

“This Isn’t Just Another Gay Group”: Privileging Heterosexuality in a Mixed-Sexuality LGBTQ Advocacy Group

Lain A. B. Mathers¹, J. Edward Sumerau²,
and Koji Ueno³

Abstract

This paper examines how members of a southeastern LGBTQ advocacy group privileged heterosexuality through group interactions. Based on twelve months of fieldwork, we analyze how LGBTQ members and their heterosexual allies traded power for (heterosexual) patronage by (1) heterosexualizing their group, (2) sanctifying allies, and (3) privileging parenthood. In so doing, all the members, regardless of their intentions, ultimately reproduced societal patterns of sexual inequality within the context of their group. In conclusion, we draw out implications for understanding (1) the ways LGBTQ people and their heterosexual allies negotiate heterosexual privilege, (2) the ways they construct the meaning and status of heterosexual allies, and (3) some ways dominant groups’ affiliation with subordinate groups may inadvertently facilitate processes of inequality reproduction.

¹University of Illinois Chicago, IL, USA

²University of Tampa, Tampa, FL, USA

³Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA

Corresponding Author:

J. Edward Sumerau, Department of Government, History, and Sociology, University of Tampa, 401 W. Kennedy Blvd., Tampa, FL 33606, USA.

Email: jsumerau@ut.edu

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Near the end of a monthly meeting of a southeastern mixed-sexuality lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) advocacy group¹ we call Allied Pride,² the group president, a lesbian woman named Shannon, gets out of her chair. She begins passing out sheets of paper that contain the group by-laws and proposed changes that would require the group to have a heterosexual co-president. Prior to this occasion, the group had no requirements concerning the sexual identities of group officers. As she passes out the papers to the eleven other people present, she continues, "The secretary needs one" and looks at a heterosexual ally named Norman, who is temporarily serving as secretary for the night. Smiling, Norman responds, "I'll make sure she gets it," which provokes laughter throughout the room.

Sitting in a circle, the members quickly look over the papers while Shannon reads the documents aloud. After she finishes, Shannon looks around the circle and explains, "When I consider what we want to present, I think it would be good to have a parent, friend, or family member as the public face of the [group]. The newspaper called and wanted to talk to the head of [Allied Pride], and I told her, well, you're talking to her. She was talking to me, and basically turned out to be, 'can I speak to someone straight,' and a lot of that is coming back to me. Like, you're gay and it's like, yeah, I am, and I can't and won't change that. So, I think we should have a straight person because that's what the group is about. This isn't just another gay group."

Although some members appear confused by this message, others begin nodding their heads.³ A bisexual woman named Joyce tentatively says, "Well, I make a motion to amend the by-laws language to what Shannon says." As more and more members around the circle start nodding, Shannon says, "Yeah, and let's have some nice straight people come out and run with us." This initiated a round of laughter, and led the group into its next discussion.

Like all the members of Allied Pride we studied, Shannon must manage the contradiction of advocating for LGBTQ people on the one hand and needing the legitimacy granted to heterosexuals in our society on the other.⁴ Shannon is intimately familiar with the symbolic weight granted to heterosexuals in the battle for LGBTQ rights and recognition. As Broad (2002) explains, heterosexual allies often become "outspoken about gay rights" while promoting their heterosexual selves, which ultimately may promote rather than challenge sexual inequalities. Allied Pride members' struggle to

enhance the social status of LGBTQ people thus unfolds as sexual minorities, their family members, and other heterosexual allies—referred to as individuals who are heterosexual, non-parent advocates for sexual equality—make sense of heterosexuality. As a result, LGBTQ Allied Pride members constantly manage their stigmatized sexual identities. Because of their dependence upon heterosexual allies, however, they may also inadvertently privilege heterosexuality.

An emerging line of research focuses on the ways LGBTQ people, their parents, and their heterosexual allies make sense of sexual inequalities (see, e.g., Broad 2002; Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004; Johnson and Best 2012). These studies show that heterosexual allies of lesbian and gay people face a “courtesy stigma” (Goffman 1963) due to their association with and advocacy for sexual minorities, and that they mobilize the symbolic resources at their disposal to dispel negative connotations of themselves and their friends or family members. In so doing, however, heterosexual allies may, regardless of their intentions, reproduce sexual inequalities embedded within the larger social world (Broad 2011; Fields 2001). While these studies importantly reveal ways in which heterosexual allies (mostly parents) make peace with the expectations they had for themselves and their loved ones, we know far less about how LGBTQ people and heterosexual allies collectively make sense of heterosexuality. How do LGBTQ people, their family members, and their heterosexual allies interpret heterosexuality, and what consequences do these interpretations have for the reproduction of sexual inequalities?

Queer theorists have long recognized heterosexuality as an organizing principle of social relations (see, e.g., Crawley and Broad 2008; Butler 1999; Warner 1999). Specifically, systems of heterosexual privilege rely upon people interpersonally and institutionally defining heterosexuality as natural, normative, ahistorical, and ideal (Butler 1999; Duggan 2004; Ingraham 1999). Building on these insights, interactionists have documented some ways heterosexual beliefs and assumptions shape concrete social interactions including gay men’s use of heteronormative scripts to explain parenting (Berkowitz 2011), public and private interaction rituals involving people claiming differential sexual identities (Adams 2010; Ueno and Gentile 2015), heterosexual college men’s devaluation of women during recreational and dating habits (Grazian 2007), and heterosexual parents’ interpretations of teen sexualities as varied in relation to race and class assumptions about “dangerous others” (Elliott 2010). Building upon these recent incorporations of Interactionist (Blumer 1969) and Queer (Warner 1999) perspectives, we examine how members of Allied Pride negotiated their social location between heterosexual and LGBTQ cultures in an effort to, as Waskul and

Plante (2010) suggested, take seriously the interactional construction of heterosexuality in specific social contexts (see also Plummer 1995).

The Allied Pride members we studied privileged heterosexuality by “trading power for patronage,” which refers to the process whereby subordinates accept their marginalization while seeking to acquire benefits from their relationships with dominants (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Specifically, we demonstrate that Allied Pride members, as a subordinate group who faces courtesy stigma, inadvertently reproduced the symbolic elevation of heterosexuality by defining their group as established for and dependent upon heterosexual membership. While these efforts provided members with the opportunity to enhance both their local group and their image in the larger community, they ultimately perpetuated societal patterns of heterosexual privilege and authority within the context of their own group. In so doing, they ultimately reproduced the same sexual inequalities they initially sought to challenge.

Interactionists have documented some ways subordinates trade power for patronage in relation to dominant sexual norms (see, e.g., Schwalbe et al. 2000). In their examination of fraternity little sister programs, for example, Stomblor and Martin (1994) found that while “little sisters” acquired positive feelings of self-worth from their participation in fraternal culture, their efforts ultimately reproduced the objectification and sexualization of women. Likewise, Ortiz (1997) demonstrated that baseball players’ wives maintained their marriages by turning a blind eye to extramarital affairs. Similarly, Ronai and Ellis (1989) found that female strippers often increased their earning by playing into men’s fantasies concerning submissive and sexually available women. Although heterosexual women in each of these cases derived short-term benefits from acquiescing to dominant sexual norms, their efforts, like the Allied Pride members at the heart of this study, ultimately preserved larger systems of sexual inequality.

In this paper, we thus examine how Allied Pride members negotiated heterosexuality and how their efforts ultimately reproduced sexual inequalities. Before presenting our analysis, however, we briefly sketch the social context wherein these negotiations take place as well as the conflicts that led the members to engage in such strategies. In so doing, we aim to, as Collins (1981) suggests, unpack the everyday face-to-face encounters that provide the foundation of the macro-social world, its institutions, and its systemic patterns of inequality (see also Schwalbe et al. 2000). However, it is not our intention to generalize these findings to other allied groups. Rather, we use the data from this study to illustrate some ways people committed to LGBTQ rights may inadvertently facilitate the ongoing subordination of sexual minorities by trading power for (heterosexual) patronage. We thus seek to

demonstrate some ways everyday activities reproduce heterosexual privilege even when people intend to support sexual equality.

Setting and Method

Data for this study derive from participant observation conducted by the first author in a southeastern mixed-sexuality LGBTQ advocacy group affiliated with a national network of LGBTQ rights proponents and allies. Founded in the 1970s, the national network is made up of more than three hundred fifty groups nationwide and has representation in all fifty states. The leadership of the national network defines itself as a collection of groups dedicated to the promotion of LGBTQ rights and equality that seeks to accomplish these goals through ongoing advocacy, education, and support programs at local and national levels of American society. Despite these official proclamations, the national network (as well as local groups) has developed a reputation as a safe haven and support system for heterosexual family members and allies. In fact, this reputation is so widespread that many people automatically associate the national network with heterosexual support rather than its stated goal of LGBTQ advocacy.

Mirroring this pattern, the Allied Pride group examined in this article typically defines itself as an advocacy organization dedicated to advancing the rights of sexual minorities, and such agreement was evident in interviews, group meetings, and vocalized by every group member the first author asked throughout *z*ir fieldwork. However, the group generally spends most of its time, energy, and resources providing support for heterosexual family members and allies. The group was developed in 2009 when its initial president, Shannon, saw the need and demand for LGBTQ advocacy in her local community. As a result, the group participates in many local LGBTQ events, fundraisers, and protest activities, but ultimately—as we show below—relies upon the elevation of heterosexual needs and concerns throughout its group activities. While this pattern mirrors the national network by failing to accomplish its stated goals, it has thus far maintained a presence in the local community for more than five years, held regular meetings throughout this time, and built a network of local support for its endeavors.

The first author became involved with the group in April of 2011, when *ze* contacted their president and explained *z*ir interest in studying the group. At the time, *ze* was seeking a setting to study the advocacy work of heterosexual allies within the LGBTQ movement. After speaking with the president, (who confirmed the group's focus upon LGBTQ advocacy), *ze* was invited to present *z*ir research interest to the group. At their next meeting, *ze* explained *z*ir interest in understanding the dynamics of LGBTQ movements from the

ground up, and answered questions the members had about zir intentions. Following this exchange, the members granted zir permission to study the group, and ze began attending all group functions.

Over the next year, the first author observed and participated in monthly group meetings (12), and informal events, such as fundraisers and community Pride activities, hosted by the group (4). Ze also collected written materials, pamphlets, and educational documents handed out at each meeting as well as personal flyers members often brought to promote local events in the community (e.g., information about upcoming shows at local theaters or special church events). Ze spent about two to four hours on average with members during each visit conducting informal interviews before and after each activity. Afterwards, ze used shorthand notes taken in the field, materials gathered at the events, and recorded notes ze made on zir phone on the way home to compose detailed field notes and explore themes that emerged during data collection. To supplement fieldwork, the first author also conducted four interviews with members who held prominent positions in the group during zir fieldwork. Apart from using an interview guide that consisted of a list of orienting questions about members' sexual and social background and involvement with the group, the interviews were unstructured.

The first author focused data collection upon informal interactions and conversations in hopes of excavating the ways members created meaning in the course of their normal activities (see, e.g., Cahill 1987; Duneier 1999; Goffman 1959). Rather than emphasizing structured interviews or questionnaires wherein respondents are prepared to deliver pre-formulated answers and coordinated self-presentations, the first author sought to uncover taken-for-granted assumptions, discourses, and routines members accomplished in typical face-to-face interactions (see also Kleinman 2007). Following Goffman (1959), the first author thus sought to observe what people actually did in concrete situations in order to compare and contrast such actions to the group's expressed goals (see also Kleinman 2007).

It is also important to note that the Allied Pride group we studied consisted of LGBTQ people, heterosexual parents, and their nonparental heterosexual allies. Whereas previous studies of similar groups have relied upon samples of heterosexual parents (Fields 2001; Johnson and Best 2012), organizational documents (Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004), or a combination of both of these elements (Broad 2002, 2011), our sample incorporated all of these elements as well as LGBTQ members and non-parental heterosexual allies. Specifically, the group we examined consisted of eighteen LGBTQ-identified people, eight heterosexual parents, seven nonparental heterosexual allies, and one heterosexual partner of a bisexual member (for full demographics, see Table 1). As such, this group's negotiation of heterosexuality may have been influenced by the variety of sexual perspectives present.

Table 1. Allied Pride Demographics.⁵

Person	Race	Gender	Age	Informal and Formal Roles	Sexual Identity	Meetings Attended
Shannon	White	Ciswoman	30s	LGBT Member; President	Lesbian	11
Tiffany	Black	Ciswoman	30s	Ally; Co-president	Straight	12
Pamela	Hispanic	Ciswoman	30s	Mom; Co-president	Straight	11
Carol	White	Ciswoman	40s	Mom; Secretary	Straight	11
Gerald	White	Cisman	70s	LGBT member; Treasurer	Gay	11
Samantha	White	Ciswoman	60s	Mom	Straight	8
Norman	White	Cisman	50s	Ally	Straight	8
Joyce	White	Ciswoman	50s	Ally	Bisexual	7
Terry	White	Cisman	60s	Ally	Straight	7
George	Black	Cisman	60s	LGBT member	Gay	5
Franklin	White	Cisman	50s	LGBT member	Gay	5
Phyllis	White	Ciswoman	70s	Ally	Straight	5
Barbara	White	Ciswoman	60s	Mom	Straight	4
Berkeley	White	Cisman	60s	Dad	Straight	4
Ruth	Black	Ciswoman	30s	LGBT member	Queer	3
Amelia	White	Ciswoman	30s	LGBT member	Lesbian	3
Zachary	White	Cisman	20s	LGBT member	Bisexual	3
Damian	White	Cisman	30s	LGBT member	Bisexual	3
Charlotte	White	Ciswoman	30s	Spouse of LGBT person (Damian)	Straight	2
Melissa	White	Transwoman	40s	LGBT member	Bisexual	2
Florence	Hispanic	Ciswoman	20s	LGBT member	Bisexual	2
Billy	White	Cisman	70s	LGBT member	Gay	2
James	White	Cisman	30s	Ally	Straight	2
Linda	White	Ciswoman	40s	Mom	Straight	2
Keisha	Black	Ciswoman	20s	LGBT member	Lesbian	1
Rhonda	White	Ciswoman	60s	LGBT member	Lesbian	1
Amber	Asian	Ciswoman	30s	LGBT member	Not Specified	1
Arthur	White	Cisman	20s	LGBT member	Gay	1
Allen	White	Cisman	60s	LGBT member	Gay	1
Layla	Black	Ciswoman	20s	Ally	Straight	1
Sean	White	Cisman	30s	LGBT member	Not Specified	1
Ali	White	Ciswoman	40s	Mom	Straight	1
Jacob	White	Cisman	40s	Dad	Straight	1
Justin	White	Cisman	30s	Guest speaker	Straight	1

The geographical context also had important implications for the results. The Allied Pride group we studied was located in a southeastern college town that contained both an active conservative Protestant population and a small but active LGBTQ community consisting of organizations that had been in operation for many decades. As a result, the group faced neither the most hostile surrounding community to be found in the Bible Belt nor the most supportive community. Rather, the most accurate description of the community would likely be sexually moderate. Whereas there were active LGBTQ groups and large populations of college students and professors with (on average) more liberal attitudes in the area, many actively anti-LGBTQ religious and political groups were also present in the area and within the collegiate population. As such, this group's negotiation of heterosexuality may have been influenced by its location within a relatively moderate community and thus may serve as a starting point for exploring the experiences of ally groups in more conservative and more liberal areas.

Our analysis developed in an inductive fashion. Throughout the first author's fieldwork, members—both heterosexual and LGBTQ—regularly discussed the importance of heterosexual allies for both the group and the larger LGBTQ movement. Seeking to make sense of these dynamics, the first author approached the second and third authors (both of which identify as sexual minorities and played mentoring roles in the research experience) with examples from *zir* fieldwork, and the three of us began to examine what “heterosexuality” meant in this setting. Drawing on elements of “grounded theory” (Charmaz 2006), we began coding for depictions and discussions concerning heterosexual people and heterosexuality, which revealed patterns that we sorted into thematic categories. Further, we examined the literature on LGBTQ allies and heterosexuality, and began to see the discourses mobilized in the meetings as part of the process through which members negotiated heterosexuality.

Building on this insight, we generated labels to describe the meanings of heterosexuality created in the context of group interactions. To do so, we compared and contrasted each initial code to sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1969) uncovered in previous studies of interactional inequality reproduction (see Schwalbe et al. 2000) and refined our terminology and examples in relation to insights gleaned from these materials (see Kleinman 2007). In so doing, we came to see our case as an example of “trading power for patronage” (Schwalbe et al. 2000) wherein group members symbolically reproduced societal patterns of heterosexual privilege within their group. From there, we generated more refined labels and marshaled our data (see Charmaz

2006) to demonstrate how members accomplished this process by (1) heterosexualizing the group, (2) sanctifying allies, and (3) privileging parenthood.

Before turning to our analysis of these three processes, it is important to note that—in the tradition of analytic induction (e.g., Blumer 1969; Schwalbe et al. 2000)—our focus is not on the members' intentions, and we thus do not argue that members intended to privilege heterosexuality. In fact, our analysis revealed that the members believed deeply that their group promoted LGBTQ advocacy and equality, and intended to be a voice for sexual equality in their community. Despite the best intentions, however, the Allied Pride members we studied generally acted in ways that privileged heterosexuality, and in so doing, reproduced the elevated position of heterosexual people, perspectives, and ideas embedded within contemporary American society. As such, we offer the following analysis in hopes of providing LGBTQ people and their heterosexual allies guidance that may facilitate the formation of groups and interactional processes that ultimately accomplish (rather than undermine) the intentions of all people seeking sexual equality across varied interactional settings.

Privileging Heterosexuality

LGBTQ and heterosexual people participated in Allied Pride to reduce sexual inequality in society, but their efforts to achieve this goal resulted in privileging heterosexuality as they attempted to manage struggles they, their children, or their friends faced. For heterosexual members, their connections with sexual minorities motivated them to challenge societal norms based upon the presumption of heterosexuality, the social construction of “real” families as inherently heterosexual, and the location of sexual minorities as inherently different, other, and deviant (see, e.g., Butler 1999; Ingraham 1999; Warner 1999). Many of them interpreted Allied Pride as an opportunity to push back against these norms and promote social justice for sexual minorities (see also Fields 2001). As Tiffany noted,

You have another family out there. Your family may be giving you a hard time, but you have another family. And I think that's what the LGBT community—'cause I hear stories, I haven't experienced it yet because I haven't worn [my Allied Pride button] outside of [this town]. But I'm told of the stories of, “Oh, [Allied Pride] moms! We love you!” Because they see that, okay, *my* mom may not be as supportive, but there is somebody who is that I can go to, and somebody else is having an easier time. For the world at large, it's just . . . it's easy to discount somebody of the minority because, “Oh they're just part of the minority.” When you have supporters surrounding that group, trying to protect it and help them get what they need, it makes the circle bigger.

For Tiffany and others, Allied Pride represented an opportunity to support sexual minorities and promote sexual equality (see, e.g., Broad 2002, 2011). However, the heterosexual members we 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 (see also Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004). As Terry noted in an interview, “I think it helps to have straight people there, so it doesn’t become a group that is only a group of people directly interested. It goes to show, you know, it’s not just them.” Similarly, Berkeley, whose daughter is a sexual minority, spoke during one meeting and told the other members that “without allies, it could be argued that LGBT people are promoting their own self interest. It moves civil rights from self-interest to social justice and human rights.” Allied Pride thus gave heterosexual people an opportunity and space to advocate for sexual minorities by constructing and performing identities as allies (see also Johnson and Best 2012).

Meanwhile, the LGBTQ members we studied confronted heterosexual privilege directly in their everyday lives. By openly identifying as a sexual minority, they risked losing jobs, being forced out of families, becoming the victims of homo, bi, and trans phobic violence, and experienced a denial of the rights and privileges granted to heterosexual people in their daily lives. In other words, they participated in order to challenge sexual “stigma” (Goffman 1963) and to do their part in acquiring equal rights for themselves and other sexual minorities. Thus, both LGBTQ and heterosexual members saw Allied Pride as an avenue for positive social change. Additionally, LGBTQ members generally echoed heterosexual members’ assertions that heterosexual advocacy could be the lever necessary for enacting such changes. As a lesbian woman named Amelia explained during one group meeting:

You have to meet people where they are. Some of us who are progressive lack compassion for those that struggle with being progressive. If we’re marching in the streets half naked, we’re going to alienate people. I may be angry, but if I come off as angry then I won’t get anything done. Allies normalize [LGBT concerns] for [non-progressive people].

Thus, all the members we studied privileged heterosexual voices and actions in order to lend credibility to LGBTQ issues and “normalize” LGBTQ experience. In so doing, however, they ultimately reproduced the elevation of heterosexuality at the expense of other forms of sexual expression and identity. We elaborate on this point throughout the following analyses.

Trading Power for (Heterosexual) Patronage

Allied Pride members, both LGBTQ and heterosexual identified, privileged heterosexuality within their group in three ways. First, they defined their group as explicitly for and dependent upon heterosexuals—a process we refer to as heterosexualization. Second, they sanctified heterosexual allies by defining them as the ultimate saviors for sexual minorities, and the heroes that could one day provide sexual equality. Third, they privileged parenthood by symbolically elevating the experiences and efforts of parents by stressing the importance of protecting the safety and security of parents. Throughout our analysis, we highlight the ways these strategies to gain recognition in the community ultimately traded away the power and opportunity to challenge heterosexual privilege by reproducing this privilege within the context of their group interactions. While we treat each of these developments as analytically distinct, members often did more than one of these things at a time.

Heterosexualizing the Group

As explained above, Allied Pride, at national and local levels, purports to serve both sexual minorities and their affiliates, but the group at the heart of our analysis rarely offered any evidence of such a goal. Discussing the demographics of the group when it began, for example, Shannon noted, “It was actually very few gay and lesbian people. There were some, there were people that identified as bi.” Similarly, she explained that the current group was “about 75 to 80% straight . . . probably 80%.” In fact, members regularly defined Allied Pride as a group for heterosexual people, rather than simply a diverse community or an LGBTQ group as specified in the national network’s mission statement. By heterosexualizing their group, members distanced themselves from other LGBTQ groups.

One of the primary ways members accomplished heterosexualization involved defining what their group was. Since people act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them (Blumer 1969), these efforts set the ground rules for the group while distinguishing Allied Pride from the stigmatized position held by other groups focused on sexual issues. In so doing, however, the members acquired the participation of dominants at the expense of fully advocating for sexual minorities. As Shannon explained in an interview,

There are [Allied Pride groups] that have a lot of gay people, and that’s good and great and everything, but it really is an organization that is supposed to be for the straight community to learn and then interact with the gay community. But not just be this other gay group.

Rather than “just” another “gay” group, members defined their group as a place “for the straight community,” and often, as the following field note excerpt reveals, signified this focus during meetings by catering to heterosexual attendees:

As the members continued working on the elections materials, and attempting to ascertain the new leadership of the group, new meeting attendees were left with little to do. Recognizing this situation, Shannon approached the wife of a bisexual (cisgender man) member during the process whereby officers were nominated. As she approached, Shannon apologized for the formal business tone of the meeting, and said, “I promise, we do fun things! You just came on a boring night.”

Importantly, Shannon made no attempt to apologize to the new LGBTQ attendees, but rather interrupted the official business of the meeting to make sure a heterosexual member felt properly welcomed to the group. Similar to sorority girls that trade on their looks to acquire the favor of men (Stomblor and Martin 1994), Shannon—especially in her capacity as leader—signified the important place of heterosexual people within the group.

Other members also defined Allied Pride as a heterosexual group. In some cases, this simply involved complacently accepting the ways Shannon and other officers “defined the situation” (Goffman 1974), but in other instances, heterosexual members explicitly echoed the sentiment. In each case, as Schwalbe and associates (2000) point out, their efforts met immediate needs at the expense of perpetuating the larger system of sexual inequality. As a heterosexual ally named Tiffany explained during an interview,

Most other groups are from the LGBT perspective. This one’s from the people trying to support them, which—because I know that my personality is more caretaker—it fits my personality a lot more. And it helps me say—I remember using this phrase a lot—people try to put LGBT people back into the closet, well you can’t put me, because I’m straight, back into the closet. So, I’m going to be that voice.

Although it is encouraging that Tiffany and others desire to use their privileged sexual position to advocate for sexual minorities, she separates her advocacy from “the LGBT perspective” while explicitly identifying herself as “straight.” Later in the interview, she notes: “So, whoever in power may discount the LGBT community. But I’m a family member—you can’t discount me.” Whereas Tiffany and others are apparently aware of their privileged positions, they use these positions to define Allied Pride as an avenue for their “perspective” and to increase the group’s legitimacy in the local

community. Rather than expressing a desire to prevent the dismissal of LGBTQ voices, such statements frame Allied Pride as yet another outlet for those who already have a voice.

While members' definitions of Allied Pride implicitly privilege heterosexual "perspectives," this pattern becomes more explicit when members talk about what the group actually does. Rather than focusing on easing the burdens of sexual minorities or assisting their effort to elevate themselves, member statements reveal that Allied Pride seeks to support (and often elevate) heterosexual voices. As Shannon explains,

I think that one thing it can do is particularly if somebody has come to [town], and now they're away from home, so they can finally come out. But, now they gotta deal with the fact that they have a family elsewhere, and how do I do this? How do I navigate this path into letting my family know who I am. . . . In that way [Allied Pride] can be a good place for them to come, because again, you get to be around parents and straight people who will talk to them about when their kid came out and how they responded.

Perhaps heterosexual members felt that there were very few people that would help these parents deal with challenges often overlooked by other LGBTQ organizations. Nonetheless, their focus on supporting heterosexual parents ultimately resulted in reproducing sexual inequalities by privileging the needs and experiences of heterosexuals rather than LGBTQ people. Echoing this sentiment, Terry explains,

I have been there when parents are coming for the first time, and they're shaky. And the fact that they're there means they're open to some sort of support. They're not the kind that are just throwing the kids out and closing their eyes to it. But, they have a lot of questions they don't know and often have never met anyone in their situation. And to see them shake a little less, that's the most dramatic thing I can say. To find out they're not alone. To find out there are always other people who have handled this better. To find out there's a place they can go *with* their children to discuss this. They don't have to hide in their houses like it's something shameful.

Similar to the statements of Shannon and others (as well as previous literature on ally groups, see Fields 2001), members focus on easing the burden of the parents, and helping the parents deal with the shame or guilt of having LGBTQ children (see also Broad 2011). Rather than promoting sexual equality, such efforts privilege the feelings and experience of heterosexual people by making sure they know "they're not alone"—and thus not abnormal or unusual or part of the problem—when they feel ashamed of their children.

Expanding this focus on heterosexual support, members also reproduce societal discourses that paint heterosexual people as inherently more legitimate and important in the public sphere. As Shannon notes while discussing the pursuit of rights for sexual minorities,

Because the thing is that, for example—the Human Rights Ordinance, to me it meant a lot more when I’m hearing from people that were not gay getting up to talk about it. Because that gave it the perspective of—this is not just some minority group coming and crying to the county commission about why we need to be protected.

In statements like this, Shannon and others reproduce cultural discourses that marginalize, demonize, and delegitimize issues raised by minority groups, and reserve serious issues for members of dominant groups (see also Schwalbe et al. 2000). In other cases, as the following example from an interview with Terry illustrates, members suggest that LGBTQ people participate in the group for the support of heterosexuals:

[Allied Pride] allows them to give something back when the parents come. It allows them to say, “Well, here’s my experience. Here’s what was good, here’s what was bad.” So, it allows them to offer their own support in their own ways. Well, someone being there so someone doesn’t feel alone. That alone is support. Just saying, “I remember when I came out to my mom or dad, here’s what happened. You don’t have to feel like you’re the only one in the world who is shocked, stunned, doesn’t know what to say. This is what happens and it will get better.”

Echoing societal patterns and dictates for feminine submission to masculine goals and needs (see Schrock and Schwalbe 2009), statements like this one define LGBTQ Allied Pride members as a source of—necessary and important—support for heterosexual parents struggling with non-heterosexual children. While group members could have challenged parents to interrogate their own sexual assumptions, they instead suggested that LGBTQ people serve a supportive role to their heterosexual counterparts (see also Duggan 2004; Warner 1999).

Resonating with interreactionist scholarship on the practical consequences of meaning making (Goffman 1974; Schwalbe et al. 2000), members’ heterosexualization of their group mirrored their strategies to manage external conflict. When outside agents questioned the lesbian leadership of the group, for example, they responded by establishing some heterosexual leadership instead of challenging these questions via protest or other methods. While this strategy provided immediate relief from external pressures (see Schwalbe

et al. 2000), it also reproduced the marginalization of LGBTQ voices in the wider society. Talking about the issues she faced as group president, for example, Shannon explained,

One of the things that I have found is that sometimes I get people who just kinda make these insinuations about me being gay and I'm a lesbian, and really it's supposed to be about parents. This whole idea of "how can you really help parents if you're a lesbian?" And I'm like, well, because when I'm on the phone with parents, I'm not talking to them as "I'm a lesbian, and I'm gonna tell you why you need to do blah blah blah." I'm listening to them, and I'm responding to *them* as *they are* not as I am.

Rather than fighting for the recognition of LGBTQ leaders, however, the group decided it should avoid such criticisms by having heterosexual leadership. As Shannon explained,

We're trying to figure it out. But it feels better to me. And part of what feels better is the idea that you've got Pamela who is a parent, Tiffany who is an ally, and then there's me. So, in that sense, what I was talking about as far as people making snippy comments about a lesbian running this [group]. It's like well, now there are a couple of straight people involved in running this [group].

It is important to note that when faced with an opportunity to fight for sexual equality and the recognition of LGBTQ leadership potential, the group chose instead to bow to heterosexist assumptions in the wider society. While this might be surprising based on the stated goals of the membership, it makes much more sense when we consider that the members defined their group as well as its primary purpose as a heterosexual outlet. Rather than promoting sexual equality, members' heterosexualization of Allied Pride ultimately reproduced, within the context of their local group, the privileged position of heterosexuality and heterosexual people in the larger society. In so doing, they traded the opportunity to promote significant social change for the legitimacy and comfort of heterosexual patronage.

Sanctifying Allies

Whereas previous research has focused exclusively on parents' experience in ally groups (see, e.g., Johnson and Best 2012), the members we studied regularly emphasized the role of other (nonparent) heterosexual allies. Instead of challenging the legitimacy automatically granted to heterosexual others, however, members—both LGBTQ people and heterosexual parents—managed their stigmatized identities by cashing in on the legitimacy of

“non-tainted” allies (Goffman 1963). They argued that by virtue of their “clean” identities, allies were especially moral beings (see Kleinman 1996) capable of saving “tainted” others from marginalization. Thus, members privileged heterosexuality by sanctifying allies. Because they relied on the patronage of heterosexual allies, however, they reproduced societal discourses that encouraged dominants to ignore the plight of minorities and grant extra status to “charitable” dominants that do otherwise (see also Schwalbe et al. 2000).

The Allied Pride members at the heart of this study sanctified allies by constructing “heterosexual ally” as a “moral identity” (Katz 1975). As Kleinman (1996) explains, moral identities are socially constructed identifications that signify not only what someone is but also that said being has worth, value, and virtue (see also Fields 2001; McQueeney 2009; Sumerau 2012). Rather than just another identity, heterosexual ally thus represented a privileged status held by people who went beyond acceptable social standards, and possessed extraordinary character (Ueno and Gentile Forthcoming). Similar to the processes whereby other social identities are constructed (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996), members constructed the heterosexual ally moral identity by defining what an ally was, what an ally did, and what an ally expected from the group. In this section, we demonstrate the construction of “heterosexual allies” while paying attention to the ways this moral identity reproduces heterosexual privilege.

Defining what heterosexual allies are. Members devoted considerable time during their meetings to defining and describing heterosexual allies. During these discussions, the members elaborated what it meant to be an ally, and in so doing, celebrated the positive influence of heterosexual others on LGBTQ experience. In so doing, however, they generally suggested that LGBTQ rights and recognition relied upon the existence of heterosexual allies, and constructed these allies as ideal social beings possessing especially moral or valuable selves (see also Fields 2001 for a similar phenomenon among parents of LGBTQ people). Whereas these efforts successfully established a shared impression of “heterosexual allies,” they also reproduced the elevation of—supposedly moral—heterosexuals in relation to sexual “others.”

When members discussed the characteristics of an ally, they typically emphasized the positive things allies could do. As a heterosexual mother named Carol noted:⁶

Allies lend credibility. Obviously I’m going to push for gay rights for my son, but parents are seen as emotional. Allies aren’t emotional. When we went to meet with legislators, there was a mixed group. There was a transgender man,

and I don't want to be offensive, but if it was just a group of trans people going in, it wouldn't have the same effect as a white middle class person.

Similarly, a gay man named Gerald noted: "Friends don't have the same expected emotional connection, but they're here. It's an odd question for that reason. It's almost like we're talking about allies when we're talking about [Allied Pride]." As these illustrations reveal, allies were people that chose to help, were free of emotional investment, and could lend credibility to the "discredited" (Goffman 1963). Parents, although awarded more legitimacy than LGBTQ people, were still assumed to have a biased investment in the plight for LGBTQ rights because of their attachment to their nonheterosexual children. As Carol's quote above demonstrates, members linked parenthood to emotionality. Thus, the presumed emotional investment of parents allowed members to conceptualize nonparental allies as the ultimate unbiased, and thus legitimate, supporter of LGBTQ concerns. Rather than arguing that people (regardless of sexuality) should care about one another, members suggested that allies were "special" because, unlike sexual minorities or heterosexual parents, they did not "have" to care about "others" (also see Ueno and Gentile 2015).

Heterosexual allies also defined their identities in terms of a chosen opportunity to serve others. Rather than interpreting their efforts as merely an example of human decency, they argued that their own experience was detached from—and thus more commendable than—the everyday efforts and experiences of LGBTQ people. As an ally named Phyllis noted, "I don't feel comfortable making myself a member of a gay organization. I will support them but, for me, to be a part of one of those groups would be out of place. If I'm going to be a part of a group, I want my identity to be a part of that group." Similarly, an ally named Terry noted, "I hope that what it gets across is these issues aren't just for small interest groups. Gay rights won't change my life, but I support it because it's right." Note that statements like this imply that people fighting for their own rights (such as LGBTQ people) are not simply doing so "because it's right," and that allies are special because they "support" sexual minorities even though they do not have to do so. Thus, group members demonstrated that an ally is thus not someone that has an emotional connection to other people, but rather, someone that takes action simply because it is the right—read moral—thing to do. Further, these illustrations reveal that even though members focus more on heterosexuals when defining the group, they emphasize the struggle of LGBTQ people when explaining the motivations for their participation. In so doing, they simultaneously construct Allied Pride as a heterosexual space while highlighting the stated mission (of LGBTQ advocacy) to claim moral worth as "allies."

Defining what heterosexual allies do. As Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) explain, identities rely upon the ritualized repetition and affirmation of specific types of action. Once an identity is defined into existence, people must find ways to signify their possession of said identity, and for other people to affirm their claims (see also Goffman 1963). In the case of heterosexual ally identities, members accomplished this task by regularly emphasizing the things allies did—or could do—for sexual minorities. Their explanations often revealed, however, that allies did not actually do much for either LGBTQ people as a whole or the group itself. Rather than demonstrating the impact of allies, their explanations thus resulted in celebrating the activities of “heterosexual allies” no matter how small or inconsequential.

During fieldwork, the first author noticed that despite the constant discussion of heterosexual allies ze had trouble locating what—if anything—allies actually accomplished. As a result, ze began asking group members what role allies played in the group or in the push for sexual equality. In so doing, ze discovered that both allies and other members typically stressed what allies “could do,” but offered very few examples of things they actually did. Talking about an ally named Vanessa,⁷ for example, a lesbian member explained that while she almost never attended meetings, it was okay because she showed her support by serving as the administrator for the Facebook page. Speaking about the same ally, Shannon expressed enthusiastic appreciation when Vanessa finally came to a meeting, and suggested that her presence was important because they showed a movie about the role allies “could play” during that meeting. The implication was that even though Vanessa did not in fact play much of a role in the lives of LGBTQ people, her presence was important because she could (theoretically) learn how to do so in the future. When the first author asked Shannon for specific things allies have done, however, Shannon struggled for an answer before finally offering the following examples:

I’ve seen people put the Safe Zone sticker on their office or something, or a bumper sticker to make it clear where they stand when it comes to questions about gay and lesbian people. I’ve had some people show up for things for PRIDE week. I asked, and they actually showed up. And then the other thing is with the membership, I encourage people to wear their [Allied Pride] buttons when they’re out doing stuff just because that will raise a question. Somebody might ask them and start a conversation.

These examples illustrate that “heterosexual allies” typically received credit and affirmation by simply existing rather than by being active participants who choose to be involved in the pursuit of better conditions for sexual

minorities. In the end, it seemed that allies could claim their moral identities by simply calling themselves allies.

Interestingly, allies themselves painted a similar picture. Rather than elaborating ways they actively sought to assist LGBTQ people and their parents, they typically responded to questions about the role of allies by either highlighting small ways they showed kindness to sexual minorities, admitting that they had not actually done much, or justifying things they did not do. A typical example of the first type of response can be seen in the following excerpt:

I used to have a button. I was an honorary gay man, and I used to wear that proudly before it got lost. I had another friend who just recently put two and two together that, yes, I know your orientation. No, it doesn't matter. And yes, I'm doing things about it, thanks in part to your inspiration.

Similarly, the second type of response is exemplified by Terry's admission: "I haven't done much in the sense of going out specifically to tell other people or to proselytize. None of my friends would be the least bit surprised, but I have not done much in terms of reaching out on the issue." At other times, allies noted hostility toward LGBTQ people in their own lives, and as the following example from Tiffany shows, explained why they had not taken action:

I tell some of my LGBT friends when they come [to my house], "Don't make a big deal about it around my uncle because he's stupid and we still haven't educated him completely." He's trying—one of his best friends is the father of [a well-known state activist], so he's learning really quick. But he's still a military man, old school military. So, it takes a little bit more education.

Although Tiffany shows her respect and support for LGBT friends by welcoming them in her home, she asks them to tone down their sexualities for the sake of heterosexual others. Perhaps she took such an action to create a pleasant space for her LGBT friends, but such effort resulted in giving excuses for her uncle's behaviors, instead of educating him. This example demonstrates that allies' inability to make progress on sexual equality in their daily life does not necessarily undermine their ally identities because their identities do not require such actions.

Defining how heterosexual allies think. Despite the celebration of heterosexual allies throughout group events, members also noted that allies typically had little understanding of the issues facing LGBTQ people and parents. Rather than interpreting this as a problem that needed to be solved or addressed,

however, members typically stressed the “innocence” or “naivety” of heterosexual allies. Considering that “innocence” and “naivety” have historically been linked to sexual purity, moral virtue, and the elevation of heterosexuality (e.g., Butler 1999), members’ reactions to heterosexual ignorance demonstrates another way heterosexual ally identities were sanctified. Moreover, these reactions mirror longstanding societal patterns wherein dominants are granted the benefit of the doubt while subordinates are conceptualized as morally lacking (Warner 1999).

Members developed a set of unique definitions for the ways allies thought and regularly affirmed them in meetings and informal interactions. Through their framing of allies as morally superior to other group participants, members conceptualized allies’ misinformation and lack of understanding as reasonable mistakes and never commented on the fact that these beliefs often explicitly contradicted members’ own definitions of allies as the ultimate supporters of LGBTQ rights. The following excerpt from an interview with Shannon offers a typical case:

And there were some people who, I think they personally were at this place of being fed up with the idea that anybody had a problem with gay people. And these are allies; these aren’t gay people. I think gay people are so used to people not liking us that it’s no skin off our nose. But, some of these allies were just like, “I’m sick of this, and people need to just get over their whole shit,” blah blah. And I’m like, well, you can take that approach, or you can hear what the bullshit is and you can counter it, or offer another way for them to think about it. So, you know, and I think the people who didn’t stick around were just the ones that wanted to get in everybody’s face and tell them to get over their bullshit.

Although Shannon made an effort to demonstrate the support of allies who “stuck around,” she failed to draw attention to the privileged position that allowed some allies to “get in everybody’s face” or tell people “to get over their bullshit.” Instead, Shannon and others generally excused the ignorance of heterosexual allies. At other times, heterosexual allies demonstrated surprise at the notion that “they” might be asked to be supportive of LGBTQ people. As Shannon describes,

When I said that part of our mission was support—and this was amazing—I said that part of our mission was support and she and some others in the group, who were the allies, were just like, “well, I’m not here to do support.” And I’m like, “You’re not? Okay.”

While Shannon, later in the interview, assumes that the allies in question simply misunderstood what “support” meant, it is striking that heterosexual

allies balked at the thought of being supportive, and that rather than calling them on it, Shannon—and others in the meeting—simply let the moment pass without raising the issue of what an “ally” should do.

Alongside LGBTQ and parent members’ attempts to excuse the misconceptions of heterosexual allies, allies themselves often shared similar misconceptions. In such cases, they typically stressed the positive benefits they acquired from their “ally” status while leaving their efforts to challenge societal misconceptions unspoken. Discussing the ways people just don’t understand allies in an interview, for example, Tiffany noted, “I’ll be mistaken for gay. It’s frustrating when I try to find a date. Other than that, it’s like, okay fine. Whatever you think. I’m still going to be that person behind the scenes making you think.” Note that Tiffany (a heterosexual who self-identified as an ally) focuses on her efforts to help sexual minorities, but keeps these efforts “behind the scenes” rather than challenging the people that assume she is gay. Furthermore, by stating that she makes no effort to correct people who “mistake” her for a gay person, Tiffany emphasizes how comfortable she is with her heterosexuality, thereby claiming her moral worth as an ally. Similarly, Terry explained:

I’ve never gotten an outwardly negative reaction. I have often gotten silence, they’re not happy about what I said. Whether it will have some later effect, I don’t know. But, at least to convey the message of, not only is what you think not acceptable, but also not everyone feels that way. And you need to think about what you’re saying because you could be the one in that position.

While Terry’s statement importantly recognizes some ways allies may help the cause for sexual equality, he stops short of actually disengaging from people making derogatory statements and finishes his statement by linking LGBT people with negative conditions like “abuse” and “cancer”: “To the extent I’ve gotten any reaction, it’s been wholly positive. Much the same reaction as if I said I were helping abused kids, or cancer patients or anything less controversial in that sense. It’s been exactly the same reaction.” Rather than sharing this experience to criticize the prejudice of others, Terry uses the negative actions of others to highlight his own nobility and value without actually challenging the marginalization of LGBTQ people. Further, he leaves unchallenged (and indeed repeats) historical discourses associating LGBTQ people with (sympathetic and unsympathetic) disease patients, and infantilizing or devaluing LGBTQ experience by linking it to other charitable “issues” (see also Warner 1999).

Overall, the Allied Pride members we studied sanctified allies by constructing “heterosexual ally” as a moral identity, and excusing occasions

where actual ally activities did not live up to said construction. Their efforts to sustain ally members and highlight their presence in the group seem to reflect their belief that allies play an important role in gaining legitimacy in the larger society. By taking such an approach, however, members ultimately granted allies elevated moral standing and sidestepped opportunities to educate and challenge heterosexism within group interactions. As a result, their endeavors ultimately reproduced their own subordination to heterosexual others without actually challenging existing sexual inequalities.

Privileging Parenthood

Previous research of ally organizations has focused almost exclusively on the experiences of parent allies but paid little attention to LGBTQ and nonparent ally members and their positions relative to parent members within organizations (see Broad 2002, 2011; Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004; Fields 2001; Johnson and Best 2012). While these studies have importantly revealed some ways parents benefit from these groups as well as the difficult struggles many parents experience in their attempts to “accept” sexual minority children, they have also implicitly suggested that ally groups downplay the issues faced by sexual minorities in order to provide support for heterosexual parents. Similarly, the Allied Pride members we studied privileged parenthood by granting parents a central position within the group, celebrating the advocacy efforts of parents, and striving to support parents. While none of these processes is inherently negative in and of itself, we call these strategies privileging parenthood because they often involved positioning parental needs and efforts above those of LGBTQ people in much the same way group members constructed ally identities.

Although engaging parents in the organization could be a positive exercise, the group casted parents (and, as noted previously, other allies) as the symbolic center of the group and elevated them—rather than LGBTQ voices—into the spotlight. The following illustration, where Shannon responds to a school group’s request for an LGBTQ speaker, demonstrates a typical case of this strategy:

So, I said that what we could do instead is have some of our membership come to one of your Gay-Straight-Alliance meetings to talk about the fact that they’re parents and they love their gay kids and have an interchange over that because they’re high school kids and some of them might not be getting along with their parents. And it might be nice for them to see that there are some parents that they could get along with. And what I told him was, “As much as I would like to come talk to your group, I think it would be better if I could get one of my

parents to come rather than me. Because me is just another lesbian talking to you kids.”

Thus, Shannon assumed that heterosexual parents have greater ability to communicate with high school students and emphasized this factor in service to the high school. By having parent members represent the group, however, she passed up an opportunity to promote “just another lesbian” or other sexual minorities. Further, members often sought to have parents seen as the face of their group as Shannon’s following quote reveals:

He (the president of a local Gay Straight Alliance) looked up from his texting and said, “Well,” looking at Pamela, “I’d really rather have you come talk to our group.” He looks at me at that point and says, “No offense,” and then he looks back at her, “But I’d really rather have a parent come and talk to us.”

Whether requests came from inside or beyond the group, members typically offered parents as their representatives. In so doing, however, they reproduced the privileged position of heterosexual parents in the larger society (see also Fields 2001), and missed opportunities to promote and encourage LGBTQ voices in their community.

At other times, members celebrated the efforts of parents within the group. Once again, celebrating parental efforts to support sexual minorities may have helped increase the group’s visibility in the community. Within the group, however, these celebrations stood out because there were rarely similar celebrations of the efforts of LGBTQ people in the group or the larger community. Instead, parents received credit for their efforts from LGBTQ people while LGBTQ people were simply (one assumes) expected to be engaged. The following story Shannon told in an interview offers an example of celebrating parents:

My mom used to go to D.C. with [LGBTQ advocacy groups] and go knocking on the doors of the congress people to tell them why they needed to support whatever was the legislation du jour. And I mean, in later years it was not nearly as bad, but she told me the story of going to talk to her congressman, and telling him, “I have a gay daughter.” And he actually looked at her and said, “I’m sorry.” And my mom was like, “well, I’m not.”

While this mother’s efforts could be interpreted as positive steps to promoting sexual equality, it is noteworthy that similar efforts by LGBTQ people received little recognition. Similarly, members often conceptualized LGBTQ children as an opportunity for parents to gain celebration and status. The

following example from a field note demonstrates how the group focuses on parents' experiences with their LGBTQ children rather than the experiences of LGBTQ children:

Gerald says, "Carol just wants her son to come out, so she can stand on a street corner and hold a sign that says 'my son is gay!'" Another member calls out, "She wants to get quoted in the [local newspaper]!" Carol nods at this comment, and her eyes widen.

While these statements are made in jest, they demonstrate that parents were very conscious about how they were perceived in the local community. Further, while making such statements may have helped parents bond over shared experience, they ultimately relied upon trivializing what is often one of the most traumatic experiences in an LGBTQ person's life (see Adams 2010), and reinforced the emphasis upon parental—rather than LGBTQ—needs within the group (see also Johnson and Best 2012).

Like other mixed-sexuality advocacy groups nationwide (Broad 2011), the group at the heart of our study strived to support parents of sexual minorities. In so doing, however, they regularly downplayed the issues sexual minorities face in order to express their support for parents. After the murder of a local basketball player by her partner, for example, the members expressed their concern that domestic violence issues within the LGBTQ community are not discussed enough, but ended the conversation by asserting that "[Allied Pride] supports *parents* that suspect that there is violence in their children's relationships." Similarly, the members often responded to questions about coming out by emphasizing the struggle parents may face when children do so, and during one conversation, a lesbian member emphasized that "straight family members need a safe space, too" during such times. While striving to support parents (of all types) facing problems (of all types) could be beneficial for society as a whole, illustrations like these demonstrate that such support came at the expense of supporting sexual minorities.

Throughout these examples, members regularly privileged parents at the expense of sexual minority concerns. In fact, the members frequently spent time at meetings brainstorming ways to reach out to more parents, and coming up with strategies for contacting more parents about the group (e.g., giving bags of cookies with informational materials hidden in them so as not to arise suspicion). Parental involvement in LGBTQ issues and endeavors may have helped the group address parents' needs and gain recognition in the community by appealing to traditional family values (Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004; Fields 2001). In this process, however, the Allied Pride members

granted parents a central position within the group, while downplaying the issues facing LGBTQ people. As a result, their efforts ultimately reproduced the elevation of heterosexuality within the group despite their stated aspiration to reduce sexual inequality in the larger society.

Conclusion

The Allied Pride members we studied were intimately familiar with the marginalization of sexual minorities and their family members in mainstream society. Their participation in Allied Pride, however, allowed them to present themselves as respectable people committed to LGBTQ rights and recognition. While they could have pursued this goal by challenging heterosexism within both their group and their local community, the group did not discuss such an option, perhaps because they channeled their focus into a more immediate goal of making the group more visible and respected within the local community. To pursue this immediate goal, they wound up privileging heterosexuality by heterosexualizing the group, sanctifying allies, and privileging parenthood.

While their elevation of heterosexuality allowed them to successfully acquire the patronage, support, and legitimacy of heterosexual others, it also reproduced cultural patterns that facilitate the ongoing subordination of sexual minorities. By distancing themselves from other “gay” groups and defining their group as established for and dependent upon heterosexual people, for example, they reproduced conventional discourses used to construct sexual minorities as utterly distinct from, subordinate to, and oppositional to “normal” social arrangements, structures, and traditions (see, e.g., Butler 1999; Duggan 2004; Warner 1999). Similarly, their construction of heterosexual allies as morally superior, especially dedicated, and exceptionally capable advocates for sexual equality reproduced assimilationist discourses (see, e.g., Duggan 2004) that define minorities as sympathetic beings dependent upon the sponsorship, care, and protection of dominants while granting dominants moral and cultural credit for supervising minorities in a “kindly” manner (e.g., Ueno and Gentile 2015; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Whereas sexualities researchers have sought to understand the limits of assimilationist strategies for sexual equality (see, e.g., Duggan 2004) and the negative consequences of heterosexual advocacy on behalf of sexual minorities (e.g., McQueeney 2009), these findings suggest that part of the answers to these questions may lie in the ways LGBTQ people and their heterosexual allies, regardless of their intentions, privilege heterosexuality in their face-to-face interactions.

These findings also resonate with the existing literature on experiences of heterosexual (especially parental) allies (see, e.g., Broad 2011; Fields 2001;

Johnson and Best 2012), and extend this literature by revealing how mixed-sexuality advocacy group members reproduce heterosexual privilege. Specifically, the Allied Pride members we studied drew upon cultural notions of heterosexual legitimacy and normalcy (Warner 1999) to deflect stigma against sexual minorities and their families, acquire heterosexual participation and support for their organization, and claim moral standing in the ongoing struggle for LGBTQ rights. They sought to accomplish this goal, however, by trading power for patronage. Rather than explicitly challenging the legitimacy and normalcy of heterosexuality, they traded upon these societal patterns to manage internal and external pressures and reward parents and heterosexual allies for their involvement. These findings thus reveal the importance of examining and comparing the myriad of ways LGBTQ people and their heterosexual allies make sense of, challenge, and/or privilege societal patterns of heterosexism.

These findings also complicate previous treatments of trading power for patronage (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Although researchers have typically focused on the ways subordinate members adapt to dominant norms, our analysis calls into question this relatively straightforward conceptualization. While LGBTQ members did in fact trade the power to challenge dominant sexual norms for the patronage of heterosexual others, the examples of parents and other allies are not so clear-cut. Rather, parents and other allies occupied an ambivalent social location wherein they affiliated with a subordinate group despite their dominant sexual status. In a sense, parents and other allies traded the marginalization of sexual minorities for greater recognition and moral value, which ultimately reproduced their own elevation at the expense of the very people they sought to help. Whereas Schwalbe and associates (2000) point out that subordinate adaptations may reproduce systemic patterns of inequality, our analysis reveals that dominants' affiliation with marginalized groups may exacerbate this process by facilitating—and potentially justifying—these dysfunctional adaptations within marginalized groups. These findings thus reveal the necessity of exploring the ways dominants affiliate with subordinate groups as well as the consequences these actions may have for the reproduction or reduction of social inequalities.

Our results also extend previous treatments of LGBTQ-identified advocacy groups by drawing our attention to the social construction of heterosexual allies. Whereas previous studies have focused on the experiences of heterosexual parents, they have thus far left other heterosexual allies unexamined (see, e.g., Broad 2011; Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004; Fields 2001; Johnson and Best 2012; but see Ueno and Gentile 2015). The Allied Pride members we studied, however, devoted significant time and effort to defining, encouraging, and excusing heterosexual allies. While these efforts did in

fact mirror the privileged position of parenthood within the group in some ways, they also constructed the nonparental “heterosexual ally” as a distinct moral identity that signified value, worth, and character, and granted heterosexual allies an elevated moral standing in relation to sexual minorities (and parents) despite the fact that allies rarely did much to challenge sexual inequality either for the group or in their daily lives. These findings thus reveal the importance of addressing not only how parental allies relate to their children, but also the ways LGBTQ people, their parents, and other heterosexual people construct and signify “ally” identities.

These findings also reveal the necessity of examining how LGBTQ people and their allies conceptualize heterosexuality in ways that simultaneously deflect sexual stigma and preserve inequalities. Whereas previous studies generally focused on attempts by parents of LGBTQ people to deflect sexual stigma or fashion creditable selves, our analysis reveals that heterosexual efforts to deflect “courtesy stigma” and acquire legitimacy for groups may ultimately rely on the reproduction of LGBTQ marginalization (see also Duggan 2004; Warner 1999). Further, examples of this interrelation may be seen in many arenas where sexual minorities and their heterosexual allies seek to assimilate to societal norms in the service of combatting sexual inequalities. Lesbian women (McQueeney 2009), gay men (Sumerau 2012), and their heterosexual allies (Moon 2004) in Christian organizations, for example, have been found to draw upon and reproduce racial, classed, gendered, sexual, and religious inequalities in their efforts to destigmatize and moralize their sexual marginalization. In a similar fashion, LGBTQ social movement groups—as well as the heterosexual allies that support them—may accomplish short-term political goals, bolster fundraising, and garner more mainstream support by presenting white, middle-class, cisgender, and familial representations of the LGBTQ community while ignoring, denigrating, or distancing themselves from “other” sexual and gender minorities (see Warner 1999). Unraveling the ways LGBTQ people and their allies accomplish these interrelated endeavors, however, requires asking questions beyond the scope of the present study. Researchers could, for example, examine how LGBTQ people and their allies make sense of heterosexuality in other settings, such as social movements, religious traditions, and workplaces. Further, researchers could examine what role heterosexual allies actually play in the construction, reproduction, and deconstruction of heterosexual privilege. Finally, researchers should explore the ways that race, class, and gender also shape the interpretation and construction of heterosexuality and heterosexual allies.

To fully understand the reproduction of sexual inequalities, we must analyze the ways LGBTQ people and their allies make sense of heterosexuality and the consequences of these actions (Plummer 1995). Following Waskul and Plante

(2010), this task will require critically investigating the social construction of heterosexuality within specific social contexts as well as the factors that lead some people to act in ways that reproduce societal patterns of heterosexual privilege even when they explicitly wish to combat sexual inequalities. As seen in the case of the Allied Pride group, the social construction of heterosexuality may involve trading power (and by extension the pursuit of sexual equality) for (heterosexual) patronage. Unraveling the variations in the ways LGBTQ people and their allies make sense of heterosexuality, and more generally, the multitude of ways people—intentionally or otherwise—facilitate the elevation of heterosexuality at the expense of sexual and gender minorities may thus deepen our understanding of the intricacies of sexual inequalities and provide tools for actively pursuing sexual and gender equality.

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Notes

1. We use the term *group* here specifically to note (a) that at the time of fieldwork there was not yet a fully formed formal organizational structure within this group, and (b) that we are focused here on the interactional dynamics of people within a group setting instead of potential organizational dynamics or structures. We would suggest that analyses of interactional and organizational dynamics within both more formal and less formal groups would be a welcome next step following from our analysis.
2. All names contained in this paper are pseudonyms.
3. While we expected to find contention over issues like this within the group, such contention never emerged from the members even when explicitly asked about this issue. Rather, the members of the group expressed either shared belief in the opinions noted throughout this article or affirmation of the opinions promoted by the leaders of the group. As such, we often use the phrase “the members” or “the group” when we discuss issues and opinions the group shared as a whole throughout data collection.

4. Although many advocacy groups focus on LGBTQ people as a whole, the combination of these distinct communities often leaves issues facing specific communities unresolved. In the case of groups like Allied Pride, for example, they focus heavily on the rights and struggles of sexual minorities and dominants while rarely noting that many transgender people are heterosexual as well, and without much discussion of the issues faced by bisexuals in contemporary society. Thus while we use the language of scholarship and our case (e.g., LGBTQ), we acknowledge that such collective terms inevitably simplify the nuances of different sexual and gender minority groups, histories, and experiences.
5. Along with regular members, three white transwomen visited a group meeting during fieldwork to discuss organizational strategies and promote their own group's events (these visitors did not disclose their sexual identities, ages, or roles in their own group).
6. It is important to note that Carol mentions the race and class of the "ideal" advocate, but leaves the race and class of the observed trans person unknown. In so doing, Carol reproduces societal assumptions that portray trans people as a unified whole without variation, and constructs this unified whole as automatically different, other, and / or deviant (see Schrock, Holden, and Reid 2004). Carol thus reproduces both heterosexual and cisgender privilege within her elaboration of the virtuous nature of allies while further suggesting white, middle-class cisgender heterosexuals possess the most legitimacy (see also Butler 1999).
7. This person is not listed in Table 1 because she never attended meetings while the first author was conducting field work. This member was only referenced during an interview. The meeting that she attended was prior to the first author beginning field work.

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Author Biographies

Lain A. B. Mathers is a doctoral student at the University of Illinois Chicago. Zir research focuses on the intersections of gender, sexualities, and religion in public and private social spaces.

J. Edward Sumerau is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Tampa. Zir teaching and research focuses on relationships between sexualities, gender, religion, and health in the historical and interpersonal experiences of sexual, gender, and religious minorities. Zir previous work has appeared in *Gender & Society*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Symbolic Interaction*, *Critical Research on Religion*, *Sociology of Religion*, and *Men and Masculinities*.

Koji Ueno is an associate professor of sociology at Florida State University. His research examines the impact of sexual orientation on mental health, friendships, and status attainment by drawing on life course and social psychological perspectives. His previous work has appeared in *Social Forces*, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *Work and Occupations*, and *Symbolic Interaction*.