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The Experience of Becoming a Straight Ally-Activist of GLBT People

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Abstract: This hermeneutic phenomenological investigation uncovers elements of the experience of becoming an ally-activist. Six essential themes are developed through writing and analysis of interview text.

In my own experience of being involved as an activist-educator and being involved in several GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) advocacy organizations, I have encountered many fellow activists for GLBT issues who identify as straight. As a gay man, I experienced their presence as support for those who find themselves oppressed because of their minority sexual orientations or gender identities. The activism in the GLBT rights movement by straight identified people made me wonder about the motives behind their activism. I have come to refer to this type of activism *ally activism*, because it is activism done by allies of GLBT people. For the purposes of this investigation, *activism* refers to a “practice of vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political or other goals, sometimes by demonstrations, protests, etc” (activism, n.d.). In this sense, *ally* refers to “a person who associates or cooperates with another; supporter” (ally, n.d.), as in a straight *ally* to GLBT people or GLBT issues.

While trying to search research and theoretical literature, I found several articles and chapters related to specific suggestions to demonstrate ally status and attempt to improve the environment (for GLBT people) in a given institution (see Brodio & Reason, 2005; Evans & Brodio, 2005; Lucozzi, 1998; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001; Washington & Evans, 1991). Much of this literature was located in college student services texts. Tillmann-Healy (2001) has written about the journey she and her husband overtook to purposely befriend gay and lesbian people. Tillmann-Healy’s personal account is focused on the nature of communication in the friendship that bridges gay and straight than the actual experience of the straight ally. With the absence in the research literature of accounts of the experience of ally-activists, I set out to study this phenomenon.

Framing the Investigation

Borshuk describes the practice of *outgroup activism* as activism being done by those in a group that does not seem to directly benefit from the activism (2004). Borshuk’s study was a qualitative study of 8 activists for AIDS issues who were HIV negative. This ingroup-outgroup schema offered a useful way of looking at ally-activists. In the case of ally-activism, a type of outgroup activism, straight-identified people, the allies, do not seem to be involved in activism for their own direct benefit. Had the group of activists been GLBT activists advocating for GLBT issues, my curiosity would not have been raised, since they would be advocating for change that would benefit the group to which they belong; this would be a form of ingroup activism.

This study has the potential to contribute to the practice and theory of adult education and other fields of practice that work with communities for liberation. First,

this study may enlighten educators who work with community groups in order to understand what is happening to people who are becoming activists in their organizations. This study also has the potential to identify gaps in knowledge regarding activist formation and education.

While British adult educators have long considered activism to be part of their practice, American adult education has nearly sloughed off the community-based activism practice from adult education (Brookfield, 1985). Tisdell has linked adult spiritual development to the practice and development of social activism and social movements (1999). These social movements are often tied to the critical theories of education, namely those of Habermas, Friere, and Horton, and Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Brookfield, 2005).

Because I was searching for experience and meaning, I selected a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Hermeneutic phenomenology has its roots in the work of Heidegger, combining both phenomenology, as proposed by Husserl, and hermeneutics, the interpretive aspects of the understanding of lived experience (van Manen, 1997). This search for the meaning of lived experience led me to the question: What is the experience of becoming an ally-activist (of GLBT people)?

Methods

This inquiry began as part of a class project that has since become a pilot study for my dissertation. Because it was done during a short period of time, just three participants were interviewed. After obtaining appropriate approvals from the Institutional Review Board, I began recruiting using a nominated sampling technique. I sent a recruitment poster to an E-mail list for a formal committee that plans and supports activism around GLBT issues in a mainline Protestant church. Within two weeks, I had 17 volunteer participants. Three were selected, based on their differing characteristics, including gender, age, marital/familial status, and socioeconomic class as a way to enhance diversity among the interviews. I limited my interviews to those people who would be available in the surrounding area for an interview.

One of the participants was a man in his 20s who was single and was spending a year volunteering for a GLBT-advocacy organization in a mainline Protestant denomination. The second participant was a middle-aged woman, single, working in an administrative/executive position in a large company. The third participant was a retired psychologist, a woman who I knew had specialized relatively recently in counseling around GLBT issues. All three were active participants in a mainline Protestant congregation known for its longstanding ministry and advocacy for GLBT people and their families and friends.

The participants were prepared for the interview using a pre-interview guide that asked them to think about the story of how they became an ally-activist. I was careful not to tell the interviewees what I thought this would be like, other than being "straight-identified" and involved in advocacy or activism for GLBT issues. The first interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. I transcribed the interviews soon after each interview happened. To maintain rigor and reflexivity, I kept a journal that highlighted my own thoughts, preconceptions, ideas, and decision making. In addition, I debriefed with other researchers. Each interview was coded separately, with codes then being compared across the cases into clusters and later into essential themes.

Essential Themes

Six essential themes were generated. These themes were then elaborated on with writing, and were continually checked against the transcripts.

Realizing and Witnessing Oppression of GLBT People

Participants narrated their experiences of realizing that GLBT people were being oppressed by others. The ally-activists saw this oppression as unfair and undeserved. When they realized that GLBT people were being oppressed, they began to see connections to additional oppression faced by GLBT people. Witnessing the oppression brought on feelings of physical illness and surprise that they had not realized how oppressed GLBT people were. Joyce* recalls one event:

[It was like] "OH MY GOSH, there is a lesbian on the team!" Literally, people lost the focus on what the weekend was about, people split and left the [leadership] team. So it became very apparent to me that I was some naïve person that went, "I don't see it as being any different, what's the big deal?" But, I realize that other people did.

Joyce feels naivety and surprise that she had not realized that sexual orientation was such a controversial issue. She knew lesbians all her life, and accepted them, not realizing the volatility that issues of homosexuality have in some circles. She is surprised and somewhat ashamed for her own lack of knowledge.

Reflecting on Attitudes in the Past

Ally-activists reflected on their own attitudes before they became ally-activists, sometimes feeling "guilty" or "stupid" for their past, which might have included mistreating GLBT people. Sometimes, they feel naïve for the ways they thought the social world worked. While they feel bad, they are aware that things can change, comparing this to other movements in the past. Mark* remembers his days in the college dormitory:

First off, I said, "I don't think that they're going to place me with some [homo]" I mean, I lied through my teeth. I didn't know what to say, I was awkward. I never said to him specifically, "I don't want you as my roommate," because that would have been far too courageous for me to do.

Mark wonders what others would think of him if he, in fact, did have a gay roommate. Mark worries that others might think he is gay, then what? Mark feels bad for the way he treated gay men in the past. He realized that he was very mean to gay men as a result of what he had learned as a child about gay men, that they were predatory. He was very homophobic and felt great remorse after he realized how lonely and unwelcome this must have made the gay men he met feel.

Joyce recalls,

Maybe this sounds kind of like benign neglect of sorts, but I think prior to this experience, I never really had a perception of GLBT people as being anything other than just people, I'll say, from even the standpoint of whether their lives were more oppressed or whether people considered them different.

Joyce continues to remember her past acceptance of GLBT people, but not understanding how others felt about GLBT people. She is frustrated that she did not see the way GLBT people were actually viewed by others. She feels that she has let down her GLBT friends.

Developing Personal Relationships with GLBT People.

Ally activists became friends with GLBT people, often times with same-gendered GLBT people. They saw oppression as hurting their GLBT friends, and held their friends as their window to the world of being GLBT. Ally-activists saw and experienced the pain their GLBT friends experienced, and felt emotional connections with the GLBT friends. When a friend was hurt, the ally activists felt hurt. Mark remembers being with friends:

[I was] with real people that I knew and loved and cared for that are not being granted their God-given right to love who they want, to enter into this community, and enter into relationships and love, and respect that they weren't given an opportunity, and that just tore me apart.

Mark feels torn up watching GLBT people suffer at the hand of policy that prevents them from living their lives fully as partners. Because Mark used to treat gay men so poorly, he especially feels bad as he believes his own past contributed to the way GLBT people were being treated by others. He feels that his own action in the past helped fuel a movement of hatred and misunderstanding toward GLBT people.

Confronting Others About Actions or Language

Confronting others was often one of the first actions an ally-activist pursued. When they heard hateful language or harmful language, they often would take the opportunity to teach someone else about appropriate language. There were times and places where confrontation was appropriate, and others where it was not seen as appropriate or seen as too risky. Because the decision to confront someone had to be made quickly, ally activists had already assessed the situation before the confrontation was necessary. Hattie* recalls a discussion she had with a friend:

I confronted him about his stance toward homophobia. And then he shared, he shared a story of being, umm, approached by someone in junior high in a locker room. Therefore, that justified the whole, all of his prejudice against all gay...and I remember just flat out telling him, "That doesn't wash...I really appreciate that's a hard experience, but so now you have this stereotype about all gay people", and he was really homophobic, at least he admitted it.

Hattie feels the need to question the man's prejudice about gay people. She feels it is her duty to try to change his prejudice. However, she also suggests that someone who is homophobic is better when someone knows they act in homophobia than someone who refuses to acknowledge his homophobia.

Being Called to Action

Ally-activists recalled times when they were moved to action. This call was experienced after a time of reflection, and was a call to take action to change the way GLBT people were treated or viewed. Being called to take action involved considering risks of actions that would be undertaken. In being called, it was sometimes a lack of action by others in an area that led to the ally-activist feeling called to action. Mark remembers an experience at an event for activism around GLBT issues in the church:

I felt them coming together at the same time, so when I said that, "I think I need to go to seminary", the same time I saw hope in a church that I would start to serve when I got out of seminary was on its way and continually being open and affirming of LGBT Christians, and at that point I thought, "Well, if I'm going to

be a leader in this church and this church I want to go a certain direction, I cannot see any other way, but to be an activist in that way.

Mark has developed a vision for how he believes the church should be. He sees this vision as something he must be a part of in order to make a change. Mark may be reflecting on his past ill treatment of gay men and sees this as a way to make the world better for those gay men he hurt. He may see this as the service he owes them, a penance of sorts. He is called to become a pastor.

Developing and Maintaining Personal Identity

Ally activists had to integrate and change who they were in reaction to their new ideas about who they saw others to be. They needed to reflect and change habits and practices. This personal identity had to be shown to others in order to reinforce the change that had occurred.

I think the whole idea about calling yourself an activist is interesting. Ever since you first talked about it, I mean I had a lot of interest. I like to think that those other people are doing a lot more than I am, so then I can't be. I guess I think I'm an activist. That's very cool. I mean, it kind of felt kind of good to claim that and say, "OK, this is where my passion is.

Hattie began to realize that she has agency in her life. She realized that she could take actions that would lead to change. She is unsure that her level of activity qualifies her to be an activist, though, and may be having resistance to being considered an activist because of the stigma attached to the term.

Implications

This research has the potential to inform the practice of adult education and community organizing with groups of ally-activists. Practice with these groups might be enhanced through this phenomenological understanding as practitioners reflect on the experience of their own groups.

This analysis of essential themes can also lead to more effective recruitment and integration tools for potential allies. One way that this recruitment and integration may be established is through the visibility (to straight people) of the everyday experiences of oppression faced by GLBT people. Another way may be enhancing opportunities for interaction between gay and straight people in non-judgmental ways, that is, in ways where each may learn about the other. GLBT people might improve the momentum of the GLBT equality movement through offering visibility and opportunities for interaction.

Conclusion

The analysis of ally experience has the potential to affect the practice of adult education and organizing in ally communities. While this project has a relatively small sample size, a larger study is being completed, which will offer greater insight into the phenomenon of ally-activism.

This study presents one way of seeing the experience of becoming an ally-activist. More research into the lives of allies must be sought. Potential areas for study with allies of GLBT people abound, such as the interplay of masculinity and ally identity and behavior, and the way with which social stigma is dealt.

This study has given me ideas for further study, and has changed the way I view allies of GLBT people. Perhaps one of the greatest personal benefits I have experienced through this study is witnessing the stories of allies. I have had people contacting me, wanting to just tell someone their story after learning about my research. One woman told me that she never “realized that allies had coming out stories too”. Two of the best gifts humans can offer each other are their stories and the patience to hear the stories that shape our lives.

* indicates that this is a pseudonym.

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