



## Factors associated with straight allies' current engagement levels within Gay–Straight Alliances



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### ABSTRACT

Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs) can foster action-oriented engagement among straight youth allies. The objective of the current exploratory study was to identify factors related to straight youth allies' greater engagement in GSAs. Participants included 156 straight members of 48 high school GSAs (78.2% female,  $M_{age} = 15.71$ ) who attended regional GSA conferences in 2013. The survey asked youth to report their engagement in their GSA based on multiple items, and it measured factors external to the GSA and GSA-specific experiences that could be related to GSA engagement. In an overall model with all factors as independent variables and engagement as the dependent variable, initial positive feelings after the first few GSA meetings and having more current LGBT friends emerged as the clearest contributors. This study broadens our understanding of how factors external to the GSA and GSA-specific experiences relate to straight youths' role in promoting social change through their GSA engagement.

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An emerging body of research highlights the importance of straight allies actively working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer individuals (LGBQ) to end systems of oppression (Dillon et al., 2004; Duhigg, Rostosky, Gray, & Wimsatt, 2010). A straight ally not only is affirming and supportive of LGBQ people but also challenges discrimination faced by LGBQ individuals (Evans & Wall, 1991; Jones, Brewster, & Jones, 2014). Existing ally identity development models include the following facets: having openness and knowledge about LGBQ experiences, oppression awareness, efficacy and skills to support LGBQ people, and engaging in social action to promote change through behavioral interventions. Pertinent to this last attribute, Ji, Du Bois, and Finnessy (2009) noted that straight allies indeed move from being passive to more active throughout their ally identity development. However, active engagement is one of the least studied dimensions of ally identity (Bishop, 2002; Broido, 2000; Duhigg et al., 2010; Evans & Wall, 1991; Jones et al., 2014). Further, prior studies have focused on straight adult allies with little attention to youth (Borgman, 2009; Duhigg et al., 2010; Rostosky, Black, Riggle, & Rosenkrantz, 2015). Nevertheless, straight youths have a major role in ending discrimination (Ratts et al., 2013; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2013). Furthermore, adolescence is a critical period for solidifying values and beliefs and for identity development in general (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Kroger, 2007). As such, there is a need for research on factors and settings that could cultivate active behavioral engagement among straight youth allies.

School-based extracurricular groups are primary settings for building youths' skills and social connections (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006). Building on this, we focus on Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs) as an important setting to consider ally behavior. GSAs are school-based groups whose mission in part is to cultivate key facets of ally identity (e.g., action, knowledge, and skills in supporting LGBQ people; Bishop, 2002; Broido, 2000; Jones et al., 2014). Indeed, straight youths are a sizeable demographic within GSAs (Miceli, 2005; Szalacha, 2003; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010); nevertheless, there is little research on their contributions in these settings. Although there is emerging research on straight youths' motivation to become GSA members (e.g., opportunities to learn more about LGBQ issues and advocate for human rights, having straight peers who were already GSA members, being driven by one's empathic reactions toward those marginalized; Lapointe, 2015), we have little knowledge of factors that relate to their greater engagement once they are members of these groups.

### Beyond membership: Being an “engaged” ally in the GSA

Youths join clubs for varied reasons, some of which are more self-serving than others (e.g., to place on college applications vs. genuine investment in the group; Dawes & Larson, 2011; McLellan & Youniss, 2003). Simply focusing on straight youths' membership status in GSAs gives a limited sense of the degree to which they are actually acting as allies in these groups. Further underscoring the need to focus on active engagement among members, according to the participation–identification model (Finn, 1989), youths who are more actively engaged in

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clubs gain greater benefits than youths who are less involved (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Of interest, straight allies actively contributing to social change may gain greater knowledge, satisfying interpersonal relationships, community belonging, and sense of purpose (Rostosky et al., 2015). Therefore, we aim to move beyond examining youth allies based on GSA membership status; instead, our research questions highlight the action-based facet of youth ally identity: level of current GSA engagement.

We conceptualize GSA engagement as the degree to which straight youths actively contribute and take initiative as members based on multiple dimensions of behavior (e.g., attending and participating in GSA-related activities, having a strong vocal presence in GSA meetings, and encouraging others to be involved in the GSA). Taken together, these actions begin to capture the behavioral facet in ally identity models (Jones et al., 2014). Given the dearth of literature on straight ally GSA engagement, in this initial exploratory study we consider factors external to GSAs as well as direct GSA-related experiences that may encourage straight GSA members to engage more in their ally role. Attention to a range of facets (e.g., contextual, interpersonal) is important as GSAs vary in their composition, structure and purpose (Poteat et al., 2015), which can lead to variability among youth in their experiences within these groups.

### Factors external to the GSA associated with greater GSA engagement

We draw from findings in the adult literature on straight ally identity to consider potential correlates of youth ally members' engagement in their GSA. Adult allies have pointed to the importance of parents in modeling LGBQ-affirming values (Duhigg et al., 2010; Goldstein & Davis, 2010; Roades & Mio, 2000; Stotzer, 2009). Early exposure to LGBQ-affirming messages from parents may socialize straight youth to LGBQ issues and these parents may also encourage or support their child's GSA engagement. Also, peers shape and reinforce youths' attitudes and behavior during adolescence (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006), including those related to sexual orientation (Poteat, 2007). Along these lines, straight youths whose peers encouraged their GSA membership may feel an even greater personal investment or accountability in their role within GSAs. Thus, we were interested in the extent to which straight members who report having more LGBQ-affirming parents and who had peers encourage them to join the GSA reported greater GSA engagement.

There is robust evidence from intergroup contact theory that close intergroup contact can reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954; Heinze & Horn, 2009; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Close contact also relates to more comfort interacting with LGBQ peers and heightened awareness of prejudice against the LGBQ community (Heinze & Horn, 2009). Straight youths with more current LGBQ friends may empathize with the LGBQ community and may desire to be even more active GSA members for social and political reasons (Miceli, 2005; Stotzer, 2009). In general, peers serve as socializing agents in school-related engagement (Berndt & Keefe, 1995) and this could extend to GSA engagement in particular. Thus, we explore two ways in which LGBQ friendships could be linked to higher levels of GSA engagement among straight members: (a) having more LGBQ friends who were already GSA members prior to their joining the GSA and (b) having more *current* LGBQ friends in general.

Straight women are more likely to engage in LGBQ activism, have more positive attitudes toward LGBQ individuals, and are more interested in learning about the experiences of LGBQ individuals than are straight men (Fingerhut, 2011; Herek, 2000). Of note, the majority of participants in studies examining straight allies are female (Goldstein & Davis, 2010; Miceli, 2005), highlighting the need to consider the potentially unique experiences of straight male allies who are GSA members. As such, we also consider potential gender differences in GSA engagement.

Finally, victimization may be associated with GSA engagement among straight members. Similar to LGBQ youth, some straight youths experience victimization based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender-variant presentation (Aspenlieder, Buchanan, McDougall, & Sippola, 2009; Poteat, Scheer, DiGiovanni, & Mereish, 2014; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). Thus, on one hand, allies who experience more victimization may be more engaged in GSAs than others in order to seek support for their own victimization. Indeed, youth who are victimized but who receive support can feel greater empowerment, a key predictor in activism engagement (Craig, Tucker, & Wagner, 2008; Tully, 2000). On the other hand, straight allies who experience more victimization might report less engagement in the GSA out of fear of further victimization. As such, we consider whether, on average, victimization is associated with greater or lesser GSA engagement among straight ally members.

### GSA-specific experiences related to current GSA engagement

In addition to considering factors external to the GSA, it is important to identify GSA-specific experiences that could be connected to greater GSA engagement among straight members. These factors in particular could inform efforts made by GSAs to encourage greater engagement of straight youth. We consider three GSA-specific experiences that may characterize more engaged ally members: (a) positive feelings experienced after their first few GSA meetings attended, (b) having made a close new friend since joining the GSA, and (c) perceived amount of socializing and support received from the GSA. In relation to the first variable, and as found in the general psychology literature, many initial impressions of people and situations are lasting and inform individuals' future behavior (Smith & Mackie, 2007). Thus, the first few GSA meetings that straight youths attend could be critical in not only shaping their impression of the GSA but also the extent to which they wish to remain actively involved.

Many GSAs exist as a distinct setting in schools to provide a safe place for youth from many diverse backgrounds to socialize and make new friends (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam Aarti, & Laub, 2009). Recent research suggests that some straight youths joined GSAs because they had straight friends who were already GSA members and thus became sensitized to LGBQ issues (Lapointe, 2015). Adding to these findings, straight youths who have had more opportunities to connect with peers in the GSA may remain more actively engaged in it in order to maintain these relationships. At the same time, some advisors have reported that some youths become less engaged in the GSA once certain needs have been met (e.g., making new friends; Poteat et al., 2015). In this respect, we were interested in whether allies who had made a close new friend since joining the GSA would report greater or lesser current GSA engagement.

Finally, support provision is a major aim of youth programs in general (Fredricks & Simpkins, 2011) and GSAs specifically (Lapointe, 2015; Mayberry, Chenneville, & Currie, 2013; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011). Drawing from the youth programs literature that has emphasized the importance of fostering supportive relationships in these settings (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003), straight youths who feel supported by the GSA may be more engaged because they may have a stronger attachment to the group.

### Purpose of the current study

Studies have given inadequate attention to straight youth allies and to experiences that may cultivate important behavioral facets of ally identity during adolescence. It is critical to focus on adolescence in order to support straight youths as they develop a more active ally identity. Further, identifying factors that relate to greater GSA engagement, not just basic membership, could be important in uncovering ways to encourage straight youth to be more active in countering sexual prejudice and discrimination. To address these issues, we explored factors

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