Gay-Straight Alliance involvement and youths' participation in civic engagement, advocacy, and awareness-raising☆

V. Paul Poteat[a],[*], Jerel P. Calzo[b], Hirokazu Yoshikawa[c]

[a] Boston College, Campion Hall 307, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill, MA 02460, United States
[b] San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Dr., San Diego, CA 92182, United States
[c] New York University, 726 Broadway, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10003, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Civic engagement among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) youth and heterosexual cisgender allies can challenge oppressive systems. Among 295 youth in 33 Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs; 69% LGBQ, 68% cisgender female, 68% white, $M_{age} = 16.07$), we examined whether greater GSA involvement was associated with greater general civic engagement, as well as participation in greater LGBTQ-specific advocacy and awareness-raising efforts. Further, we tested whether these associations were partly mediated through members' sense of agency. Greater GSA involvement was associated with greater civic engagement, advocacy, and awareness-raising; associations did not differ based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Finally, the association between GSA involvement and civic engagement was partially mediated through youths' greater sense of agency. Agency did not mediate the association between GSA involvement and engagement in advocacy or awareness-raising efforts. The results suggest GSAs are settings with potential to foster students' capacity to be active and engaged citizens.

1. Introduction

Within the area of positive youth development, scholars have emphasized the importance of preparing youth to be active and engaged citizens in society (Lerner, Wang, Champine, Warren, & Erickson, 2014; Sherrod, 2007; Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2009). This outcome can be reflected in youths' involvement in addressing issues affecting their community (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Zaff et al., 2009). Such work could be especially critical for youth who face societal oppression, as their efforts could serve to challenge oppressive systems (Russell, Toomey, Crockett, & Laub, 2010). Specific to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning youth as well as transgender youth (LGBTQ youth), myriad laws and policies have direct implications for their safety and civil liberties at school (e.g., anti-bullying or anti-discrimination laws, policies that regulate discussion of LGBTQ issues in classrooms; Meyer & Beyer, 2013; Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010) and in society at large (e.g., marriage, adoption, immigration; Baunach, 2012; Nakamura & Pope, 2013; Whitehead & Perry, 2016). Heterosexual cisgender youth, as allies, also stand to play an important role in advocating for LGBTQ equality through civic participation. In addition to

general civic engagement, this type of work could include their engagement in awareness-raising efforts (e.g., campaigns or events to educate others about the experiences of LGBTQ youth, their histories, and the ongoing discrimination they face), or engaging in advocacy efforts to directly counter discrimination (Poteat, Scheer, Marx, Calzo, & Yoshikawa, 2015; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009; Toomey & Russell, 2013). Given the association between civic engagement and a range of immediate and long-term benefits, including community connection, self-esteem, and sense of self-efficacy (Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006; Feldman Farb & Matjasko, 2012), as well as the direct relevance of awareness-raising and advocacy efforts in promoting social justice and countering discrimination, greater attention to these issues among LGBTQ youth and heterosexual cisgender allies is warranted. In doing so, we focus on Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs).

1.1. GSAs and positive youth development

GSAs are school-based extracurricular groups for LGBTQ youth and heterosexual cisgender allies that aim to provide support, access to

resources, and opportunities to engage in advocacy and awareness-raising efforts on issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004). Generally, they meet once per week for up to one hour during or after school and they are structured such that they place youth in leadership positions with support from adult advisors (often teachers, nurses, or guidance counselors in the school); and they aim to affirm and empower youth and increase their sense of self-efficacy through various discussions and activities (Griffin et al., 2004; Poteat, Yoshikawa, et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2009). In addition to members providing social and emotional support to one another, some GSAs engage in various advocacy efforts within the school to counter discrimination and to raise others' awareness of LGBTQ issues (Poteat, Scheer, et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2009; Toomey & Russell, 2013). As part of these efforts, many GSAs host schoolwide day- or week-long events such as Day of Silence, National Transgender Day of Remembrance, National Coming Out Day, and Ally Week, or they advocate for their schools to adopt anti-bullying policies that explicitly protect students based on sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (GLSEN, n.d.).

GSAs are based on models of positive youth development (PYD; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2014). PYD models emphasize that all youth have strengths and can contribute to society, and that positive development occurs when there are resources available (e.g., extracurricular activities and clubs at school) to cultivate strengths and promote thriving (Damon, 2004; Lerner et al., 2014). For example, one prominent PYD model has conceptualized thriving in youth as reflecting a sense of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (i.e., the "Five Cs"; Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009). In turn, this model proposes that youth who thrive are then more likely to contribute (i.e., the "Sixth C"; Lerner et al., 2009, 2014). Civic engagement is important to foster among adolescents as they steadily gain access to a larger number of responsibilities and opportunities to impact and shape their communities (e.g., through voting, holding leadership positions in their communities; Youniss et al., 2002).

Participation in youth programs predicts greater civic engagement and civic responsibility (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Gullan, Power, & Leff, 2013; Viau, Denault, & Poulin, 2015). Nevertheless, much of this work has not considered how youth programs address issues of diversity and social justice. Also, most research on youth programs has overlooked the experiences of LGBTQ youth and has not included settings that focus on LGBTQ social issues (Horn, Kosciw, & Russell, 2009). Finally, many of these programs are based primarily in the community and not directly in schools. These represent important omissions, particularly because LGBTQ youth are not always welcomed in or they historically have been excluded from certain youth programs and feel unsafe participating in certain youth settings and school clubs or sports (Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, & Schultz, 2010; Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016). Moreover, much of the discrimination faced by LGBTQ youth occurs in the school (Kosciw et al., 2016). Thus, it cannot be assumed that these other programs are meeting the needs or interests of LGBTQ youth or promote their civic engagement, either in general or specific to addressing sexual orientation and gender identity issues.

These points further emphasize the need to focus directly on whether youths' level of GSA involvement relates to greater civic engagement in general, as well as involvement in advocacy and awareness-raising efforts specific to LGBTQ issues. In addition, we also examine whether the association between GSA involvement level and these forms of civic engagement is partially mediated through youth feeling a greater sense of agency (i.e., a global belief in one's ability to make and attain goals in general; Snyder et al., 1996). Finally, we consider whether associations differ for LGBQ and heterosexual members as well as for transgender/genderqueer and cisgender members.

1.2. Accounting for how GSA involvement relates to forms of civic engagement

Whereas a range of correlational studies show that students in schools with GSAs report better wellbeing and academic functioning (Davis, Stafford, & Pullig, 2014; Heck et al., 2014; Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010), these studies have not focused on actual members of GSAs nor have they considered variability among GSA members themselves. Thus, there has been a certain assumption of homogeneity among GSA members in their experiences. To address this limitation, we consider whether some GSA members report more civic engagement, advocacy, and participation in awareness-raising activities and events than others.

We expect that GSA members who report more involvement in their GSAs will report greater civic engagement in general, as well as engagement in advocacy and awareness-raising efforts specific to sexual orientation and gender identity. This would align with findings that participating in youth programs predicts civic engagement (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Gullan et al., 2013; Viau et al., 2015). Adding nuance to this, beyond simply joining the GSA and counting oneself as a member, those members who contribute more to conversations in meetings, more often take on leadership roles, and invest more time on projects in the GSA may be even more likely to engage in forms of civic participation. Indeed, youth who report greater investment in youth programs gain more benefits such as greater empowerment, motivation, and self-efficacy (Akiva, Cortina, & Smith, 2014; Dawes & Larson, 2011; McMahon, Singh, Garner, & Benhorin, 2004; Pearce & Larson, 2006). These benefits could be critical to then promote youths' civic engagement, as self-efficacy and competence predict civic engagement (Hope & Jagers, 2014; Youniss et al., 2002).

We expect, then, that the association between GSA involvement and civic engagement is partially mediated through feeling a greater sense of agency. Similar to factors such as self-efficacy and competence, a greater general sense of agency could be an important precursor for building members' confidence to act as engaged citizens in their schools and communities. This mediated process is outlined in PYD models: youth programs aim to promote thriving (e.g., reflected by the "Five Cs", empowerment, self-efficacy, or in this case agency), and thriving subsequently leads youth to make contributions to society (Lerner et al., 2009, 2014). Indeed, involvement in youth programs leads to a greater sense of empowerment (McMahon et al., 2004) and youth leaders in GSAs report feeling more empowered as a result of their GSA involvement (Russell et al., 2009). Thus, although agency (or other indicators of thriving) may also predict greater initial involvement in youth programs, in this study we consider greater GSA involvement to predict greater agency, as this particular temporal order has a strong basis in theory and extant empirical findings (Lerner et al., 2009, 2014; McMahon et al., 2004; Russell et al., 2009; Sherrod, 2007). As such, we expect that greater GSA involvement will relate to greater agency, which will relate to greater contribution in the form of general civic engagement as well as participating in advocacy and awareness-raising efforts specific to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Building on these potential associations between GSA involvement and forms of civic engagement, we consider whether these associations are stronger for LGBQ members than heterosexual members, as well as whether they are stronger for transgender/genderqueer members than cisgender members. GSAs aim to address issues that affect LGBTQ youth (e.g., discrimination; Russell, Everett, Rosario, & Birkett, 2014). Consequently, involvement in this setting may be especially empowering for LGBTQ youth to find their voice and to be more active citizens. As such, although GSA involvement may be associated with various forms of civic engagement for both LGBTQ and heterosexual cisgender youth, we consider whether these associations are relatively stronger for LGBQ youth and transgender/genderqueer youth than for heterosexual and cisgender youth, respectively.