent human.

Beyond Ally Week, Rose also disapproved of the day the GSA took the group's yearbook photo, telling me that she believed the club members dismissed her comments about the legalization of same-sex marriage in France so that they could hurry to take the yearbook photo. About her comment, Rose told me, "You know, it was a minor trivial point of 'oh that's interesting; let's get back to having our picture taken so we can show our friends and future generations how awesomely accepting we are.'"

Similarly, Fairchild, a 16-year-old queer-identifying girl, rejected the GSA after attending a few meetings as a freshman. She told me she was disappointed that the club's then-student leaders were straight ally girls who silenced queer youths: "I think that a lot of straight allies end up talking over some of the gay people that should be talking…because they are gay, and they understand the struggles." I asked Fairchild if she participated in any of the GSA rituals outside of meetings, like Coming Out Day. She recalled once wearing an identifying sticker on Coming Out Day and then added:

> …and that reminds me, apparently there was an Ally Day (sarcastically giggles), sometime last month, and I look around and there's a bunch of straight people who are around me wearing "I'm an ally" stickers. Maybe they were giving them out or something, and everyone was wearing them, and I was just like, "Do you wanna cookie?" I mean not to sound like really mean, but sometimes I just feel like that… "Okay here's your cookie. You're a good person." You know?

Fairchild believed that Ally Week was giving more power to allies. She even rejected the label "ally," and preferred "supporter," because she thought "ally" was too presumptuous of a label. She told me that straight people could be good "supporters" by calling out those who make homophobic remarks and by leaving queer spaces to queer people. Indeed, Fairchild would be willing to attend a queer-only club meeting with no allies, but at Park, no such club existed.

The GSA's yearbook photo and the celebration of Ally Week—created by a national GSA organization and adopted as an observance by the Park GSA—worked to shore up straight ally girls' privilege at Park by celebrating that power and rewarding them with progressive merit badges. Ally week allowed straight ally girls to maintain their heterosexual status that divided them from LBQ girls along lines of sexual identity. All LGBTQ students in the GSA were pushed to acknowledge the power of allies by thanking them for their support, yet unlike LBQ-identifying girls, gay and bisexual boys never criticized ally participation in the GSA. Boys I interviewed felt similarly to Lucas, who told me, "I think allies are one of the biggest main strongholds of the club, because without allies, you wouldn't have that different feeling of people coming together." Mark, another gay-identifying boy told me, "It's good to have

straight people in the club. I don't see any negative effect of them being there." For LBQ-identifying girls, the privilege of immunity from critique and the progressive merit badges afforded to straight ally girls changed the meaning of the GSA to a club that was more alienating than inclusive.

The Effects of Straight Ally Girls' Participation

The participation of straight ally girls in the Park GSA, and the absence of any critique of their ally work, complicated the space for LBQ—identifying girls. While gay-identifying boys in the GSA never criticized allies, some LBQ girls quietly struggled to make sense of straight ally girls' participation. Perhaps an unintentional consequence of the GSA itself, this tension privileged straight girls' participation while alienating some LBQ girls from the GSA, causing LBQ girls like Rose, Fairchild and Kate to ultimately leave the club. While Alexandria and Taylor, who both identified as bisexual, remained in the GSA, they privately shared their frustrations with straight allies in their interviews with me.

The "Gay Best (Boy) Friend"

At one meeting in February, in which none of the three student leaders were in attendance, Betsy and Mr. Cruz tried to make conversation with the rest of the attendees. Mr. Cruz talked about a current event in Indiana where a school was insisting that students only attend prom as straight couples. Betsy added that in her high school, same-sex couples would have never been allowed either. She said, "I didn't even know homosexuality existed when I was in high school. But, as I became more involved in theater, I learned that gay guys are fun! The most fun of all!" In research of the relationships between straight women and gay men, Maddison (2000) argues that straight women and gay men participate in what he calls homosocial relationships for the benefit of both people. Straight women and gay men both gain gendered cultural currency from these relationships. In other words, gay men receive the benefits of women's nurturing behavior, while straight women's sexuality appears unchanged. In order for these relationships to persist, straight women may distance themselves or even demonstrate homophobia toward lesbian women in order to maintain their status as straight women (2000). In the Park GSA, straight girls' participation allied closely with gay boys; they rarely engaged with LBQ-identifying girls.

In interviews, two straight girls, Liza and Claire claimed to join the GSA because they had gay best (boy) friends in the club. Liza told me that she was really trying to convince her best friend "to come to terms with his sexuality and come out of the closet." Although adhering to her value of supporting her friend, Liza's attempt at counseling him demonstrated her inability to see her own straight privilege as it related to her friend's reluctance to publicize his sexuality. Similarly, Claire came to meetings to support Yvonne, her gay-identifying best friend who was harassed by administration and other students for dressing in drag. Both Liza and Claire felt compelled to counsel their "gay best friends" from positions of privilege invisible to them.

Taylor, a bisexual girl, 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 [straight] man

be like, 'this is my lesbian friend.'" She also discussed her observations of straight girls on Tumblr, a social media site frequented by youths:

> They're [straight girls] like, 'Yeah, I've always wanted this gay family member!' and the whole like, 'Guys are great for shopping and advice on cute [straight] guys…'. I guess it's more about gay men than lesbian women…they're more the token, I guess, gay person.

To Taylor, some allies in the GSA viewed gay boys as a token, about whom they could brag to peers. Allies who view gay people as tokens highlight cultural stereotypes associated with gay men, particularly their presumed affinity for shopping and fashion and ability to give advice on heterosexual relationships. These perceptions of gay boys relegate them to a one-dimensional identity, overlooking the complexities with which people construct multiple identities. Taylor's comment also reflects a critique of emphasized femininity; straight girls perform a stereotypical and heterosexual feminine identity in their relationships with gay boys.

The Distance Between Straight and LBQ Girls

Interestingly, in my interviews, none of the straight ally girls claimed to have a current "lesbian best friend." Liza told me that her former best friend came out as lesbian, and her friend's feelings for Liza ultimately ended their relationship because, as she said, "It's always hard to know where that boundary is with that person. It was always hard for me to know whether or not we could stay like we were because she admitted she had feelings for me, so it was hard to know the boundaries I could cross as a friend without making things difficult." In GSA meetings, straight ally girls and gay boys often sat together, or straight allies sat in small groups with each other; rarely did straight ally girls and LBQ girls sit close together. Indeed, Rose, who identified as queer, recognized straight girls' distance from LBQ 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." Rose referred to the yearbook photo meeting mentioned above. She excitedly raised her hand to share that French President, Francois Hollande was legalizing gay marriage. She celebrated this news because her stepdad lives in Paris, and she shared, "Whenever I go see him, I like to know I'm in a country that sees me as a person." The distance between straight and LBQ girls was obvious to Rose, and like Fairchild, she decided the GSA was no longer a place for her.

Scholars show that straight men and women may distance themselves from gender and sexually non-conforming "others" for different reasons. While straight boys may avoid feminine boys and find "hot" (non-"butch") lesbian girl relationships attractive (Jackson and Gilbertson 2009; Pascoe 2007), straight girls may avoid lesbian girls out of fear their heterosexual identity may come into question (Ezzell 2009; Hamilton 2007). Instead, straight girls may pursue heterosocial relationships: being more supportive of their gay-identifying male friends than their lesbian peers (Maddison 2000). Straight girl and gay boy friendships maintain heterosexual privilege for girls who can still defend their straight identity because they are not connected to lesbian girls as they are with their gay (male) best friends. Participation in the Park GSA may be contaminating for both straight boys and girls, but in the Park GSA, straight girls' options to befriend gay boys and distance themselves from lesbian, bisexual and queer girls, reinforced their heterosexuality and left some LBQ girls on the margins of a queer-friendly space.

Straight Allies and Gendered Responses to Assault and Harassment: The Cases of Yvonne, Johnny, and Kate

In my observations at Park, I documented three cases in which gender inequality in the GSA was particularly salient between straight girls, gay boys, and LBQ girls. In this section, I utilize these magnified moments (Hochschild 2003) to illustrate the ways in which responses to Kate's, Yvonne's, and Johnny's experiences with assault and harassment, respectively, despite good intentions, were gendered and unequal. In this section, I also use the "they" pronoun for Yvonne because although Yvonne dressed as a boy when not in drag and identified as a gay boy during an introduction to the group, it was unclear what pronoun they preferred when not dressed in drag, even though peers and teachers used he/him/his prounouns when referring to Yvonne. When I am referring to Stella, I use the "she/her/hers" pronouns, as Stella did.

Yvonne and Johnny

Before I attended my first GSA meeting, I met with Mr. Cruz to introduce my study. He told me about a student named Yvonne, a boy who self-identified as gay. Yvonne preferred the name Stella when they dressed in drag at school. Mr. Cruz informed me that the previous principal decided Yvonne's guardian should know that they were leaving the house as Yvonne and then using janitorial closets at school to dress as Stella. Mr. Cruz was angry that the principal felt compelled to call Yvonne's guardian (their aunt), who did not want them "dressing like a fairy." The principal mollified Yvonne's aunt by forbidding them to dress as Stella and promising to call her if Yvonne appeared as Stella again. Mr. Cruz responded by encouraging Yvonne to come to GSA meetings for support.

At the first GSA meeting I attended, Yvonne entered the room right after I introduced myself, wearing dark jeans and a white t-shirt with a gold necklace with "Stella" spelled out on it. Yvonne sat with Claire, a straight ally girl, with whom they seemed close. Stella or Yvonne would only come to the meetings with Claire, and usually, reluctantly. Shortly after one meeting began, Claire came running into the classroom happily shouting, "Stella is here! Not Yvonne, Stella! Stella! Stella!" After Claire's announcement, Stella appeared, wearing a long straight dark brown wig with blond highlights and a navy blue floor-length, fitted sleeveless gown, and carefully applied makeup. Standing in front of the room, Stella shared with the club while continuously stroking and rearranging her hair. Earlier in the day, she was caught changing in the custodial closet, from Yvonne to Stella. The room was quiet, everyone focused on Stella, waiting for Mr. Cruz to offer some comforting wisdom, knowing that Stella had broken a rule. The anxiety and fear in the room were palpable.

A few minutes into the meeting, a female assistant principal walked into the room, gave Mr. Cruz a piece of paper, and left. Mr. Cruz opened the note and looked at Stella, confirming the Dean "wants to talk to you." He encouraged Stella to "change back into Yvonne, and then go talk to her." Everyone knew why. One student raised her hand, frustrated, and questioned, "What about girls who dress as boys?" Nobody offered a confident argument for why that might be allowed, but Stella's dress was not.

Claire, angry, stood and dramatically reenacted the entrance of the assistant principal, becoming more animated as she analyzed the body language of the administrator who "did not even look at Stella!" Silent, Stella stood to leave the room, and Claire asked if she could have her bra back. Mr. Cruz told Stella, "Take care of yourself, honey." Both Mr. Cruz and Claire seemed defeated, when Mr. Cruz said, "Let's just be supportive of her." Yvonne returned in more masculine clothes—jeans and a t-shirt—and handed Claire her bra before quietly leaving the room for the Dean's office.

Claire's involvement as Yvonne's friend illustrated a way in which a straight ally girl felt compelled to support her gay friend. In our interview, Claire told me that Yvonne asked her to go to the GSA meetings to support her. Claire was relentless in trying to bring social justice for Stella. She was constantly concerned about Stella's safety in the boys' bathroom. She solicited 70 signatures from her peers at Park for an all gender bathroom, a reform the school ultimately failed to provide while Yvonne was still a student. Claire told me football players were always harassing Yvonne and Stella in their art class, using homophobic language. Although Yvonne refused to report their behavior to the teacher, Claire proudly told me that she did, and the boys were suspended from the football team for the rest of the season. In a school where sports were a significant part of the overall culture, a straight ally girl had the power to change the trajectory of some of its prized athletes.

Like Yvonne, Johnny was a gay-identifying boy who, as a ninth-grader during my second year of research, and after Yvonne left Park, often attended school in drag. Johnny's home life was much different than Yvonne's; he was very close with his mother and when he told her he was gay, she replied, "I love you. You'll be my son forever." Johnny was a vocal and regular participant in the GSA, and he was also summoned to the Dean's office because of the choice to wear drag. Johnny shared with the group, "Last week I cross-dressed and got hate from people. People told me I didn't look like a girl."

As a result of Johnny's experience with the deans, peers and allies rallied successfully for the formation of a unisex bathroom at Park. Johnny told me that many kids even organized a Facebook page to protest the administration's constant requests for him to refrain from dressing in drag. Johnny said that boys, including football players, and girls cross-dressed one Friday to support him, and the school decided to create what he called a unisex bathroom in the nurse's office.

Kate

Kate was a lesbian girl who came to Park after a year at a private Catholic high school where she was repeatedly sent home for violating the girls' dress code by wearing pants instead of skirts. She determined she was "kicked out" of the school because of her gender violations. For her sophomore year, Kate transferred to Park where her brother was a senior star on the football team. Given her brother's status and popularity, she thought Park would be a safer and more accepting place for her.

During one meeting, sitting in the back of the room, Kate raised her hand. After being acknowledged by Lucas, Kate, visibly shaken, told the group her story: "Last week I was running in PE class, running in the park, and two ROTC boys jumped me. One of the boys shoved me, called me a faggot, while the other held a lighter to my face." The room was strikingly silent, unusual because students typically chatted in small groups throughout meetings. While Kate's assault was the only narrative of physical violence against an LGBTQ student I heard, students often shared struggles with disapproving family members and incidents of verbal harassment by peers. As Kate told her story, Betsy asked her if she told anyone. Kate said she informed her gym teacher who promised to bring it to school administration, but she never received a response speaking to any disciplinary actions taken against the boys. Betsy, Lucas, and Mr. Cruz advised Kate to go to a different Dean. Betsy, the straight-identifying teacher, urged Kate to be more persistent with finding someone who would listen: "You need to make a bigger stink!" Liza, a straight ally, added, "You need to be involved," concurring with Betsy's charge that Kate fight harder for herself. After that day, I never saw Kate at a GSA meeting again.

Both Betsy's and Liza's comments accomplished two things at once. They allowed straight allies to feel like they were affecting change and to play a role in discussing problems with the school. Yet, while less noted by those present, the interaction also discursively relieved straight allies from any responsibility to bring punishment to Kate's attackers. They were immune from critique of their ally work. Rather, these comments worked to inform Kate that in addition to being assaulted, she was also failing to *properly* advocate for herself. Kate's experience highlighted a magnified moment in which gender inequality between LBQ girls and gay boys was especially salient; a lesbian-identifying girl was not offered the same support as her gay-identifying male peers in the GSA. Kate's experience in the Park GSA illustrates a shortcoming in this context. As a well-respected teacher with heterosexual and adult privilege, Betsy's displacement of responsibility back onto Kate, and away from straight allies, revealed the GSA's inability to deploy allies to stand beside Kate as she navigated the administration. While Betsy, Liza, and all of the straight ally girls often revealed that they were allies, their good intentions, and the privilege of immunity from critique minimized their ability to be more effective allies, despite their intentions to be helpful and supportive.

Both before and after Kate's experience, straight allies distributed school-wide petitions to create unisex bathrooms and promoted student demonstrations on Facebook to support Johnny and Yvonne, both gay-identifying boys who dressed in drag and experienced harassment by school officials and students. In the Park GSA, straight girls, the only self-identified allies at the meeting on the day Kate shared her story, may have been reluctant to advocate on her behalf for fear that doing so would cause outsiders to question their heterosexuality. On the contrary, supporting gay boy friends like Yvonne or Johnny, offered girls the close relationships that Brown (2003) argues they desire but struggle to achieve with other girls. Kate's experience and her subsequent avoidance of the GSA demonstrate a need for the club to examine heterosexual privilege and the ways in which the club and its allies supported gay boys but overlooked the needs of several of its LBQ-identifying girls.

I observed the Park GSA to be a club where straight girls had unfettered access to a space that encouraged their voices as experts of LGBTQ lives, while some LBQ-identifying girls felt increasingly marginalized. Straight ally girls were included in discussions of LGBTQ issues and invited to give uncritiqued advice to LGBTQ students. Yet, allies were not given opportunities to learn about straight privilege, nor allowed a space within the GSA to explore female sexuality and its subordination to heterosexual male sexuality. Straight girls also lacked understanding of LGBTQ histories and contemporary cultures, and the Park GSA did little to reconcile this beyond Mr. Cruz's brief lesson about the Stonewall Inn. For the minority of straight girls who decided to join the GSA with positive intentions to help their friends, the GSA limited their ability to think about gender and straight privilege in constructive ways. The Park GSA provided a space in which straight girls avoided the larger gender hierarchy found at Park High School; their sexuality and gender were not scrutinized by teachers or other club members, and remained largely invisible. Simultaneously, the Park GSA restructured that hierarchy, in allowing straight girls a voice, with the privilege of immunity from critique, that supported gay boys, but stifled LBQ girls.

Conclusion

Research shows that straight allies join GSAs for a number of reasons: supporting their friends and learning more about LGBTQ experiences, or for personal convictions of

justice, an awareness of privilege, or a need to fulfill personal moral principles, but this research overlooks youth experiences with gender and sexual identity divides within GSAs. In this article, I explored the intersection of gender and sexuality in being an ally for straight and questioning girls and the ways in which the LGBTQ club members, particularly lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identifying girls perceived the participation of straight allies. Both within and outside of the GSA, institutional practices at Park High School essentialized straight allies as stereotypically feminine (in opposition to masculinity), and celebrated them as caring, supportive, and even possessing power to create social change. By constructing allies within a discourse of emphasized femininity, however, the high school, and in some cases, the Park GSA itself, implicitly excluded most straight boys from joining as allies. In a space that preserved heterosexual privilege by sanctifying straight allies, the leadership also neglected to critique the work of allies in constructive ways that may have alleviated the inequality between girls in the club. The Park GSA also emerged as a space that concealed girls' experiences with the social inequalities constructed in gendered institutions like schools.

My observations of and interviews with participants in the Park GSA showed that the club was unable to deconstruct heterosexual privilege for its members. Straight ally girls had unlimited access to several discussions of the challenges that LGBTQ students faced because of their sexual and gender identities. The GSA invited straight girls to offer advice, immune from critique, to their LGBTQ peers, however, nobody explained the significance of historical and cultural contexts of LGBTQ experiences to the girls, nor identified the role of heterosexual privilege in LGBTQ inequalities. Such discussions might have prevented straight girls from feeling compelled to advise their LGBTQ peers. Although Dorian, who described herself as a "loud" lesbian girl, once attempted to address the issue of heterosexual privilege, neither teachers nor her peers carried her discussion further. The structure of the Park GSA limited her ability to be heard.

This article does not intend to claim that straight ally girls have ill intentions when they join high school GSAs. The straight girls in the Park GSA all told me that they desired to help their friends and that they wanted equal rights for LGBTQ people. Indeed, they were unlike the vast majority of straight girls at Park who *did not* join its GSA; therefore, I cannot conclude that the straight girls in the Park GSA represent *all* straight allies. Rather, this study reveals a flaw in the structuring of the Park GSA in which straight girls, likely unknowingly, participated in the marginalization and alienation of LBQ girls because of the structure and culture of the organization itself. With the persistent celebration of allies, and without any constructive criticism of their ally work by adult leadership, straight ally girls lacked a deeper understanding of the meanings of their participation in this particular space. While gay-identifying boys believed that allies were necessary for the strength of the club, some LBQ-identifying girls struggled in silence.

Knowing that most allies will be girls, GSAs might offer a broader discourse of girls' sexualities to include the intersections of straight and gendered identities in heterosexist schools. A discussion of female sexualities from a feminist perspective could open doors for all GSA participants to think about multiple constructions of femininities, beyond the stereotypes within which Park High School, and consequently, its GSA's youths situated their straight ally girls. GSAs might also challenge their members to rethink the construction of straight ally boys as gay. Alternatively, the club could be a space in which to think about multiple notions of masculinities and femininities so that both boys and girls become more fully aware of the ways that compulsory heterosexuality and gender conformity shape their

own contributions to inequalities, as Sadie's comment in the opening vignette illustrated. Finally, adult teacher-sponsors might initiate constructive conversations with youths about gender and heterosexual privilege, including what that privilege might mean in a club created to support social minority groups. Such concepts may be unknown to teenaged students, and high school GSAs may provide a rich context in which to explore these ideas.

Acknowledgements This article has benefited greatly from the kindness of Tristan Bridges, Hava Gordon, Jennifer Reich, Alan Klein, Lisa Pasko, Alison Walton, and the anonymous reviewers who offered constructive feedback on this article. Please accept my gratitude for your valuable time and advice.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

References

Becker, H.S. 1990. Generalizing from case studies. In *Qualitative inquiry in education: The continuity debate*, ed. E.W.A.A.P. Weisner, 233–242. New York: Teacher's College Press.

Bettie, J. 2002a. Exceptions to the rule: Upwardly Mobile white and Mexican American high school girls. *Gender & Society* 16 (3): 403–422.

Bettie, J. 2002b. *Women without class*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Blinde, E., and D. Taub. 1992. Women athletes as falsely accused deviants. *The Sociological Quarterly* 33 (4): 521–533.

Bosson, J., & al., e. (2006). Gender role violations and identify Misclassifcation. Sex Roles, 55, 13–24.

Bridges, T. 2010. Men just Weren't made to do this: Performances of drag at "Walk a mile in her shoes" marches. *Gender & Society* 24 (1): 5–30.

Broad, K.L. 2002. Social movement selves. *Sociological Perspectives* 45 (3): 317–336.

Brown, L.M. 2003. *Girlfighting: Betrayal and rejection among girls*. New York: New York University Press.

Butler, J. 1999. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Casey, M. 2004. De-Dyking queer space(s). *Sexualities* 7 (4): 446–461.

Chu, J.Y. 2004. A relational perspective on adolescent Boys' Identiy development. In *Adolescent boys: Exploring diverse cultures of boyhood*, ed. N.a.J.C. Way, 78–104. New York: NYU Press.

Connell, R. 1987. *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Connell, R. 1995. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Connell, R., and J. Messerschmidt. 2005. Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society* 22 (5): 829–859.

Corbett, K. 2001. Faggot = Loser. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 2: 3–28.

Epstein, D., S. O'Flynn, and D. Telford. 2002. Innocence and experience. In *Handbook of lesbian and gay studies*, ed. D. Richardson and S. Seidman, 271–290. London: SAGE Publications.

Ezzell, M. 2009. "Barbie dolls" on the pitch. *Social Problems* 56 (1): 111–131.

Fetner, T., A. Elafros, S. Bortolin, and C. Drechsler. 2012. Safe spaces: Gay-straight alliances in high schools. *Canadian Review of Sociology* 49 (2): 188–207.

Fields, J. 2001. Normal queers: Straight parents respond to their Children's "coming out". *Symbolic Interaction* 24 (2): 165–187.

Glaser, B., and A. Strauss. 1967. *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.

Goldstein, S., and D. Davis. 2010. Heterosexual Allies. *Equity and Excellence in Education* 43 (4): 478–494.

Griffin, P., C. Lee, J. Waugh, and C. Beyer. 2003. Describing roles that gay-straight alliances play in high schools. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* 1 (3): 7–22.

Hamilton, L. 2007. Trading on heterosexuality. *Gender and Society* 21 (2): 145–172.

Jackson, S., and T. Gilbertson. 2009. Hot Lesbians. *Sexualities* 2 (2): 199–224.

Kolb, K. 2014. *Moral wages: The emotional dilemmas of victim advocacy and counseling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kosciw, J., E. Diaz, and E. Greytak. 2008. *The 2007 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our Nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN: The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

Kosciw, J., E. Greytak, M.J. Bartkiewicz, M.J. Boesen, and N.A. Palmer. 2012. *The 2011 National School Climate Survey.* New York: Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network.
LaMar, L., and M. Kite. 1998. Sex differences in attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. *Journal of Sex Research* 35 (2): 189–196.
Lee, C. 2002. The impact of belonging to a gay/straight Alliance. *The High School Journal* 85 (3): 13–26.
Lipkin, A. 2005. The case for a gay and lesbian curriculum. In *The gay teen: Educational practice and theory for lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents*, ed. G. Unks, 31–52. New York: Routledge.
Maddison, S. 2000. *Fags, hags, and queer sisters: Gender dissent and Heterosocial bonding in gay culture.* London: Macmillan.
Martin, K. 1996. *Puberty, sexuality, and the self: Girls and boys at adolescence.* New York: Routledge.
Mathers, L., Sumerau, J. E., & Ueno, K. 2018. This isn't just another gay group. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 47 (6): 834–864.
Miceli, M. 2005. *Standing out, standing together.* New York: Routledge.
Montgomery, S., and A. Stewart. 2010. Privileged allies in lesbian and gay rights activism. *Journal of Social Issues* 68 (1): 162–177.
Murray, S.O. 1996. *American gay.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Nielson, J.M., Glenda Waden, and Charlotte Kunkel. 2000. Gendered heteronormativity. *The Sociological Quarterly* 41 (2): 283–296.
Pascoe, C.J. 2007. *Dude, You're a fag.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
Payne, E. 2007. Heterosexism, perfection, and Popularity. *Educational Studies* 41 (1): 60–79.
Plummer, K. 1995. *Telling sexual stories: Power, change, and social worlds.* New York: Routledge.
Russell, G. 2011. Motives of heterosexual allies in collective action for equality. *Journal of Social Issues* 67 (2): 376–393.
Russell, S., A. Muraco, A. Subramaniam, and C. Laub. 2009. Youth empowerment and high school gay-straight alliances. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 38: 891–903.
Schippers, M. 2007. Recovering the feminine other. *Theory and Society* 36: 85–102.
Stotzer, R. 2009. Straight allies. *Sex Roles* 60 (67–80).
Thorne, B. 1993. *Gender play.* New Brunswick: University Press.
Walls, N.E., Sarah B. Kane, and Hope Wisneski. 2010. Gay-straight Alliance and school experiences of sexual minority youth. *Youth and Society* 41 (3): 307–332.
Wilkinson, L., and J. Pearson. 2009. School culture and the well-being of same-sex attracted youth. *Gender & Society* 23 (4): 542–568.

Amie Levesque is a sociologist who studies gender, sexuality, children, and schooling in society. Dr. Levesque is a Visiting Teaching Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Denver.