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## Allyship as an Act: The Performative, Power-Laden, and Contradictory Co-Cultural Strategies of Straight Allies

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**ALLYSHIP AS AN ACT: THE PERFORMATIVE, POWER-LADEN AND  
CONTRADICTORY CO-CULTURAL STRATEGIES OF  
STRAIGHT ALLIES**

A Master's or Doctoral Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, Communication

By

David Dooling

May 2020

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# **ALLYSHIP AS AN ACT: THE PERFORMATIVE, POWER-LADEN AND CONTRADICTORY CO-CULTURAL STRATEGIES OF STRAIGHT ALLIES**

Communication

Missouri State University, May 2020

Master of Arts

David Dooling

## **ABSTRACT**

While the study of queer communities underscores the importance of responses to heteronormativity, this dual-method study challenges positionality by examining the co-cultural strategies of straight allies in predominantly queer conversations and spaces. Using Orbe's Co-Cultural Theory as a lens, this study examines the co-cultural strategies and factors that influence straight allies' communication when entrenched in queer ontology and dialogue (Study 1). Additionally, co-cultural strategies are measured among straight allies in hypothetical workplaces that are either predominantly queer or predominantly straight (Study 2) using Lapinski and Orbe's (2007) Co-Cultural Theory Scales. Together, the results of these studies contribute to the ideas that (a) straight allies have the privilege of using a variety of co-cultural strategies and responses to navigate both queer and straight spaces, and (b) allyship is constituted in ephemeral performances that bolster queer communities while also maintaining heteronormative structures. Overall, this dual-method investigation extends the framework of Co-Cultural Theory by challenging positionality, acknowledging nuances in existing strategies, and continuing the work of including traditionally dominant group members within understandings of intercultural communication research.

**KEYWORDS:** Co-Cultural Theory, challenging positionality, straight allies, ally, intercultural communication, LGBT studies, performance, dominant group members, nondominant group members, heteronormativity

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A Master's Thesis  
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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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Second, I'd like to thank my chosen family, specifically Michael, Mikaela, Amber, Kaleigh, Brooke, Mickie, Dominic, Josie, and countless others who helped me complete this journey. While not related to me through blood, they are connected to me through modalities of community, joy, endless laughter, unwavering support, and glittering adventures.

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## INTRODUCTION

Queer communities have carved a salient space for themselves in society, creating a unified community and a rich environment from which intercultural communication can occur (Gross, 1993). Although intragroup differences among queer persons are often ignored by scholars (see Eguchi & Asante, 2016), criticism from heterocentric society promotes a unified front from which queer persons of all backgrounds come together. Through social movements, advocacy, and the reconstruction of dialogue, queer folks have fostered increased tolerance and social acceptance among straight populations, albeit with some resistance (Baxter & Asbury, 2015; Hamedy, 2013; Johnson, 2013). Straight persons, in their positions of power, still oppress queer persons, fostering mixed emotions, uncertainty, hostility, harassment, and violence against them (Dragowski, Halkitis, Grossman, & D'Augelli, 2011; Gonzenback, King, & Jablonski, 1999; Herek, 2007; Hornsey, Majkut, Terry, & McKimmie, 2003). While queer people work to negotiate their oppression in the public realm, heterosexuality remains indicative of power and privilege (Orbe, 1998a). It is in this interaction between queer and straight populations that power can be observed for its ephemeral and fluctuating nature.

In these instances of intercultural communication between queer and straight communities, each group utilizes specific strategies in relating to the other. However, the research on such strategies is often focused on queer populations and other non-dominant groups in way(s) they strategically embrace, manage, or circumvent power structures used by dominant groups. Multiple scholars have focused on such strategies under the umbrella of Mark Orbe's co-cultural theorizing (Bie & Tang, 2016; Camara, Katznelson, Hildebrandt-Sterling, & Parker, 2012; Camara & Orbe, 2010; Fox & Warber, 2014), but few have done the work of looking holistically

at the process, both in analyzing the dominant as well as the nondominant group. Just as the burden of education should not be placed solely on the oppressed, intercultural communication research should not only focus on the communication exhibited by nondominant groups. For a richer understanding, Orbe and Roberts (2012) thankfully acknowledge the importance of challenging positionality in these instances, and Orbe and Spellers (2005) mirror this notion in emphasizing the importance of studying the dominant group and the ways they communicate with non-dominant groups. This change in scholarship leads to the goals of this study in *analyzing* straight allies for the purpose of possibly illuminating complexities of ‘straight communication;’ *examining* co-cultural strategies of straight allies by measuring to what extent such strategies are used in the context of both interpersonal, and organizational, communication; and *expanding* the multidimensional framework of co-cultural theorizing by challenging positionality. These goals are accomplished by a dual-method study: (a) a qualitative study (Study 1) analyzing what strategies are used, if any, by straight allies when communicating with queer people and (b) a quantitative study (Study 2) testing the differences in co-cultural strategies when straight allies are in either primarily straight or primarily queer workplaces. In this fashion, I seek to bridge the gap between advocacy and organizational support; identity and professional role; and potential social negligence versus institutionalized discrimination and harassment.

Co-cultural theorizing, a framework developed by Mark Orbe, provides factors and influences that contextualize discourse between non-dominant and dominant group members while also outlining specific strategies that implicate structures of power (Orbe 1998a; Orbe 1998b; Orbe & Roberts, 2012). Scholars have largely focused on queer communicative behavior for the purpose of exposing meaning and dismantling power structures. Considering that

oppressive structures mute and suppress queer populations, a community forced to articulate themselves in a heterocentric society, scholarship focusing on their truths and expression is common (Ardener, 1975; Kramarae, 1981). While a focus on queer communication strategies remains useful for understanding ways in which marginalized groups manage negative perceptions, discrimination, and difference, it fails to create a cohesive framework for how *both* groups, queer and straight, interact. Complexities of ‘straight communication’ remain majorly elusive, undefined, and unchallenged, especially when in contact with queer persons, spaces, and groups. Minimal research has been conducted on what constitutes straight communication, especially in the communication discipline. Straight people benefit from the systematic advantages afforded to people of dominant sexual identities. Straight communication operates under the veil of heteronormativity, the assumption that being straight is an unquestioned norm (Suter & Daas, 2007). Dominant groups and their categories are considered a default: a privileged, downplayed population with the power of articulating minimal critique or analysis in mainstream research. This dynamic leaves scholars ignoring the role straight people play in intercultural interactions other than utilizing negative communication such as discriminatory behavior (Johnson, 2018).

While the critique of negative communication against queer populations remains an important issue to scholars, a more positive approach focusing on the responsibility of straight populations to uplift queer populations may prove more cohesive. Even with this idea in mind, positive aspects of straight communication are minimal in scholarship. While Vonofakou, Hewstone, and Voci (2007) note that straight people form more favorable attitudes of queer persons when interacting with them, this finding only notes the importance of exposure to co-cultural groups, not the strategies or power dynamics that operate in these instances. Allen

(2011) explains straight privileges that guide communication, such as preserving face, not having to explain or justify one's sexuality, being open about one's love and sex life, and maintaining the status quo of heteronormative culture, both in its maintenance and suppression of co-cultures that threaten it. In this way, Allen's work exposed straight privilege, a necessary step for social progress, but it did not provide a framework for interpersonal or intergroup communication that should succeed it.

While aspects of straight communication remain utterly undefined, its interaction with minority-dominated spaces has received some attention in research. Queer people have crafted spaces, events, and forms of activism where they have a significant presence. Orbe and Spellers (2005) recommend extending co-cultural theorizing to a more multidimensional framework in which dominant groups are examined as an important partner in their relationships with non-dominant groups. Thus, challenging positionality productively expands the theoretical framework of co-cultural theorizing (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). Examining majority-as-minority situations provides a rich context for understanding straight communication. For example, O'Hara and Meyer (2003) closely examined this phenomenon when observing the way straight college students interacted at a primarily lesbian event. They found a mix of blatant and subtle strategies of prejudice. Duster (1993) states, "the closer one is to the phenomenon, the more likely one is to see internal differences" (p. 238). Straight people in predominantly queer conversations and workplaces have the potential for communicating rich intersubjective meaning worthy of analysis. Straight allies specifically, in their partnership with queer people, organizations, events, and spaces, potentially practice salient co-cultural strategies.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: STUDY 1**

### **Profile of Straight Allies**

Straight allies represent myriad persons with varying levels of commitment to the queer community (Fingerhut, 2011). Ranging from “challenging assumptions and jokes” to “those who volunteer time and money to organizations that advocate on behalf of queer issues,” straight allies perceive themselves as committing time and energy to fight homophobia, heteronormativity, and/or heterosexism (Fingerhut, 2011, p. 2231). Homophobia refers to a personal negative affect toward queer persons (Weinberg, 1972). Heteronormativity, as discussed earlier, is the societal normalizing of the heterosexual experience (Suter & Daas, 2007). Heterosexism, in contrast, is the protection of this normalization through collective cultural bias, prejudice, and discrimination against any behavior or concept outside of heterosexuality (Nakayama, 1998). No universally accepted definition of a straight ally exists, alluding to constructions of allyship as contextual and indicative of privileged action (Brooks & Edwards, 2009).

While definitions remain allusive, represented straight allies are most often women, educated, and a friend to someone in the queer community (Fingerhut, 2011). Straight allyship is associated with a variety of attitudes, such as an orientation toward social justice, an absolvment of guilt, allophilia, and potentially empathy. Brooks and Edwards (2009) describe many straight allies who are motivated by a sense that everyone deserves a right to fair treatment and equity. Russel’s (2011) study of straight allies found that personal incidents of guilt, either personally derived or in reaction to a negative past interaction with queer people, served as a catalyst for reactionary allyship. While high allophilia (loving or liking) and low prejudice are associated

with being a straight ally, empathy remains disputed (Fingerhut, 2011; Pittinsky, 2005). While Pittinsky could not find a relationship between straight allyship and empathy, Stotzer (2009) found that straight allies empathized with queer people under the assumption that their sexuality is inherent. This reasoning led these participants to the perception that queer people are normal. Straight allies also found themselves growing more and more resistant toward people who held negative perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward queer persons (Stotzer, 2009). Essentially, straight allies in Stotzer's study acted in ways that stressed similarity and unity with queer folks, suggesting that straight allies may communicate in ways that stress co-cultural strategies of assimilation. Although the studies above each give greater insight into the profile of straight allies, they lack specific explanations of intercultural communication taking place in predominantly queer spaces, a primary goal in this study. Co-cultural theorizing sets a foundation for behaviors straight allies may exhibit.

### **Co-Cultural Theorizing: Origins and Advancements**

Orbe's co-cultural theorizing builds off of three theories: muted group theory (MGT), standpoint theory, and cultural phenomenology. MGT describes the power of social hierarchies in their ability to craft language for the privileged while disavowing and barring the oppressed from articulating themselves (Ardener, 1975; Kramarae, 1981). Kramarae (2005) explains her view of MGT in that:

[P]eople attached or assigned to subordinate groups may have a lot to say, but they tend to have relatively little power to say it without getting into a lot of trouble. Their speech is disrespected by those in the dominant positions; their knowledge is not considered sufficient for public decision-making or policy making processes of that culture; their experiences are interpreted for them by others; and they are encouraged to see themselves as represented in the dominant discourse. (p. 55)

Considering that asymmetrical power dynamics are so pervasive, muted groups are common and bound to recur throughout time (Meares, 2003; Meares, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs, & Ginossar, 2004). In a public realm ruled by dominant group ideology, non-dominant groups find ways to resist privileged discourses through specific strategies, strategies which Orbe (2005) implicates in his explanation of using MGT for his own framework of co-cultural theorizing:

The focus of my particular interest was not on how existing power dynamics create a muted group framework but how individual and small collectives worked together to negotiate their muted group status. In other words, I wanted to shed light on the various ways in which persons reinforce, manage, alter, and overcome a societal position that renders them outside the centers of power. (p. 65)

Castle Bell, Hopson, Weathers, and Ross (2015) suggest that Orbe's use of strategies explain the ways in which muted groups resist dominant structures.

Co-cultural theorizing also draws on concepts from standpoint theory and cultural phenomenology. Standpoint theory posits that people perceive reality differently due to their critical ways of thinking about hierarchy and the surrounding environment (or social location) they inhabit (Droogsma, 2007; Intemann, 2004; Wood, 1994). For example, a White, upper-class male is likely to have a different perspective of the world than a Latinx, working-class woman. Standpoint theory also recognizes the intersectionality of standpoints, such as a Black woman having a unique experience when compared to Black culture (Allen, 2011). Cultural phenomenology shares many similarities with standpoint theory, in that they both rely on the "experience of a shared lifeworld" in which persons should "respect differences [standpoints], to learn from others" (Craig, 1999, pp. 138-139). Without acknowledging the importance of phenomenology, an individual's standpoint and collective cultural identity remains undefined, ephemeral, and inapplicable to intercultural contexts. Essentially, a world without a positive framing of phenomenology would inhibit empathy, encourage selfishness, and imprison us in a



philosophy of solipsism. Standpoint theory also ties in with Orbe's framework in that each acknowledges power and its effect on suppressing or affording privileges to certain standpoints, a dynamic that fosters different strategies of intercultural communication among co-cultural groups.

While both MGT and standpoint theory acknowledge social hierarchies, value subordinated groups, and carry political implications, they do differ. MGT focuses on language and its reconstruction while standpoint theory focuses on acquired knowledge. Additionally, MGT heavily ties power to group membership, such as being a woman or a queer person, while standpoint theory posits that critical knowledge about nondominant groups can be acquired regardless of group membership (Wood, 2005). While the theories do have significant differences, they provide valuable rifts of interaction in which the framework can be explored and refined. Co-Cultural Theory represents the result of complicated tensions between cultural phenomenology, MGT, and standpoint theory.

Orbe and Spellers (2005) indicate that co-cultural theorizing essentially "offers a framework to understand the process by which people come to select how they are going to interact with others in any given specific context" (p. 174). Orbe's (1998a) original studies focus on strategies non-dominant groups use when interacting with dominant groups and structures. Twenty-six strategies were produced by Orbe within this framework (See Orbe & Roberts, 2012) ;however, others have been added throughout the development of co-cultural theorizing by other scholars (Camara & Orbe, 2010; Castle Bell et al, 2015; Gates, 2003; See Orbe & Roberts, 2012 for an update chart).

Orbe's (1998b) later research focuses on influences and factors that explain why people use certain strategies over others, such as preferred outcome, field of experience, abilities,

situational context, perceived costs and rewards, and communication approach. *Preferred outcome* outlines whether an individual wants to assimilate into, accommodate among, or separate from dominant groups (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). *Field of experience* represents an individual's standpoint, or culminated "life experiences" (Orbe & Roberts, 2012, p. 297). *Abilities* refers to the personal and situational performances in which the 26+ strategies are usable (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). For example, aggressive separation, one strategy offered by Orbe, may not be an appropriate strategy where norms of professionalism are expected. *Situational context* represents the diversity of strategies for different contexts, such as using different strategies in personal life than work life. *Perceived costs and rewards* persuades non-dominant persons to analyze the impact of each strategy and whether it will serve personal interests. Finally, *communication approach* refers to the intensity with which a person attempts to achieve a preferred outcome (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). Approaches range from nonassertive ("non-confrontational" and "inhibited") to assertive ("self- and other-enhancing") and aggressive ("hurtfully expressive, self-promoting, and controlling") (Orbe & Roberts, 2012, p. 298). While each factor can stand alone for consideration, all six factors create an interrelated framework from which people choose applicable strategies:

Situating within a particular *field of experience* that governs their perceptions of the *costs and rewards* associated with, as well as their *ability* to engage in, various communicative practices, co-cultural group members will adopt certain communication orientations—based on their *preferred outcomes* and *communication approaches*—to fit the circumstances of a specific *situation*. (Orbe, 1998b, p. 19)

In summary, co-cultural theorizing seeks to explain and analyze "interactions among underrepresented and dominant group members" (Orbe, 1998a, p. 3). While Co-Cultural Theory has expanded over the years to cover specific topics within queer communities, such as coming out (Bie & Tang, 2016), responding to heterosexism (Camara et al., 2012), and managing sexual

identity online (Fox & Warber, 2014), little research has been done on straight allies, the individuals acting as a bridge between dominant society and the queer community (Grzanka, Adler, & Blazer, 2015). Straight people do not represent nondominant group members; however, Orbe and Roberts (2012) note the theoretical expansion of *challenging positionality*, in that dominant group members, when in majority-as-minority situations, use similar power dynamics to those of traditionally marginalized communities (O'Hara & Meyer, 2003). Additionally, Razzante and Orbe (2018) outline tenets of Dominant Group Theory, the idea that dominant group members either reinforce, impede, or dismantle power structures that oppress nondominant groups. In an effort to challenge positionality of Co-Cultural Theory, the first portion of this study seeks to analyze co-cultural factors and behaviors among straight allies in salient queer environments and conversations, prompting the following research questions:

RQ1a: What co-cultural strategies, if any, do straight allies use when interacting with queer people?

RQ1b: How, if at all, are straight allies' co-cultural strategies influenced by situational and contextual factors?

RQ2a: What are the relationships, if any, between and among straight allies' co-cultural strategies?

RQ2b: What communicative outcomes manifest based on straight allies' use of co-cultural strategies?

## **METHODS: STUDY 1**

### **Orientation**

As a queer researcher studying heterosexual populations, it is important to locate my frame of reference for this study. Deetz's (2001) paradigms of organizational communication provide useful philosophical underpinnings for my approach to theory and method. Specifically, I operate in between dialogic and interpretive paradigms. While both of these paradigms champion the examination of local and emergent cultures (i.e., comparative communities, shared language, etc.), I toe the line between organizing data as both representative of social orders (consensus) and implicative of opportunities for deconstructive, politicized praxis (dissensus). It would be naïve of me to assume I am conducting purely interpretive research whilst also acknowledging my queer identity as historically and culturally situated (Deetz, 2001). Therefore, in the efforts of trying to represent a population's communication, I acknowledge that the following interpretation of data is symbolically challenged by my identity as a person, researcher, and queer.

### **Participants**

Initially, I selected participants from a large Midwestern university using purposive sampling, a method requiring specific inclusion criteria (Keyton, 2015). Purposive sampling allows researchers to "make informed judgements about what to observe or whom to interview" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 110). Therefore, purposive sampling supplies specificity that other sampling methods cannot provide. I first recruited participants within my social circles via both in-person and through social media. Following contact, participants willingly offered other

participants, promoting snowball sampling that extended the sample size and its accompanying geographical diversity (Tracy, 2013). The inclusion criteria for each participant were their identity as a straight person and their previous experience and interaction in salient queer conversations and environments—spaces, events, and platforms where queer people carry a cultural and/or numerical majority. Ingram, Bouthillette, and Retter (1997) describe the complexity of queer space as a dialectic between resonating queer experiences and physical means from which collectivized survival is available. While definitions of queer space are hard to conceptualize, I negotiated qualifications for the study from person-to-person. For example, one participant was the only straight sibling in their family, prompting multiple salient conversations and strategies. I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 19 individuals, creating a rich context from which intersubjectivity, personal narrative, and situated experience, could be observed (Tracy, 2013). I determined sample size as ongoing interviews eventually reached a “critical threshold” where “interpretation ha[d] been reached” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 129).

Participants represented a majorly homogeneous demographic. Twelve participants identified as female and seven identified as male. Fifteen participants identified as White/Caucasian, three Black/African-American, and one Latina. Participants were dispersed throughout the United States. While a majority of participants were from the Midwest, several participants lived in states such as Michigan, Florida, Maryland, and Washington, adding to the geographical diversity of the study. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 61 with an average age of 33. Participants ranged in educational attainment: High school/GED ( $n = 2$ ), Associate’s degree ( $n = 1$ ), Bachelor’s degree ( $n = 10$ ), Master’s degree ( $n = 5$ ) and Ph.D. ( $n = 1$ ). Occupational titles varied, but many participants claimed jobs directly related to allyship, such as

being a director of an HIV clinic, an advocate for transgender medical procedures at an insurance company, a graduate assistant in a multicultural programming office, and a public relations professional for an LGBT<sup>1</sup> civil rights campaign. In terms of identification, I gave each participant the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym. Some participants gave that right to me, creating a mix of self-chosen and assigned pseudonyms.

## **Procedure**

I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews for the purpose of convenience and methodological strength. Interviews provide a comfortable space where “mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation via a path that is organic, adaptive, and oftentimes energizing” is possible and enabled (Tracy, 2013, p. 132). Interviews elucidate subjectively lived experiences and viewpoints from the respondents’ perspective where emotion, self-disclosure, and sensemaking are likely to occur (Tracy, 2013). My choice to use interviews mirrors Orbe’s (1998b) preference for semi-structured interviews in his own work, in that one-on-one sessions can allow the participant to freely express their own reality. Additionally, semi-structured interviews specifically allow for a blend of flexibility in yielding to the participants’ thoughts while also maintaining breadth in analysis for all occurring interviews (Douglas, 1985). Some interviews took place in person in locations dictated by the interviewee’s preference (i.e., coffee shops, offices, restaurants, etc.). Other interviewees did not live in my immediate area, resulting in mediated interviews via Skype or phone call. While Tracy (2013) notes the various disadvantages of mediated interviews (i.e., lack of nonverbal data and exclusion of people with

<sup>1</sup> The reader may notice that I oscillate between queer and LGBT verbiages. I use both to embrace the various studies, participants, and disciplines that use both terms interchangeably. On average, I use queer verbiage within Study 1 and LGBT verbiage in Study 2 to mirror the terms used in existing research.

limited technological access), I chose mediated interviews as a cost-effective way to reach a wide variety of participants. Additionally, people are much more likely to disclose private information online than in-person (Joinson & Paine, 2007). Therefore, mediated interviews may have provided me more data about sensitive topics related to allyship, heterosexual privilege, etc.

As a visually queer researcher, I understand my role as a interviewer may conflict with, or potentially dissuade, many potentially awkward conversations about straight advocacy. My orientation to interviewing mirrors Tracy's (2013) guidance on listening, remaining non-judgmental, and conveying confidentiality in the face of uncertainty. In engaging in face-to-face conversation, I took advantage of interpersonal interaction, creating an environment where trust and disclosure are encouraged (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012). I combine these general orientations with the philosophy of empathetic interviewing, the prioritization of people before theory or method (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 695, as cited in Brinkmann, 2018). When talking with participants, I discussed various aspects of co-cultural identity, interactions between straight and queer people, and possible avenues for increased communicative advocacy, not as a critical queer scholar, but as an observer who seeks to understand the various nuances of straight allyship.

After obtaining approval from the university's institutional review board (IRB-FY2019-261, approved 01/31/2020; See **Appendix A**), interviews began with introductions, a brief overview of why the study was being conducted, signing of a consent form, and verbal consent of the participant to be audio recorded. This interaction was followed by demographic questions. Subsequent interview questions were designed to explore the relationship between being a straight ally, what it means to have a co-cultural identity, and how various situational and

contextual factors affect co-cultural strategies. Interviews ranged from 16 to 112 minutes. The average interview lasted 49 minutes. Audio recordings were transcribed manually, producing 281 single-spaced pages.

## **Analysis**

In an effort to move between both theory and text, I used a modified version of constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Tracy, 2013). First, I initiated *open coding*, the process of typifying chunks of information into codes, language that captures the essence of data, in an unrestricted, undirected manner (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2013). As I gathered interviews, I wrote memos, reflexive notes over how I react to and make sense out of the data (Tracy, 2013). These steps led me to *focused coding* through the creation of rough themes. Focused coding is produced from the constant comparison of codes where an initial version of codes is articulated (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, I engaged in *axial coding*, the process of finding interrelationships among complex themes in order to organize data hierarchically and attempt to answer the study's research questions: "axial coding relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). During the process of axial coding, additional research questions became apparent as relationships between codes became increasingly complex. Additional research questions (RQ2a and RQ2b) were added to the study at this stage of the analysis. Next, I reached a point of theoretical saturation where additional information does little to add value to the existing analysis and codes are established and cohesive (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Throughout the entire process of coding, I consistently reflected on the information in relationship to identity, practicing "sharpened reflexivity" in the



way I remain critical of my stake in the research, the motivations behind my interviews, and my goals in understanding the complicated dynamics between straight allies and queer people (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 16).

## **RESULTS: STUDY 1**

The analysis shaped several answers to the previously described research questions. Co-cultural strategies used by straight allies (RQ1a) produced “(Performing) Assimilation,” “Honorable Separation,” and “Hierarchical Heterosexuality.” Situational and contextual factors that address straight allies’ co-cultural strategies (RQ1b) are majorly answered by “Other Contextual Factors.” The relationships between and among straight allies co-cultural strategies (RQ2a) are addressed by “The Duality of Assimilation and Separation.” Finally, the outcomes of these co-cultural strategies (RQ2b) are explained by “Outcomes of Allyship.” Overall, straight allies used a variety of contradictory strategies that exist in relation to queer wants, needs, desires, and judgements, resulting in majorly productive outcomes for pragmatic conceptualizations of social justice work.

### **(Performing) Assimilation**

Overall, the most prevalent theme in this research was the idea of straight allies willingly assimilating themselves into queer culture through a variety of means. Just as Orbe (1998a) describes assimilation as downplaying co-cultural identity to merge with the dominant group, straight allies communicated in ways that conjoined heterosexuality and queerness together, such as emphasizing commonalities and developing positive face. Unfortunately, some of these strategies took a dark turn when straight allies did not fully acknowledge existing power dynamics, a concept described later. It is important to note that original conceptualizations of Orbe’s (1998a, 1998b) framework acknowledge the existence of hierarchical power structures that oppress nondominant group members, resulting in strategies that seek to address that

inequality. A key assumption here underscores the inevitability of co-cultural strategies, that nondominant group members *must* do *something* in order to address oppression in their lives.

When switching positionality to analyze straight allies, this phenomenon was not evident. Rather, straight allies took heterosexual privilege into queer conversations and spaces, constructing a liminal identity that neither fully suffered in spheres of oppression and punishment nor stood out plainly in heteronormative environments. Therefore, while straight allies willingly assimilated into queer conversations and spaces, they did so under the ideology that this action is ephemeral. Straight allies did not assimilate based on institutional inequality, but instead, *performed* assimilation to meet the face needs of queer people. There was no need to assimilate, but they chose to because there was a pressure to be seen as an ally. Ben (an honorary pseudonym dedicated to the participant's late uncle), a 22 year old Black woman, described allyship in a similar way: "I would say...allyship is work. It's not really an identity. It's like an action. It's almost a verb, and if I'm not necessarily doing something that's kind of tangible, then I'm not being the best ally." Here, Ben explicated the performance of allyship, in that supportive behaviors were not inherent to one's identity or status as a hierarchical member. Throughout the remainder of this theme, I explore the various ways in which straight allies performed similarity with queer culture and people.

**Emphasizing Commonalities.** Many participants communicated co-cultural identity in a way that simultaneously downplayed difference and emphasized similarity between straight and queer people. This strategy mirrors Orbe's (1998a) original term of emphasizing commonalities, in that co-cultural members prefer to discuss *human* similarities rather than elements of difference among co-cultural groups. Straight allies were quick to reduce terms of sexuality and gender (i.e., LGBT people, queer people, etc.) into universal languages, such as having a

“friend,” “neighbor,” “brother,” or “relative” who is queer. Andrea, a 33 year old Latina woman, mirrored many participants’ use of language by stating: “I wanna say I see myself on an equal playing field, as equals you know. Like being able to be people. Being people that love others, that have needs and stuff.” Andrea reduced queer identity by stating that *people are people*, that humanity can be universalized to accentuate similarity rather than difference. Interestingly, a belief in a higher power (i.e., faith, Christianity, religion, etc.) and its accompanying language also acted as a way to simplify human identity for many participants. Joe, a 22 year old White man, explained the grounding features of having a soul: “I know who created everything and who created you, and you’ve been really beautifully made...so I think there’s a lot of power in having a soul.” Joe’s belief that humans were all created in the common image of God added to his efforts as a straight ally to simplify the human experience for the purpose of unifying identity groups.

In subverting essentialized identity categories, straight allies saved face and avoided addressing their own difference (Moore, 2017). Janice, a 25 year old White woman, recalled her experience at a military cookout where a same-sex couple attended, causing a stir in the crowd. This experience occurred shortly after Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was repealed: “Sweet, good for them, that’s fantastic. They have probably been together 10-12 years to be in that high rank already, you know what I mean? And I remember being like, who cares? That’s the same thing as bringing your wife to something you know. It’s their *spouse*.” Here, Janice appeared frustrated at the thought of even having to address difference at this moment. Reactively, she chose to simplify the essentializing term of wife into spouse, creating an egalitarian lexicon from which difference is eliminated. Emphasizing commonalities and ambiguous emotions acted in tandem. Many participants expressed confusion at the mere thought of even addressing sexuality or

gender that were different from their own identity: “I think it's always been interacting with people. I don't really see it being different for—I think for me;” “Yeah, um, I mean, to be completely honest, I don't feel like any queer identity affected me personally in any type of way.” While participants were quick to acknowledge straight privilege as a means of absolving guilt (a theme described later), discursive constructions of difference were hard to elicit from participants at first. Deeper questioning revealed that participants were able to use narratives to construct similarity even further.

Besides using a friendly, universal lexicon to communicate similarity, straight allies also used personal experiences to thread comparisons between themselves and queer people. Many participants noted observations in romantic relationships that crossed over into queer culture. Betty, a 57 year old White woman, described the universality of shared trauma when handling romantic relationships: “I've always gotten hurt by both males and females and I've always been like, I don't need those types of shenanigans, you know. You be who you are, and I love you for that...” Betty noted issues in romantic relationships regardless of gender, deconstructing essentializing features related to queer identity. Similarly, Ben, a 22 year old Black woman, noted the universal experience of sexuality generally: “Discovering your sexuality is something everybody does regardless of sexual orientation or identity.” Instead of accentuating differences in how queer and straight people perceive sexuality, Ben chose to unite the experiences into a generalized narrative. There were other narratives in which sexuality was universalized. Sam, a 33 year old White man, described the surprising pleasure he gets from date nights with his bisexual wife: “It isn't uncommon for us to have a short date night where we check out the waitress.” Here Sam constructed similarity by noting the common target of affection between

him and his wife: women. This narrative illustrated the complex ways in which straight allies willingly assimilate themselves into modes of queer identity.

The act of emphasizing commonalities carried pragmatic and even organizational implications. By merging straight and queer identity, straight allies began to see themselves as part of the community. Ben discussed how she communicatively addresses discriminatory remarks made against the queer community:

Put it on yourself and say like, that offends *me* as opposed to saying like, you know gay people would be offended by that, trans people would be offended by that. By saying like, that offends *me*...identities may be coming under attack that I don't necessarily identify with, and it's important to empathize and, um, be able to know what that oppression might look like for somebody else.

Here, Ben placed the onus of discrimination and offense onto the backs of straight allies. In this fashion, straight allies take on the emotional labor of queer suffering to alleviate negative affect. This phenomenon not only played out interpersonally, but also organizationally in how participants crafted affirming workplace cultures. Daniel, a 32 year old White pastor, addressed the communication he used to construct and maintain an affirming, queer-friendly church: "We start our services and often end them with saying every single person, regardless of belief, age, race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, or gender, is welcome here and belongs here."

A significant portion of participants reported emphasizing commonalities based on common intersections of race, class, and disability. In these cases, commonalities were not communicated because of ulterior motives to downplay differences, but instead, as an outcome of linking similar forms of oppression together. Patrice, a 23 year old Black woman, described the connection simplistically:

I see the same strength within queer individuals that I see within black people. I know definitely there's advocates and activists that feel passionate for one thing over the other, but how can you advocate for black people's rights and not queer

black people's rights, you know? You can't leave that out, because queer black people are a part of the black community.

In connecting queer oppression to black oppression, Patrice began to see her advocacy as not only similar, but necessary if social progress is to happen holistically. Lydia, a 23 year old White woman, similarly described connections between queer people and her disability status:

I was a really paranoid person when I was a kid. I can't hear in my right ear, and it's not a big deal to me at all, but when I was little, I was so fearful that I'd be treated differently for it, and I wouldn't tell people that I couldn't hear until I was maybe 17. But being younger, I hated—did your schools do this? Did they call out students who couldn't see or hear good and they would go do this weird little test to see how you'd comply?

Lydia went on to explain that intersectionality in lived oppression fostered increased empathy between herself and queer people. This empathy not only extends Stotzer's (2009) concept of straight allies experiencing empathy, but it also qualifies it under intersectional identities. When participants began to understand themselves as intersectionally connected to queer people, they started to explain the relationship as mutually beneficial. Erin, a 23 year Black woman, described this relationship further: "I'm an ally because it's right. I'm an ally because there are allies for my identity as well. Some of these same people, um, that are my friends, that are queer, are also allies of me as a black woman. So, it's kind of like a reciprocal exchange. Like I'm going to help and you're gonna help me and we're gonna make this world better." Erin's stance as a straight ally not only displayed commonalities between black and queer livelihood, but also set a precedent for a social contract of social progress. Sam, the more philosophical of my participants, conceptualized this reciprocal exchange in a modification of Hindu terminology after talking to his friend: "Like, you're familiar with the statement, *namaste*? His was *namashit*—the shit that's happened to me recognizes the shit that happened to you." Sam goes on

to explain that similar experience of oppression further emphasized commonalities between him, a man living in poverty, and queer people.

**Developing Positive Face (and Space).** Overwhelmingly, participants discussed the ways in which they developed positive face with queer people, a strategy that Orbe (1998a) mirrors in the form of polite and considerate communication. Participants were quick to list various behaviors, such as listening, using proper pronouns (they/them/theirs) and generally being present when queer people wanted to talk. Lee, a 36 year old White man, described the general orientation of developing positive face:

I also try to be just listening—a sounding board—we do have to make sure our core group of allies and LGBT advocates are with us from the start because the last thing we want is infighting or people saying this is the wrong approach, you know. I do a lot of listening. I do a lot of learning. And I try to package that all together in a way that speaks to various audiences,’ um, and yet still achieves our overall goals.

Lee understood that developing positive face involved remaining open to different experiences and audiences, and instead of placing his own beliefs onto queer people, he used the metaphor of a sounding board to reflect, rather than evaluate, information for queer people’s benefit.

Developing positive face often involved mundane acts of kindness and phatic communication.

Whitney, a 61 year old White woman, described typical communication between her and a queer person: “If you see a guy walking down the street and he’s rocking an awesome dress and you like the dress, say, ‘What an awesome dress! Where did you get that?’ It’s that simple.” In this case, developing positive face is portrayed as low-key, downplayed, and performatively chill.

Developing positive face often occurred in reaction to two different face threats: skepticism and the disclosure of sensitive information (coming out). Straight allies performed positivity in spaces where they felt their identities weren’t necessarily welcome. Ben explained the feeling of discomfort that often accompanies being considerate of queer people:



When allies kind of enter a queer space, we're kind of met with a lot of skepticism. I feel like it's a coping mechanism because there are straight people who enter queer spaces who aren't there for any positive [reason]. I kind of have to, um, be a nice person...so like having to kind of overcome that skepticism and recognizing that some things I might do have the potential to be seen as threatening or discomforting to somebody, and letting that humble me in a way.

Straight allies understood the various images they carried into queer spaces, and accordingly, attempted to develop positive relationships to try to combat that image. Similarly, Matthew, a 47 year old White man, and a director at an HIV clinic, noted the response that comes from uncomfortable situations between queer and straight people:

And that [discomfort] triggers an empathetic response on my part, you know, somehow accelerating the conversation. If it's about business, then bringing information and resources to those who are queer, and I might squeeze that in sooner than I normally would, and I grin and bear with it as they work through their discomfort, trying to figure out how to talk to this straight person and what consequences there are for disclosing my orientation.

Here, Matthew noted that being considerate of queer peoples' past trauma with straight people requires a nuanced response to conversation and dialogue. Instead of embracing the awkwardness of the scenario, he instead talked about business related to the HIV clinic to break the ice. Matthew also noted the awkwardness of queer people having to come out to him, a narrative that is mirrored in other participants' stories of being a support system. Sandra, a 23 year old White woman, mentioned the need to be positive when her sibling came out to her:

She was, like, asking me what I believed about Christianity and queer identities and she, um, and at that point, I was telling her I don't 100% know, but here are the two arguments I've heard, and I laid them out for her, and I said I don't feel like it's okay—it's whatever you feel—like you kind of knew she was gonna come out, cause I knew she still definitely identifies as Christian, but I was like “however you feel about—whatever you believe about your sexuality—I will support you. Like, if you need to be celibate. I have multiple Christian friends who are celibate because they are practicing. And then I have friends that don't do that now. And people who just openly live their life.” And so, I laid that out for her, and she was like, “Yeah I'm bi.”

Sandra's response to coming out was both considerate of her sibling still identifying as Christian and neutral in that she offered a variety of options for what Evangelical Christian queer people do when navigating romantic relationships.

While developing face could be interpreted as a benign strategy, many participants saw it as increasingly important. Daniel noted that not developing face could be disastrous for social progress:

I don't know if silence has much of a place. Silence is required to bridge divides. We need to understand where the other is coming from regardless of who that other is. That other might be a group that is anti-LGBT, and my understanding is that if there is any hope in bridging that gap and bringing people closer to inclusion, it comes from silence and understanding and listening, but you can't stop at the silence. You have to speak up and call out injustice.

In this passage, developing face became an increasingly complicated interplay between listening and staying silent to honor the other's face, and also speaking up and intervening when necessary.

Communicating positively with queer people not only provided solidarity and social progress, but also defense against homophobic and transphobic agents. Sam recalled a time when LGBT civil rights protections in his town were revoked, prompting fear of hate crimes among queer people:

So, something I did very discreetly was I went around. I made sure everyone had my number. I put together a small—sounds way more organized—I gathered a few people who also liked guns—and if you're doing everything safely and securely, who cares? So, we went around to all of our friends who were at risk of getting jumped, because you know there were reports of that coming in from big cities, like transgender teenagers getting beat to death. We just made sure everyone had our number and ran a rotational on call. And we didn't ever have to, but we were ready and willing to extract somebody from a terrifying or potentially dangerous situation armed if necessary.

While this is an extreme example of developing positive face, it underscored the importance of seemingly mundane positive affect toward queer people as foundational to intergroup networking, intervention, and support.

In some cases, developing positive ‘face’ did not accurately describe the communicative behaviors among straight allies. Instead, straight allies organized discursive spaces from which queer people could be honored and respected. Erin, a 23 year old Black woman, discussed the changes she tried to initiate at her university’s homecoming: “So, trying to change like the gender choices, so like the names of queen and king. Because everybody doesn’t identify as that necessarily, so making sure that, if you identify as someone that non-traditionally would be a queen or a king, you’re able to do that in making the playing field equitable and making sure that everybody can do whatever they want to do.” Erin used her role as a graduate assistant in student affairs to try to de-essentialize the gendered roles of queen and king, therefore creating a space where queer people can be respected. Similarly, Nicholas, a 27 year old White man, discussed his attempts to be a spacemaker at a same-sex wedding: “It definitely felt, in a sense, less structured in a way. The idea of kind of taking the idea of a wedding in their own hands and figuring out what bits and pieces they wanted to use. And it was really interesting because, you know, I was just there to do one part.” Even when Nicholas was the ordained minister, a position ascribed a considerable amount of power, he censored his influence as a way to develop a constructive space from which the queering of a wedding ceremony could occur.

While developing positive face occurred in majorly ethical and respectful ways, there were some instances in which being considerate of queer populations became more problematic. Through the subthemes of “Censoring Self and Remaining Silent,” “Extensive Preparation,”

“Mirroring,” and “Queer Commodification,” straight allies struggled with the idea of remaining considerate at all times.

Censoring self and remaining silent. In a nonassertive fashion, developing positive face came at the expense of simply remaining silent and/or hiding heterosexual identity to let queer people carry discursive space. Tyler, a 21 year old White man, recounted his experience in navigating queer spaces: “I like being aware of how much I’m speaking—I like to talk a lot—so I think it’s important that I let the other people in those spaces tell their story, hear what they have to say, and let them feel heard. I feel like my [queer] friends aren’t in a space where they can always voice their opinions.” Tyler, while normally being talkative, chose to remain silent to blend into the surroundings. This idea was common among other participants, such as Sandra: “It’s never about you. It should never be about self-interest or gain or, ‘I’m so woke,’ or whatever...A good ally is a little bit quieter. Like a good ally is quiet. Loud but quiet.” While participants tried to develop face in being considerate and openly communicative, they also felt the urge to hide aspects of their identity as not to disrupt queer space. This dynamic is more thoroughly fleshed out later.

Other participants chose not to communicate their co-cultural identities openly due to situational restraints. Matthew recalled his performance of gender at the HIV clinic where he works:

There were some moments early on in my career where as a heterosexual—actually a lot of times I wouldn’t openly disclose my sexuality to a lot of people—and you know sometimes there’s a running joke in my social circle that that is not necessary, which I’m still not sure how to react to, but there were some instances where I was made the outsider in conversations...And so you know even if I’m at a leather daddy event doing health education, my presentation of gender I think is dialed down. So, I am not forcing a masculine projection...

In spaces where queer people were the majority, Matthew felt an urge to assimilate into the culture by erasing salient aspects of self. While assimilation can sound problematic, strategies of censoring self and remaining silent could be productive. Bethany, a 40 year old White woman, discusses the implications of remaining silent for her son who had recently come out: “And then he had this girlfriend all of a sudden. I was like, ‘Is this a fake girlfriend?’ And he was like, ‘Well, yeah.’ And I was like, ‘Well you need to clue me in on this, because mom [herself] needs to know if that’s what we’re doing. Until you can be gay and okay, I’ll do whatever I need to do to help protect you.’” When Bethany’s son came out to her as pansexual, he did not want to come out to his dad in fear of homophobia. Reactively, Bethany remained silent on behalf of her son to protect his identity within the family system. Just as other participants previously claimed the onus of emotional labor, Bethany remained silent and complicit in her son’s secrecy to help protect him. This example shows that, while assimilative techniques might appear problematic, they can also be used for positive means.

Extensive preparation. In more assertive aspects of developing positive face, straight allies experienced significant mental gymnastics in order to navigate queer conversations. Generally, participants felt apprehension in not offending anyone or assuming anything. Ben used the metaphor of “walking on eggshells” to help visualize this complicated dance between developing positive face and not breaching a boundary. Matthew described his mental frameworks for interacting with queer people:

I think anyone who says they don’t see queer is lying to you or they are just really poorly educated. But what has been an intentional psychological conditioning with queer people—Once I sense queer which translates to difference—and I’ve taught myself, okay what is the next thing? What is the next thing I need to know about this person? Okay, they are queer, but what do they do for a living? Okay, they are queer, but do they need or want something from you? Do they need access to information?

Instead of emphasizing difference, Matthew took a pragmatic approach in immediately dealing with the pertinent information at hand in order to perform his job at the HIV clinic. Majorly, extensive preparation allowed for a respectful atmosphere for queer people. Lee described his experience in not conflating femininity and queerness when preparing a colleague for a media interview:

And we were talking about what the interview will be like, and it would be in-studio. And he was concerned about some moles on his face, and that they would stand out, and he was gonna go to Macy's to the makeup counter. Well one of my colleagues at the PR firm I work at said, "Well I can go there in the morning and help him out," and I wanted to be careful in assuming that he could or could not do his own makeup. And so, I was like, "Hey my colleague Andy can be there. She's willing to be there and provide any pointers if you need them." I'm not trying to make any assumptions.

Lee's colleague actually did need help with makeup, but it was Lee's approach to remaining neutral and non-judgmental that kept interactions containing positive face.

On the other hand, a lack of extensive preparation produced negative effects for other participants. Betty recalled her first few months working as a medical professional for a HIV clinic:

You're trying to figure out, like okay, "Are you married?" *Yes*. Then do you say, "Male, female? Do you have kids?" A lot of same-sex marriages have children, so then you're like—it's confusing, and you don't want to say the wrong thing. You don't want to be awkward. And one of my colleagues that I work with, she was having stomach problems and I was like, "Well, are you pregnant?" And she was like, "No, no, I'm not." And I was like, "Are you sure because that can sneak up on you." And our physician assistant looked at me and she said, "No she's definitely not pregnant." And then I met her wife at a Christmas party, and I was like, "Oh."

Here, Betty's lack of extensive preparation tarnished her efforts of developing positive face.

Mirroring. In the most aggressive cases of developing positive face, straight allies were quick to match the nonverbal and verbal cues of queer people to fit in. Joe discussed his tendency to match other queer people's behaviors: "I think when I'm around people who are gay, I usually

just mimic their movements and dress more often like them. Like when people have accents... like I do it with other people from other countries too.” Other participants noted that they synced with other queer people due to lived experience. Due to the rural atmosphere of his hometown, Sam’s deviant behavior was immediately conflated with queer sexualities, leading him to experiment with men: “The ‘weird’ label only gave me one road. And I stepped into it, and I had gotten with a guy, Matt.” After this event, Sam was better able to create a rationale from which he was similar to queer people, ascribing the “weird” label as a common signifier of queerness. Another participant, Grace, a 61 year old White woman, disclosed that, when in workplaces where queer employees were friendly to her, she took up common vernacular that they used, such as ‘flaming:’ “And I can say that because they said that.” All of these actions intended to develop positive face with queer people by syncing their experiences. However, it ignores the intrusive power dynamics that straight people engage in, breaching boundaries to form a disingenuous form of trust.

Queer commodification. In a new strategy not previously described by Orbe (1998a), I introduce the concept of co-cultural members commodifying cultures for entertainment and aesthetic. While co-cultural members may communicatively insert themselves into dominant cultures, it is also possible that they adorn themselves in its popular aesthetics and texts. These actions promote assimilation in that co-cultural members immerse themselves in materials that keep them close to the dominant culture. However, these methods of enjoyment are shallow and they ignore the power at play when a traditionally dominant group member consumes elements of a traditionally nondominant group member’s culture. Therefore, commodification defines the system of unequal trade that straight people enjoy when consuming queer culture for the benefit of being seen as both an ally and a queer associate.

Queer commodification is built upon extreme liking of the queer community, or allophilia as defined by Fingerhut (2011). Many participants were quick to define queer people as “cool,” “fun,” “fashionable,” “chic,” “confident,” and “strong.” Tyler went on to explain that it is through bravery in identity disclosure that queer people are so well liked:

Having that confidence to me is very important. But it's about expressing yourself, how you feel as an individual, and using that confidence to break the norm. I think that that's beautiful, and no matter how they express themselves, there's such a variety of ways that anyone expresses themselves, so I can't say one thing is beautiful. But I think expressing your identity in a way that is true to you is how I just think that people who do that are amazing and beautiful in their own right.

In appreciating queer people for their performances of bravery, straight allies became increasingly interested in what other things make queer people unique. Lydia describes her appreciation of queer pop culture: “As I became more educated, I still appreciated, um, what an LGBTQ person contributes to our pop culture, which may be a little selfish. But I acknowledge they contribute a lot to pop culture, so I just really like it.” Even though Lydia acknowledged that her appreciation of queer culture is selfish, she continued to show appreciation for it, implicating the complicated ways in which straight allies tried to develop positive face. Other forms of queer commodification were more blatant. Whitney acknowledged that her gay friends made her dress more fashionably, representing the problematic caricature of a queer person as an accessory.

However, it is important to note that while straight allies engaged in queer commodification, they understood it as unproductive and disrespectful. Matthew did not even want to entertain the idea of queer culture benefitting him: “I wish I could analyze the question along the lines of like, how has this awareness, the presence of queer people, benefitted me, but I think that's too self-serving. It doesn't have any value to you.” Even Lydia was quick to qualify her commodification as that of a “consumer” rather than a “direct participator:” “It's theirs to



create, not mine.” Other participants, such as Tyler, were even quick to claim cultural appropriation: “I think straight people like to adopt. Straight people think it’s cool to dance to music or be flamboyant in some aspects, but if they did that all the time, they would feel like they’re being gay.” Throughout all of these themes, it’s evident that efforts to assimilate into queer culture come with certain drawbacks or acknowledgements of straight identity as distinct. In what follows, I discuss this phenomenon further.

### **Honorable Separation**

While straight allies assimilated into queer culture through a variety of performative techniques, they simultaneously separated from queer culture by acknowledging straight privilege, feeling guilt associated with their privileged identities, and maintaining psychological and physical barriers. The duality of assimilation and separation is nuanced and serves as the organizing principle from which many of these strategies are present. This duality will be discussed later. In terms of separation, it is important to note that, while Orbe (1998b) describes the *ability* of co-cultural members to enact certain strategies, straight allies have the privilege of *choosing* among any of the co-cultural strategies due to the lack of risks concerning their identity. However, separation among participants is still honorable in that the intentions behind such strategies often serve to show respect to, as well as distinction from, queer people.

**Acknowledging Straight Privilege and Guilt.** Straight allies inevitably acknowledged their differences from queer people in the form of unquestioned privilege—a marker of invisible societal capital that gave them more and greater opportunities. Privilege was two-fold: it was impossible to articulate and it provided incalculable benefits when compared to the oppression

that queer people faced. Ben, a 22 year old Black woman, describes a theatre exercise she encountered where her troupe had to confront straight privilege:

One of the exercises we go through when in training—we all stand in a circle and our facilitator will say some identity and then we're supposed to act as that stereotype of that identity. It's a very difficult exercise! It's hard but, um, one of the things that I've found the most memorable from that was when she said, "straight," everybody kind of looked at each other like, what are we supposed to do for this? Because it's the norm and there are not stereotypes of it...no caricatures of it. There's never been a TV episode to stereotype straight people. It's what people think is the default while everything else is the outlier.

Ben acknowledged that straight privilege is hardly interrogated, if at all. Similarly, Grace, a 61 year old White woman, notes that common vernacular used against the queer community holds no bearing when placed upon the straight majority, "What *even is* the heterosexual agenda?" In these contexts, participants made sense of their experience by finding no comparable means of identifying heterosexuality, therefore exposing straight privilege.

Straight privilege also created a distinction in that it provided participants incalculable benefits. Generally, Andrea, a 33 year old Latina woman, notes the unquestioned assumptions that accompany heterosexual identity: "Um, but I think just being able to be who I am and love who I am and openly and not being able to defend it all times." Acknowledging privilege allowed for Andrea to perceive her identity as a default, an entity that is free from oppression. Tyler, a 21 year old White man, takes this notion further, outlining the material benefits of being straight: "My identity isn't going to be shaped by the policy out there. It's not life or death for me. I won't be kicked out of my home. I won't be fired from my job. They're important things to me, but if the policy doesn't change, my life won't change." When participants started to understand their identity as invincible while queer identities remain vulnerable, they began to make sense of why queer communities kept exclusionary boundaries. Matthew (a 47 year old White man), in his work as a director of a HIV clinic, recalled exclusionary conversations:

I've heard, "Well, you really don't need to be a part of this conversation," or "You're not going to help, so sit back and take notes." And honestly that's probably the worst that's ever happened in regards to my difference, and that's not bad honestly, like c'mon, so that's the nature of privilege. All the things that are kind of inconsequential that are related to your difference are elevated to the emotional weight of barriers, but that's the bullshit of privilege.

While Matthew recognized the barriers that separate him from queer people, he accepted it as a biproduct of privilege—that slightly uncomfortable tensions were the worst-case scenario.

These varying emotional tolls, while potentially exhausting, carry little relevance when compared to the plight of queer people. Sandra, a 23 year old White woman, detailed her experiences in advocacy work and how it took an emotional toll on her:

But, like, obviously, like, that [advocacy work] is 10,000 times less exhausting for me as a straight person than for any queer person, and I'm not gonna be like, "Oh my life is so hard because people hate the gays," It really is exhausting when you join a fight and are genuinely invested in it—it's exhausting, it's discouraging, it's mentally and emotionally and physically draining sometimes, and I think as an ally, that's something you choose to take on because you don't have to, like, you can be like, "Oh I support LGBT whatever," but not actually have any ramifications for that, but when you actually get invested, like, yeah you're gonna have that sense of burnout, like, wanting to hit somebody just a little bit but not doing that... but you know just the actual literal emotional toll I think it can take.

Here, Sandra explicated the mobility of privilege, in that straight allies can temporarily perform advocacy (assimilation), but inevitably exist outside it due to their hierarchical status in society. This dynamic created a sense of guilt among straight allies.

Guilt was common among straight allies, in that they felt negative feelings due to their fighting for queer rights while also existing in identity categories that may contribute to queer oppression. Patrice, a 23 year old Black woman, recalled an internal struggle she had during a college event:

I think [college club] had that transgender day of remembrance and I was, like, really just hearing all those names being called and knowing people—they were murdered, their lives were stolen from someone just because of someone being uncomfortable with, like, how a person chose to live their truest selves, and it's

not fair, and it's upsetting, and it's frustrating and, well, damn it, and how do you work to change it because I feel like, to some degree, there's only so much you can do to change it and what can you do as advocate in general? You can't reach every person, but it's those people that you don't reach that do stupid crimes such as murdering people.

Patrice, while trying to fight for queer people, regressed back into straight identity due to the constructed boundaries around privilege. The fight for queer rights was not constructed as innate for straight allies. Rather, it was a voluntary action that one could partake in at any time. This dynamic resulted in guilt. Guilt was common regardless of context. Daniel, a 32 year old White pastor, experienced guilt when constructing an affirming church: "Part of that social justice work was the realization that we have not, as Christians, loved our LGBTQ neighbors well." Even when guilt was prevalent, most participants encouraged the idea that guilt must be overcome to promote social progress, inevitably promoting assimilative behaviors. Sandra discussed embracing guilt as part of the cycle of allyship:

You just gotta get past it. You might be feeling guilty, like, before, you dated a guy who is homophobic, or maybe you voted a certain way before, or you made public statements about something. You just have to own your shit and get past it cuz you can dwell in this guilt, but it doesn't really help anything, so it's about making those conscious decisions about how to stand my ground and hold my values, you know, not just wallow and, you know, realize that you are gonna make mistakes, and I think that's a little hard, like, when you care and want to be a good ally, like, it's hard to admit that you're gonna fuck up.

Sandra acknowledges that "owning your shit" helps you get past guilt, but it could also contribute to an even greater emotional toll of wanting to be a good ally. This dynamic creates an endless cycle of guilt that straight allies must negotiate when performing allyship. Breaking the guilt involved speaking out and getting involved, a strategy that mirrors developing positive face. In essence, acknowledging straight privilege and guilt allowed for self-reflexivity among participants, giving them greater insight into power dynamics and advocacy moving forward.

**Maintaining Barriers and Distancing.** Acknowledging straight privilege and managing guilt led many participants to disclose how they discursively and physically distanced themselves from queer people. These actions were not ostracizing in nature. Rather, these strategies were implemented in order to honor the spaces and identities queer people had crafted for themselves. For example, Lee, a 36 year old White man, explained how he was the only straight person working on a LGBT civil rights campaign. He explained that his identity may not be the most important: “And I recognize that I’m really not the right messenger ever for this campaign unless I’m talking to a very conservative audience member.” In acknowledging the separation between straight and queer identity, Lee delineated himself in his group as a heterosexual representative rather than an integrated team member, causing psychological distance. Sandra goes on to explain the conceptualized distance she feels from queer people: “I would think that a majority of the queer community sees my demographic as straight allies as an associate of the group. Like you’re associated with them but not actually in the group if that makes sense.” This dynamic not only created further psychological distance, but it also encapsulates a major theme in this study: straight allies consistently oscillate between assimilation and separation with minimal communication that bridges the two strategies.

Distancing also occurred in terms of physical boundaries. Boundarymaking was often used to let queer people communicate among themselves without the worry of heterosexual surveillance. Daniel discussed his efforts to create a separated space in his church for queer people: “That’s why we had an LGBTQ community—or small group—where it was only for LGBTQ because it can be really hard from what we are told for LGBT people to process through their hurts and their story with people who they are not 100% sure love them and accept them for who they are, so we need to create some boundaries that allow for healing.” In crafting a separate

space for queer people to interact, Daniel maintained an honorable boundary from which future intercultural communication could, and did, happen. Sam, a 33 year old White man, mirrored this notion in honoring organizational spaces:

I'm in AA, in recovery. We have a meeting hall that we call GayA, just cuz it's funny; it's the gay AA meeting. I don't go there. It's not meant for me. I am an ally and not a member of the community. That's where that mutual autonomy comes in. I can sit and run guard at the door if need be, but that is a safe space to discuss those issues: being sober and being homosexual. And they have this specific set of things that they have to deal with that I have nothing to offer them. Except in my absence, they can speak freely.

Here, Sam acknowledged that separation has beneficial qualities, in that it allows for solidarity among other disadvantaged groups.

### **Hierarchical Heterosexuality: Rare Methods of Accommodation**

While separation and assimilation were the most common type of co-cultural strategies used by straight allies, there was a small subset of participants who described this notion of dispelling stereotypes about straight allies. Just as Orbe (1998a) lists dispelling stereotypes as a method of accommodation, straight allies defended their identities in comparison to *regular* straight people. Generally, participants, such as Erin, a 23 year old Black woman, acknowledged that they get stereotyped as oppressors due to their heterosexuality: "All heterosexual people get a bad rap, so sometimes everyone's kinda clumped and it kind of hurts because I know I really am not like these people." While Erin understood that queer people justifiably look at straight people negatively, she still made an effort to stand out from the general population of straight people to appear more accepting. Value judgments did not come only from queer people, but also generalized straight people. Ben, a 22 year old Black woman, describes feelings of isolation she negotiates as a straight ally: "There might be people who look down on you because you are

an ally, like, because you don't have the same kind of conservative ideology when it comes to sexuality as they do."

Due to judgements and perceptions on both sides of the sexual spectrum, straight allies felt caught in the middle, neither fully assimilating into queer culture nor fully separating from it to join heterosexual society. In essence, these participants operated in a complex space of heterosexuality, partially, and voluntarily, segmenting themselves from their essentialized identity categories. In practice, straight allies accommodated queer culture by talking only about self in genuine ways. Matthew, a 47 year old White man, describes his experience at a queer retreat:

Yeah, so I had a really interesting experience not too long ago. I got an opportunity to attend, and participate in, a retreat for gay black men called [retreat name]. It is basically a men's group who have weekend retreats to do self-work and build a sense of community and leadership, and I was invited to participate as someone who is seen as an ally and it was a real honor. We spent time in a circle of about 20 of us. We disclosed our orientation and it was an exercise in disclosure and in discovering variants in how orientations is described and lived and trying to get past the binary of straight and gay. And I said I was straight, and everyone in the room was pretty surprised, and I just took a moment to think—which they gave me—and reflect back. One of the many advantages to being heterosexual is not being conscious of your orientation as an element of your identity.

Matthew's narrative showed the rare strategy of genuine communication regarding heterosexuality in queer spaces and conversations. Not only was Matthew able to honor the space by choosing to disclose as well, but he was also able to accommodate both binaries of assimilation and accommodation by showcasing the various heterosexualities that are present in society.

## The Duality of Assimilation and Separation

During the analysis phase of this study, it became clear that participants' constantly teeter between strategies of assimilation and separation with little room for other strategies (i.e., accommodation). It is contradictory to theorize strategies that work at odds with each other. Why would a person want to separate from *and* assimilate into a culture simultaneously? Under a pragmatic lens, straight allies could use strategies of accommodation (e.g., dispelling stereotypes) to balance both straight and queer concerns. Andrea, a 33 year old Latina woman, conceptualized balance through an interesting metaphor:

Like, in the [diversity office], a lot of white students say, "Well I don't know what to do when I go into the [diversity office]." And you just walk in! Talk to people. And they're like, "Well, I don't want to, like, be rude or disrupt the space or like..." And I'm like, "You'd be rude or disrupt the space if you didn't engage with the people there. I think that's the same way of going into any sort of queer space or being with queer people—just talking to people and engaging with people, and don't act like you're a tourist."

Logically, this metaphor of avoiding tourism is ideal. By being a tourist, an individual risks superficially absorbing outsider culture for personal gain (i.e., commodification) while still maintaining personal identity. However, most participants could not locate discursive practices where they successfully avoided being a tourist. Ben, a 22 year old Black woman, addressed the ephemeral nature of straight allyship: "I understand that people in the LGBTQ community don't want allies underneath their umbrella. It's because [allyship] is something that you can turn on and off, like, literally, like, I can be an ally sitting here doing this interview and go home...but you know obviously queer individuals can't do that with their identity." By masking and unmasking identity depending on situational circumstances, Ben could not help but feel like a tourist. Similarly, other participants, such as Erin, a 23 year old Black woman, noted the complexity of identity when entrenched in differing contexts: "We navigate the same space, but



we navigate it differently.” For participants, difference is bound to exist due to strategies such as acknowledging privilege, facing straight guilt, and maintaining barriers to honor queer people. However, separatist strategies motivated straight allies to interact with queer people continuously, fostering strategies of emphasizing commonalities and developing positive face. It is in this dynamic that Putnam, Fairhurst, and Banghart (2016) define a duality, an “interdependence of opposites in a both/and relationship that is not mutually exclusive or antagonistic” (p. 69). While both assimilation and separation occur at opposite ideological poles in Orbe’s (1998a) framework, they act instead as a recurring feedback loop for the participants in this study. Assimilation promotes reflexivity in separatist strategies, which in turn fuels further interaction and community with queer people and culture. This feedback loop is interrupted occasionally by rare situations in which accommodation can occur, such as an ally being invited to a gay black men’s retreat.

In response to this duality, many participants chose to disclose various metaphors for how they perceive their actions when simultaneously assimilating and separating:

I could have a rope attached to me, so if something goes wrong, I can just pull really hard and get me out of here. - *Joe, a 22 year old White man*  
If the shoe fits, should I wear it? - *Lydia, a 23 year old White woman*  
It’s important for you to be there, to be that bridge between the two groups, but you’re a bridge, not necessarily the person standing on top of it like with their megaphone. - *Sandra, a 23 year old White woman*  
I kind of thought of myself as a fly on the wall. - *Janice, a 25 year old White woman*

Each of these metaphors elucidates the issues of (performing) assimilation, in that it is never a permanent structure for straight allies’ communication, and separation due to the social desire to be fighting for equality in queer lives and spaces. These metaphors also point to the liminality of straight ally identities, existing neither fully in queer space nor dogmatic heterosexual society.

This duality naturally causes ambiguity and confusion for participants, such as Lee, a 36 year old White man, in moments of allyship:

This isn't a frustration, but an internal dilemma that I've had, because I was talking with a reporter for a LGBT publication out of New York, and I'm used to speaking the language of the campaign, which is speaking on behalf of LGBT individuals, and I was saying that *we've* been waiting for equal rights in [location] ever since legislation was passed 37 years ago. And when I say the word "we," I was like, well, should I clarify we as the state of [location] or we as LGBT individuals, like me speaking on their behalf—but I am not LGBT—I have questioned a few times on if I should clarify that, but then I think to myself, "It really doesn't matter if someone thinks I'm gay or not. This is an issue that needs to be fixed." Like in the back of my head I'm asking, "Well should I clarify that I'm not gay?"

Here, Lee acknowledged that while he may assimilate into the concerns of queer culture, speaking as a representative may be counterintuitive. In reaction, he psychologically distanced himself from the community as both a way to avoid being seen as a gay and to honor the voice of queer communities fighting for civil rights. However, Lee continues to speak as an ally for this LGBT campaign, maintaining an endless duality.

One particularly important finding within this duality is the relationship between micro- and macro-level factors. On one level, participants acknowledged that macro-level systems, such as patriarchy and heteronormativity, created an unequal playing field for queer people. Simultaneously, participants gave up on handling macro-level concerns at all times, instead focusing on what can be done on a micro-level. In other words, participants majorly focused on interpersonal relationships and local issues rather than getting caught up in the endless societal compartmentalization of sexuality and gender. Matthew, a 47 year old White man, teased out the tensions between micro- and macro-level understandings in his history as an academic and practitioner:

So, I came out of academia as a sociologist on social inequality. My first thought was like, oh, this is gonna be easy. I'm culturally competent, right? Like I can cite

gender sources and mention queer theory, doing all kinds of cool stuff, and the reality is I have a bit of learning to do. As I've discovered in the subsequent 15 years or so in leaving academia, the idea of queer culture or gay culture—they are not the same thing—and moreover as we would see in any large, um, geographically disparate society, there are significant differences from one locality to another—from one region to another, and there are important fields.

While Matthew originally felt comfortable in relying on macro-level understandings, he went on to talk about how his work as a director at a HIV clinic required micro-level understandings of his surrounding community. While broad understandings of sexuality and gender helped him articulate his identity, they did nothing to promote meaningful interaction between straight and queer communities. Similarly, most participants noted preferences for micro-level interactions. Some preferred personable interactions because they were frankly easier to deal with than constantly interrogating macro-level conversations. Joe, a 22 year old White man, discussed his approach to queer conversations as incredibly personable: “What I know is super tiny and that’s not the picture that everyone has been presented with, so I’ll sit with someone and listen, and I’m not here to say who you are is right or wrong.” Disregarding macro-level categorizations allowed Joe to get to know queer people on a more basic level, promoting the development of positive face. Micro-level communication also promoted emphasizing commonalities. Matthew described “love as an organizing principle,” grounding simplistic vernacular (i.e., love) in his interactions with queer people. Similar to phrases like, ‘love is love,’ micro-level interactions promoted language that united humans rather than people with differing sexualities and genders.

Other participants preferred micro-level communication because it acted in opposition to ambiguous conceptualizations (or “boxes”) that stagnated sexuality and gender. Sam, a 33 year old White man, acknowledged macro understandings and championed micro understandings in the same breath: “I’m not gonna ignore someone’s sexuality, but it doesn’t hold any bearing on who they are as a human being.”

Discursive understandings of control underscored the preference for micro-level conversations. While participants felt like they could not control macro-level phenomena, they did perceive efficacy in changing their immediate surroundings. Grace, a 61 year old White woman, described her rationale for preferring micro-level conversations: “Like alright, like what’s within your control and what’s beyond your control? You have to accept it and be there and show some empathy and not judge.” Grace ultimately accepted that micro-level conversations aligned with her ability to be an ally in any given moment.

The relationship between micro- and macro-level concerns further explains the duality between separation and assimilation. Acknowledgements of macro-level understandings force straight allies to perceive their identities as hierarchical and representative of straight privilege, fostering co-cultural strategies of psychological and physical distance. However, a preference for micro-level communication promotes performative assimilation in the form of emphasizing commonalities and developing positive face. Accommodation then, could be conceptualized as a messy environment in which meso-level concerns are addressed in acknowledging straight ally identity as hierarchical and subject to tricky negotiation.

### **Other Contextual Factors**

Overall, the identities and consequential strategies of straight allies can partially be explained by what I call formative experiences—narratives or methods of sensemaking that retrospectively rationalize participants’ uses of assimilation, separation, and/or accommodation. Most commonly, narratives centered on personal background, a finding that mirrors Orbe’s (1998b) field of experience. In a typical sense, straight allies often located the origin of their identities due to being exposed to queer people, either in their family, friend groups, or in college. In some

cases, queerness was already integrated into participants' childhoods, fostering feelings of positively-framed indifference when exposure later happened. Lee, a 36 year old White man, talked about his childhood experience and how it connected to queer perceptions:

My mom is a dance teacher. I took ballet, tap, and jazz from the time I was 3 years old to when I was like in 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade. And so, as I got into the late stages of elementary and middle school, I realized I was the only boy in those classes. And then it was—dance wasn't something in my small town that boys did—and so I ended up not taking it anymore, but that led to me to sympathize with the fact that you know I was someone who got picked on for taking dance class and then...I just never understood the big deal. I always had friends since college who were in LGBT circles, or allies, and it just never was a big question to me.

Lee created a rationale from which (performing) assimilation can happen. By being raised in a feminine-typed environment, Lee experienced little cognitive dissonance in meeting queer people later on who disrupted binaries between male and female, gay and straight, etc.

However, some participants often oscillated between past experiences that kept them in conservative ideologies, and developmental (i.e., formative) experiences that changed their worldview concerning queer culture and people. Daniel, a 32 year old White man, discussed his original conceptualization of queer people while being raised in a Southern Baptist church: “I had the assumption that being gay is a choice. I had an image in my mind of a gay person and it was, um, an extremely unrealistic view of a flamboyant guy who wears dresses and whatever the most extreme view you can think of is probably what I had growing up. When I was young there was a belief in my religious community that being gay was associated with being a pedophile.” Daniel later stated that exposure to queer people in college sparked the journey to disrupt misconceptions and stereotypes, fostering affirming attitudes. Sometimes, this transition from conservative to formative experiences about straight allyship was uncomfortable. Patrice, a 23 year old Black woman, discussed her tumultuous journey in relation to religious beliefs.

I always knew about the, uh, LGBTQ community, but growing up in a very Christian household, I always—I was kind of confused—is it really bad? Is it good? And you know, I discovered my own sexuality and things like that. You know, I one time remember asking my mother, like, “What if I told you I was like gay?” And she told me that I wouldn’t be able to live with her anymore. And I was like, woah, okay, so then I kind of just—instead of allowing that to dive in more—I kind of just stayed away from it—from learning about LGBTQ communities, and I never had a disdain for it before college, but I didn’t really have understanding about it, so I always felt a little uncomfortable when I was around people in that community...but then when I got into college, I started making more friends, you know, and being able to step out from what my mother says is good, what my mother says is wrong, and being able to just learn for myself

Patrice’s experience embodied the duality of separation and assimilation. By being raised conservative, she tended to distance herself physically and psychologically from queer people out of fear. Eventually, Patrice began to develop positive face with queer people upon entering college, therefore reinforcing methods of (performing) assimilation. In analyzing formative experiences among straight allies, the previously described co-cultural themes become easier to understand.

### **Outcomes of Allyship**

Ultimately, the interplay between co-cultural strategies produced myriad outcomes for straight allies, including an expanded identity, a call toward intervention, and a need to translate messages between queer communities and straight populations.

**Education as Identity Expanding.** Education was constructed by participants as mandatory to being a straight ally. Ben, a 22 year old Black woman, noted that without education, straight people would be closed off to queer people, defeating the purpose of being an ally in the first place:

If you’re a person who, um, would, doesn’t desire to be an ally, you’re kind of going to close your mind off and your resources off to learning about and

experiencing and, um, interacting with people who can open your mind to things you haven't thought about because of their different identities and life experiences that you wouldn't have. And I think that's probably the best thing being able to see different perspectives of different people.

Since education was perceived as mandatory, (performing) assimilation acted as a logical way to understand more about the queer community. Additionally, it was an outcome of separatist behavior. By acknowledging straight privilege and guilt, participants began to understand their own identities as complex. Therefore, education also expanded straight ally identities. By engaging as an ally, participants experience worldview changes. Tyler, a 21 year old White man, discussed his personal transformation: "I see the world through less normative eyes. I don't see hard and fast lines. I see spectrums all across the board whether that's gender identity, the way you dress...it can be anything...there's sexuality...you can flow. You can be into this guy and then into this girl and then into this nonbinary person. It doesn't matter. It's more of a sliding rule."

In some cases, straight allies even began to see their own identities diverging from typical heterosexuality. Patrice, a 23 year old Black woman, discussed this change: "Even though I had never dated someone of the same sex, I am attracted to women. So, I haven't really decided if I identify as bisexual or not, so it's still something I'm discovering." Even though participants willingly identified as straight for the purpose of the study, they still understood themselves as existing on a spectrum of sexuality. Most participants did not experience dissonance due to this phenomenon. For example, Erin, a 23 year old Black woman, treated the change as nonchalant: "Especially in the last two years of my life, like, since I've graduated from undergrad, I've been on a sexuality journey. Not necessarily identifying as queer but being able to see it's not all black and white. Like realizing, okay, [Erin], you can look at a woman and be like, 'She's fine as hell,' and keep on moving on with your life." Even though education acted as

a way to expand people's understandings of sexuality, participants' confidence in their performances of heterosexuality were relatively undisturbed.

**Intervention.** As participants got simultaneously closer to queer communities and more aware of their societal differences as allies, intervention, in the form of stopping homophobia and heteronormativity, became increasingly important. Most participants noted typical examples, like shaming people for using homophobic or transphobic language, or policing straight friends even when queer people weren't around. In almost all cases, intervention tactics reflected previously described co-cultural strategies of (performing) assimilation. For example, Grace, a former insurance compliance officer, recalled her frustration when an insurance company wouldn't cover a transgender child's medical fees: "We were having all of these meetings because we wouldn't cover these mental health charges and medications, and I'm the compliance director. I had to say in a meeting, 'Excuse me, we are dealing with a *person*. What is best for this *child*?'". In her efforts to advocate for the child, Grace used simplifying language to emphasize commonalities between the transgender child and the presumably straight review board.

Some participants even acknowledged the duality of assimilation and separation in their intervention efforts. Daniel, a 32 year old White pastor, recalled his experience tabling for an affirming church at a march: "When it comes to talking and having a relationship with the LGBT community, silence is absolutely crucial cuz most of the time we need to shut up and do more listening than talking. I saw this sign at a MLK march yesterday that said, 'Silence is another form of violence,' so to not speak up, you are speaking up. You are making a statement by not making a statement." Daniel recognized that intervention efforts have boundaries, in that separation can honor queer communities,



but it can also represent a form of violence against them. Speaking up and interacting with the queer community can be helpful, but participants run the risk of using potentially unethical modes of developing positive face.

Additionally, intervention operated in varying environments, resulting in unfortunate costs. Lydia, a 23 year old White woman, noted that intervention can be harmful when in a workplace, even in moments when discrimination occurs:

If it's in a work sphere, that's really tough. I've learned that that kinda stuff is really bad. I would definitely want to have a private conversation probably with the [homophobic] person separately if they knew that I knew [about the discriminatory act] If they didn't, I would leave it alone. Unfortunately, any type of tension in the workplace, if you support the person who is seen in the wrong, you can have a lot of social consequences and affect the way that you are seen by your boss.

Straight allies intervening in potentially heteronormative and/or homophobic organizations may result in supportive communication being seen as disruptive, resulting in face and credibility threats.

**Translation.** Finally, the duality of separation and assimilation led to many instances where straight allies had to embody the translation of messages from one population to another. In many instances, allies acted as “filters” from which queer messaging could be interpreted easily by straight populations. Lee, 36 year old White man, explained this dynamic and provided an example in his own campaign for LGBT civil rights:

I try to bring a voice that is, how do we not only speak to our core supporters—LGBT individuals—but how do we make sure we are creating messaging that appeals to a broader audience? And, um, that's a fairly conservative message. We are not asking people to give anyone special advantages. We are just asking that, as you wouldn't be able to discriminate someone based on how tall they are, or, you know, their gender or things like that, we are asking for the same protections for everybody in the state, and that, for most people—based on our research—

that's not so much of an ask. We have strong support even among conservative voters, and that's very encouraging as the campaign gets off the ground.

Interestingly, Lee emphasizes commonalities when talking to straight populations as well, placing the onus of queer identity on himself when enacting allyship. Translation acts in both directions when acting as an ally. Matthew's role as director of a HIV clinic required him to switch modalities consistently, oscillating between traditionally straight spaces and familiarized queer spaces, such as his local community center:

If I believe that the person or the resources whose assistance I need is unlikely to embrace providing those services or even resist providing those services because of our LGBT status, um, but nevertheless, they are in the business of providing services, I'm going to disclose, "Hey I'm here because I'm providing services to LGBT folks and, you know, I think you'd be a great partner in that." Whereas if I were to go to *our* community center, I'd be more abrupt and say, "I'm bringing testing here...Saturday...leave the key under the mat."

In both directions, Matthew performed assimilation in emphasizing commonalities with the straight businessperson and developing positive, and casual, face with the queer community center.

## **Summary**

Overall, straight allies used a variety of co-cultural strategies to make sense of queer conversations and spaces. At times, straight allies performatively assimilated by emphasizing commonalities and developing positive face. Methods of developing positive face played out in interesting ways (e.g., censoring self/remaining silent, extensive preparation, mirroring, and queer commodification). Simultaneously, straight allies honorably separated from queer ontologies to acknowledge straight privilege, guilt, and maintain psychological and physical barriers. In rare moments, straight allies were able to acknowledge hierarchical heterosexualities by dispelling stereotypes. The relationships among these strategies can be explained by the

duality of assimilation and separation. Other contextual factors helped make sense of straight allyship and co-cultural strategies, such as common intersections and formative experiences. Allyship produced a myriad of outcomes, such as identity being expanded by education, intervention being perceived as necessary to social change, and translation being conceptualized as a bridge between queer and straight lexicons.

## **DISCUSSION: STUDY 1**

In examining a co-cultural framework for straight allies, this analysis resulted in contradictory, power-laden, and performative strategies explained by various factors, contexts, and relationships among said strategies.

### **Straight Ally Co-Cultural Strategies**

Co-cultural strategies among straight allies revealed a wide range of behaviors, such as assimilation, accommodation, and separation. Strategies also ranged in communication approach from nonassertive (i.e., emphasizing commonalities), to assertive (i.e., dispelling stereotypes), and even to aggressive in nature (i.e., mirroring). In many assimilative strategies, such as emphasizing commonalities, developing positive face, and queer commodification, straight allies constructed a discursive closeness between them and queer communities. Discursive closeness to queer people and communities appears rational, in that many participants identified queer people as their “friends,” “neighbors,” or “family.” In simplifying relationships between themselves and queer people, straight allies mirror Fingerhut (2011) in their observation of allies readily identifying queer friendships. While this phenomenon may sound problematic to many critics, in that it ignores the differences between ingroup and outgroup members, it may represent general feelings of allophilia, in which loving or liking of queer folks fosters immediacy and closeness (Pittinsky, 2005). Specifically, the ways in which straight allies commodified queer culture for entertainment and enjoyment was met with general feelings of intense fascination, and this phenomenon in turn would support cases of allophilia among straight allies.

This observation is not to say that straight allies act in completely ethical ways. Arguably, feelings of commodification and allophilia toward queer people could border on fetishization—the act of straight allies exoticizing queer communities. While fetishization can be argued as a communicative act used in contexts where dominant members maintain power over non-dominant members (Bhaba, 1983), straight allies occupy a space in which they are neither completely queer nor fully subscribing to heterosexual culture. Therefore, straight allies may take strategies from both spaces, blurring lines between what is considered queer and straight identity. Fetishizing queer people, a strategy that straight allies use in heteronormative culture, may represent a modified strategy used in predominantly queer spaces (hence the title of commodification in this analysis, not fetishization).

Additionally, straight allies aggressively assimilated themselves into queer culture at times. Using strategies such as mirroring, censoring self, and queer commodification, participants felt an intense need to fit into these spaces. O’Hara and Meyer (2003) describe similar behaviors in the context of straight people feeling isolated at a predominantly lesbian event, showcasing the idea that dominant group members, when put into a minority position, take on salient co-cultural strategies to make sense of their experience. Aggressive behaviors may result from the considerable ambiguity that straight allies face when trying to act appropriately in queer conversations and/or spaces. As a queer researcher, I found many of the aggressive strategies to be disingenuous in nature, not because they were performative and potentially disrespectful, but because they were often accompanied with feelings of anxiety and ambiguity over role. Just as Sue and colleagues (2019) note that straight allies may lack the educational resources to enact tangible, respectful actions for disadvantaged groups, straight allies in this study experience considerable confusion in what their role as an ally constituted. For

example, when asked for a personal definition of allyship, many participants experienced initial confusion in defining behavior, mirroring Brooks and Edwards (2009) observation of allyship being an ambiguous concept.

Straight allies also separated themselves from queer conversations and spaces. First, straight allies acknowledged their privilege and felt guilt due to their hierarchical separation from queer people. Even though Helms (1996) distinguishes guilt from an intrinsic desire to advocate for disadvantaged groups among allies, participants in this study perceived their guilt as a catalyst for future allyship. Russel (2011) mirrors these results, in that guilt—derived from the acknowledgement of straight privilege—motivates individuals to integrate allyship more frequently into their own lives. The rift between guilt and intrinsic desires to fight for social equity could possibly be mediated by the concept of reflexivity. Throughout the process of reflecting on their actions, examining their identity in relation to guilt, and reframing that guilt as a motivator for allyship, straight allies can consistently develop increasingly salient strategies from which queer communities can benefit.

Straight allies, in rare cases, used methods of nonassertive accommodation to balance identity needs between self and others. Strategies of accommodation are rare in comparison to assimilation and separation due to the differing needs of each of these behaviors. It is not logical to assume that straight allies would readily communicate their identity when they simultaneously seek either to maintain psychological or physical distance or to erase identity completely to assimilate into a space. Assimilative strategies reject presentations of straight identity for the purpose of emphasizing commonalities rather than difference. Separatist strategies reject presentations of straight identity for the purpose of honoring barriers and manufacturing guilt. Pragmatically, future research should explore the ways in which allies generally balance the

tensions between assimilation and separation. While accommodation is rare, more work is needed on how, and why, these methods could be positively and/or negatively received by associated members of marginalized communities. In other words, while accommodation was perceived as powerful by straight allies, are these strategies seen as effective when interpreted by queer people? If perceived negatively, what work can be done to construct and reveal novel strategies relating to respectful and effective identity balance?

### **Situational and Contextual Factors**

Most commonly, Orbe's (1998b) concepts of field of experience, ability, situation, and rewards and costs provided insight into why straight allies typically use strategies of either assimilation or separation. Assimilation strategies occurred most often due to common intersections participants faced. In their minds, participants felt intersections in lived oppression along the lines of racism, sexism, classism, and discrimination based on disability. Considering participants experienced oppression in some form, they were able to empathize with queer people's suffering, enabling assimilation. Additionally, participants' narratives of formative experience provided a rationale for why assimilation occurred. Most commonly, experiences that destabilized the binary between straight and gay sexualities along with masculine- and feminine-typed roles provided straight allies the discursive tools to emphasize commonalities and develop positive face among queer people. Simultaneously, narratives that originally held straight allies in conservative atmospheres may explain communication strategies such as acknowledging privilege and guilt. Conservative and homophobic backgrounds provided a reference point from which straight allies can track their own growth and social awareness, potentially fostering guilt along the way.

Orbe's (1998b) concept of ability may explain the preference for two polarized strategies exhibited by participants of this study. While nondominant group members often use co-cultural strategies to the best of their abilities, straight allies have the privilege of choosing among any of the co-cultural strategies available to make sense of queer conversations and spaces. Their privilege as dominant group members gives them the social mobility to interact freely within both heterosexual and queer spaces. Therefore, it is important to note that conceptualizations of ability may not hold the same validity when studies challenge positionalities or use traditionally dominant group members as the focus of research. Alternatively, future studies could potentially conceptualize ability as a co-cultural strategy itself. Similarly, my conceptualization of (performing) assimilation underscores the unique intersections between nondominant identity, context, and privilege as a form of social power. The idea of performance should be researched further in regards to co-cultural theorizing, not only in regards to dominant group members, but also nondominant group members in how they may perform certain strategies when given the choice.

Many straight allies' co-cultural strategies were situationally bound. When straight allies operated in predominantly queer spaces and conversations, they often aggressively assimilated in order to save face and promote harmony among themselves and queer folks. When in organizational settings, co-cultural strategies were often downplayed to fit into norms of professionalism and credibility. Workplaces still reflect heterosexist structures (Camara & Orbe, 2010), potentially resulting in straight allies being reluctant to communicate with queer people (see Study 2 for more details). Additionally, straight allies saw various costs and rewards related to being an ally. While assimilation carried significant rewards for straight allies, such as providing a means of entertainment in the form of queer culture and a way to promote friendly



relationships, these benefits were balanced when considering the costs of allyship in relationship to separation, such as experiencing guilt over identity, organizational consequences for aligning oneself with straight people, etc.

## Relationships and Outcomes

**Figure 12** illustrates the complicated duality that exists between strategies of assimilation and separation. Most of the time, the tensions between assimilation and separation are not mediated. Straight allies *either* assimilate into queer culture *or* separate from it completely in various ways. At rare moments, however, strategies of accommodation disrupt this relationship, allowing straight allies to balance both straight and queer identity together in moments of dispelling stereotypes and acknowledging hierarchical heterosexuality. It is in this complicated interplay that various outcomes manifest. These outcomes serve as both products of, and predecessors to, this duality—a concept described below.

Throughout the analysis, it became clear that these outcomes were not only products, but predecessors, to existing co-cultural strategies among straight allies. The duality between assimilation and separation resulted in straight allies becoming more educated and expanding their identity, feeling a dire urge to intervene on behalf of queer people, and translate messages between queer and straight communities. In return, these behaviors reinforced the duality of assimilation and separation, in that education promotes developing positive face and the acknowledgement of straight privilege. Intervention forces straight allies to interact in queer communities while also making them feel guilt when not enough intervention is done. And translation forces straight allies to engage in both separation, in acknowledging heterosexual

<sup>2</sup> This figure does not imply a theoretical relationship; it simply describes the relationships between conceptualized themes.

culture, and assimilation, by promoting increased understanding of queer culture. Additionally, rare methods of accommodation also reinforce a cyclical process concerning outcomes, in that education forces straight allies to see themselves as hierarchical agents; intervention reminds straight allies that their identities are also at play when navigating discrimination and advocacy; and translation creates avenues from which straight ally distinction (e.g., dispelling stereotypes) might be necessary.

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions**

The results of this study indicate how straight allies can be seen as multidimensional agents capable of change, destruction, transformation, and/or stagnation depending on how factors, outcomes, and dualities play out in everyday interaction between themselves and queer populations. While straight allies should not necessarily be faulted for acting in contradictory and power-laden ways, this study can act as an educational resource for this population, allowing them to understand the process of allyship in ways that transcend and challenge, rather than maintain and trouble, existing heteronormative structures. In essence, this study can act as toolkit from which straight allies can effectively articulate their identities while also helping the lives of their queer associates. Additionally, this study effectively extends Co-Cultural Theory by challenging positionality, illuminating salient strategies among traditionally dominant group members when in minority contexts.

This study is not without limitations. While Razzante and Orbe's (2018) Dominant Group Theory could have accurately described many of these strategies, I stand behind my choice to use Co-Cultural Theory because the straight allies in this study operated in instances where power was upended. Nonetheless, Dominant Group Theory should still be used to analyze the co-

cultural strategies that straight people use in generalized interactions. Comparisons between generalized, and allied, heterosexual strategies could further illuminate the performative implications of straight allyship. Secondly, while the demographics of the participants varied significantly for the analysis of the study, they inevitably reflected majorly White, female experiences. Future studies could look more deeply into the implications of intersectional allyship for people of color, people with disabilities, etc.

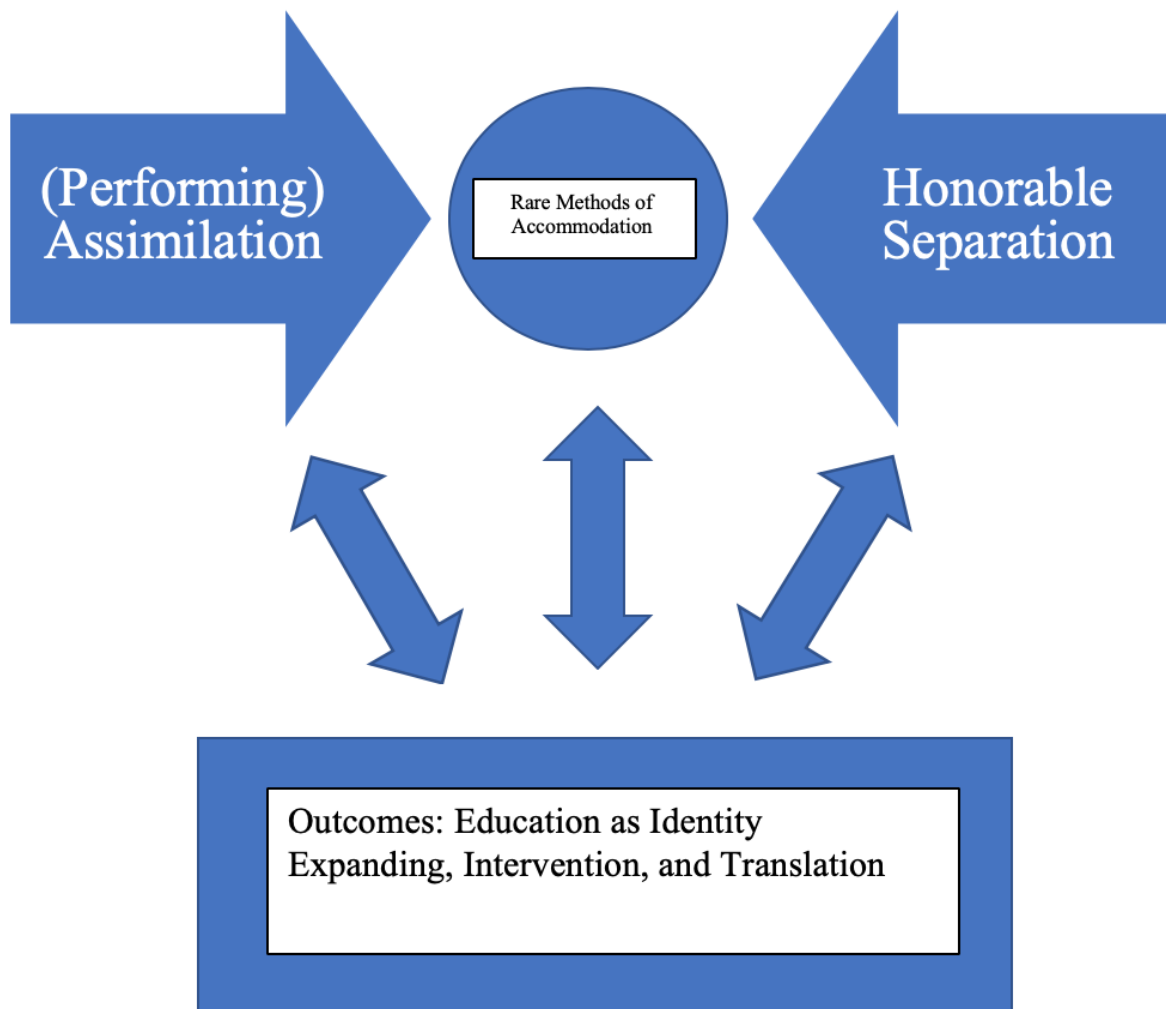


Figure 1: The relationships between straight allies' co-cultural strategies

## **BRIDGING THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL GAPS**

While my first study operated between interpretive and dialogic paradigms, the next study seeks to understand straight allyship under a more normative lens (see Deetz, 2001). While dual-method studies carry many criticisms for remaining ambivalent to the tensions between paradigms, I see a normative study adding a rich addition to my original approach by extending the theoretical and pragmatic applications of straight allyship to a generalized public. Additionally, the following research takes an organizational turn. It is not enough to analyze straight allyship communication generally. As a person who is concerned about allyship in many different contexts, I constructed Study 2 to understand allyship as contextual when entrenched in workplace culture and norms.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: STUDY 2**

Discrimination in the workplace remains an important issue for marginalized populations, especially queer employees. Comprising approximately 8 million people in the United States (Gates, 2011), queer employees face a significant amount of pushback from organizations in the form of harassment and discrimination (Webster, Adams, Maranto, Sawyer, & Thoroughgood, 2018). Queer individuals embody a problematic conflation of sexuality and work—a combination that is not typically accepted (Burrell, 1984). Without a supportive workplace environment, these individuals are less likely to present co-cultural identity, suppressing important communication that often counters problematic discourses of heterosexism (Camara et al., 2012). Queer employees not only face interpersonal tension, but also institutionalized discrimination in the form of civil rights gaps. Over 30 states in the US have no civil rights protections for queer employees, leaving them vulnerable to unregulated treatment (Freedom For All Americans [FFAA], 2018). Therefore, it is increasingly important to survey (un)supportive behavior in the workplace, resulting in the goals of this study to analyze straight allies' co-cultural strategies when in differing workplace compositions along with analyzing attitudes related to advocacy (i.e., heteronormativity and communication competence).

Straight allies represent potential agents of change in these spaces where differences between institutionalized sexism and interpersonal homophobia can be corrected (Brooks & Edwards, 2009). Specifically, Webster and colleagues (2018) outline various forms of social support that make queer employees feel supported in times of uncertainty, such as listening, empathizing, and offering assistance. While multiple studies have looked at the communication of allyship as contextual (i.e., supportive social climates and queer-centric policies/practices)

(Brooks & Edwards, 2009; Grzanka et al., 2015; Webster et al., 2018), no study has looked at how allyship changes depending on the composition of a workplace. Therefore, this study utilizes a co-cultural lens to (a) Compare differences in co-cultural orientations among straight allies who work in predominantly queer or straight workplaces, and (b) Look for possible connections between straight allies' attitudes (i.e., heteronormativity) and their communication competence, a factor that could potentially support or hinder queer people in times of need.

### **Co-Cultural Theory: Strategizing in the Workplace**

Co-Cultural Theory provides a framework from which power, communication, and culture can be deeply analyzed (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). While this framework carries a variety of applications, the workplace poses a unique setting from which co-cultural strategies may mean the difference between organizational success and failure. Co-Cultural Theory has been applied to a host of organizational settings and marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities in the workplace (Cohen & Avanzino, 2010), male nurses (Herakova, 2012), African-American women senior executives (Parker, 2002), Caribbean immigrants (Bridgewater & Buzzanell, 2010), and other studies looking at workplace discrimination more holistically (Camara & Orbe, 2010; Camara et al., 2012).

Recent advancements to Co-Cultural Theory now allow researchers to analyze workplace behavior more concretely. Lapinski and Orbe (2007) expanded the heuristic potential of co-cultural theorizing through finding initial reliability and construct validity for the Co-Cultural Theory Scales (CCT-S). This measure allows self-reports of both preferred outcome and communication approach, combining into a more complete, concrete picture of co-cultural orientation frequently used by nondominant group members (Lapinski & Orbe, 2007). CCT-S

carries analytical potential for a few reasons. First, it can only “add to the repertoire of possible ways to study the communication patterns of co-cultural group members. Using multiple methodologies can only add to our understanding of social phenomena” (Lapinski & Orbe, 2007, p. 143). Second, a quantitative approach to cultural differences can have fast, effective implementation in spaces where intercultural communication occurs. Especially in workplaces, where cultural tension can be idiosyncratic, an examination of co-cultural strategies could prove useful for a variety of organizational members. Additionally, CCT-S has not been theoretically expanded by challenging the positionality of majority-as-minority individuals. Therefore, straight allies in the workplace serve as an ideal place from which CCT-S can be tested and potentially improved.

### **Straight Allies: Profile and Issues in the Workplace**

The connection between straight allyship and queer organizational success carries adequate support. Brooks and Edwards (2009) note the seemingly natural rationalization of advocacy roles (i.e., teachers, counselors, lawyers, etc.) as intrinsically linked to straight allyship. Additionally, Webster and colleagues’ (2018) meta-analysis found a significant association between supportive workplace behaviors enacted by straight peers and job satisfaction and organizational commitment. While a dearth of literature exists on how straight allies perceive their identities in the workplace, there is a myriad of research explaining what queer people experience concerning heteronormative workplaces and organizations.

Considering workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation is still present, straight allies are necessary for supporting queer people (Brooks & Edwards, 2009). Even when organizations increasingly accept the label of being a ‘gay-friendly workplace’ (Giuffre,



Dellinger, & Williams, 2008), heterosexist structures persist. Thirty percent of nondominant group members report discrimination in the workplace (Camara & Orbe, 2010), while queer individuals specifically report 35% of perceived discrimination happening in public spaces or the workspace. These issues are compounded for transgender individuals specifically: “As recently as 2011, 78% of respondents to the largest survey of transgender people to date reported experiencing at least one form of harassment or mistreatment at work because of their gender identity; more specifically, 47% had been discriminated against in hiring, promotion, or job retention” (Sears & Mallory, 2011, p. 2). The severity of discrimination among differentiated populations serves as a powerful reminder of how social justice work (especially among allies) must continue.

To claim that organizational discrimination for LGBT people is ‘over’ or happening at ‘minute’ capacities ignores the dogmatic structures that still furtively manifest in everyday interactions. Discrimination in the workplace is no longer explicit, but covert in the form of microaggressions, bullying, dignity threats, hidden agendas, and political communication (Camara & Orbe, 2010; Baker & Lucas, 2017). Discrimination operates at a multitude of levels, creating inconsistencies in lived experience when macro (e.g., policy measures) and micro (e.g., interpersonal threats) do not align. For example, Cristin (2016) explicates the mixed messages that queer employees face when in the workplace, such as negotiating ambiguous policy (e.g., domestic partnership benefits) with potentially heteronormative supervisors and coworkers. Discrimination, while increasingly veiled, carries harsh material consequences for queer employees: 7.2% of closeted LGBT employees and 9.4% of out LGBT employees reported losing their jobs due to discrimination (Sears & Mallory, 2011).

In reaction to discrimination, queer employees note the importance of *utilizing liaisons* in responding to heterosexism, a co-cultural strategy that is used 12% of the time compared to other strategies (Camara et al., 2012). While straight allies may be used in the workplace as forms of support, these individuals appear ambivalent toward issues of discrimination. In one sample, one-third of subjects responded neutrally to questions asking about how discrimination affects queer individuals in the workplace, i.e. “Lesbians and gay men often miss out on good jobs due to discrimination” (Goldstein & Davis, 2010, p. 487). While straight ally communication in the workplace remains unclear (i.e., why this study is necessary), queer individuals note several problems in the workplace.

Queer people utilize various strategies in the workplace depending on the amount of support present. Heteronormative, heterosexist environments typically result in queer people censoring co-cultural identity, remaining silent, and/or avoiding conflict (Camara et al., 2012; Camara & Orbe, 2010; Fox & Warber, 2014). Queer individuals desire inclusion, institutional support, job security, and overwhelmingly, for straight allies to speak up when discrimination occurs: “An ally will stand up for me in the moment that discrimination is happening—will put herself or himself on the line for my right to be treated with the same respect that is due any other human being on this planet. Let me tell you that allies are few and far between” (Brooks & Edwards, 2009, p. 141).

Therefore, straight allies should be studied for ways in which they communicatively contribute to workplace culture. Another area that deserves recognition is the communicative abilities of straight allies concerning their attitudes.

## **Heteronormativity and Communication Competence**

There is reason to believe that straight allies' attitudes about heteronormativity, or the prevailing belief that everyone is heterosexual and cisgender (Habarth, 2015; Montgomery & Stewart, 2012), may relate to self-reported measures of communication competence.

Montgomery and Stewart (2012) found a significantly positive association between people's reports of resistance to heteronormativity and activism for gays and lesbians. Additionally, the study also found an inverse relationship between heteronormative attitudes and gay/lesbian activism (Montgomery & Stewart, 2012). In the context of the workplace, gay/lesbian activism may translate over to supportive communication behaviors that actively uplift and protect queer people. These utterances probably require the ability to communicate competently. Speaking up for nondominant groups may require discourse in a variety of circumstances, where peers, strangers, and/or powerful members may be in the room. Communication competence, or the ability to communicate effectively in a variety of social settings (i.e., varying in size of audience and type of relationships; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988), may be a useful skill among straight allies. Communication competence and gay/lesbian activism can be rationalized as similar in behaviors that are effective and appropriate for an audience. Therefore, this study aims to analyze possible associations between heteronormativity and communication competence.

In review of the literature, the following hypotheses were created:

H1: There will be a difference in co-cultural orientations between straight allies who work in a primarily queer workplace compared to those who work in a primarily straight workplace.

H2: There will be a relationship between variables of heteronormativity and communication competence among straight allies.

## METHODS: STUDY 2

### Orientation

This study takes a normative approach to understanding co-cultural strategies among straight allies in differing workplaces. Instead of understanding particularities of communities in response to the deconstruction and representation of social norms, this study embraces the normative paradigm of representing higher-level behaviors and structures generally (Deetz, 2001). Not only does this study provide advocates, practitioners, and researchers socially desirable ‘concrete’ data, but it also adds another dimension to this line of research.

### Participants

Participants ( $n = 110$ ; 83 females, 27 males) were all self-identified straight allies. Participants represented a majorly homogeneous demographic in terms of race/ethnicity: 86.4% ( $n = 95$ ) were White, 5.5% ( $n = 6$ ) Other, 3.6% ( $n = 4$ ) Black or African American, 3.6% ( $n = 4$ ) Asian, and 0.9% ( $n = 1$ ) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Subjects also varied in age: 54.5% ( $n = 60$ ) were 18-24 years old, 15.5% ( $n = 17$ ) 25-34, 10% ( $n = 11$ ) 35-44, 7.3% ( $n = 8$ ) 45-54, 9.1% ( $n = 10$ ) 55-64, and 2.7% ( $n = 3$ ) 65-74. One participant failed to report their age.

### Procedure

After obtaining approval from the university’s institutional review board (IRB-FY2019-261, approved 01/31/2020; See **Appendix A**), participants were recruited through social media posts and presentations about the project in small communication classes at a large midwestern university. Participants were also invited to tell their peers about the project, a method of

snowball sampling that increased the sample size. Subjects completed a survey via Qualtrics. After subjects acknowledged informed consent, they answered an exclusionary question asking if they were a straight ally. Subjects who answered ‘no’ to this question were taken to the end of the survey. Subjects who answered ‘yes’ then answered questions related to demographics of sex, race/ethnicity, and age range.

To test the difference in co-cultural orientations among straight allies working in a predominately queer space versus straight space, subjects were assigned to one of two conditions, describing the subject’s hypothetical role in the company along with the composition of queer and straight people (See **Appendix B**). One condition outlined the company having a majority of queer employees and a minority of straight employees (LGBT Majority), and the other condition outlined the company having a majority of straight employees and a minority of queer employees (LGBT Minority). After the condition was introduced, subjects reported on measures of co-cultural orientation, attitudes and beliefs about heteronormativity, and communication competence. Subjects took approximately 30 minutes to complete the survey. After six months, the survey was closed, and data were analyzed using SPSS software.

## **Instruments**

**Co-Cultural Theory Scales (CCT-S).** Lapinski and Orbe (2007) offer a quantitative approach to Co-Cultural Theory with a scale measuring attitudes related to preferred outcome (assimilation, accommodation, and separation) and communication approach (non-assertive, assertiveness, and aggressiveness). Confirmatory factor analyses, along with tests for parallelism, resulted in a 13-item scale for preferred outcome with suitable reliability and construct validity: Assimilation (“In general, I try to become integrated in the majority culture.”),  $\alpha = .81$ ,  $M = 2.85$ ,

$sd = .72$ ; Accommodation (“Members of the majority group should appreciate the unique aspects of the minority group.”),  $\alpha = .72$ ,  $M = 3.78$ ,  $sd = .69$ ; Separation (“I don't want to ‘fit in’ with members of the majority group.”),  $\alpha = .66$ ,  $M = 2.61$ ,  $sd = .69$  (Lapinski & Orbe, 2007, p. 149-150). Confirmatory factor analyses and tests for parallelism also resulted in a 13-item scale for communication approach with suitable reliability and construct validity: Non-assertive (“I try to be non-confrontational when dealing with members of the majority group.”),  $\alpha = .70$ ,  $M = 2.77$ ,  $sd = .77$ ; Assertiveness (“I voice my objections to people’s behavior if I feel it infringes on my rights.”),  $\alpha = .80$ ,  $M = 3.51$ ,  $sd = .74$ ; Aggressiveness (“I always promote my goals when talking with members of the majority group.”),  $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 2.91$ ,  $sd = .79$  (Lapinski & Orbe, 2007, p. 147). Both measurements are a Likert-type scale with a 5-point response scale ranging from ‘never’ to ‘always’ (Lapinski & Orbe, 2007). Together, preferred outcome and communication approach results in an accurate picture of what co-cultural orientation participants prefer to use.

**Heteronormativity Attitudes and Beliefs Scale.** This 16-item instrument measures attitudes and beliefs of heteronormativity through two subscales. Using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from ‘Strongly disagree’ to ‘Strongly agree,’ the first scale measures attitudes about essentializing gender and sex, splitting questions between positive (i.e. “Masculinity and femininity are determined by biological factors, such as genes and hormones, before birth”; “Gender is the same thing as sex”) and negative (i.e., “People who say that there are only two legitimate genders are mistaken”) wording (Habarth, 2015, p. 8). The second subscale analyzes what subjects consider normative behavior, splitting questions between positive (i.e., “In intimate relationships, women and men take on roles according to gender for a reason; it is really the best way to have a successful relationship”) and negative (i.e., “Women and men need not fall into stereotypical gender roles when in an intimate relationship”) wording (Habarth, 2015, p.

8). Both the Essential Gender and Sex ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) and Normative Behaviour ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ) carry strong reliability and initial construct validity (Habarth, 2015).

**Communication Competence.** The communication competence scale measures how people perceive their level of comfort in a variety of communication contexts with different types of audiences. Using a self-report measure, subjects indicate their perceived comfort with different types of speaking situations (“Talk in a small group of acquaintances.”) on a scale from 0-100. The scale has good reliability estimates ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and a history of suitable face and predictive validity (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988).

## RESULTS: STUDY 2

H1 proposed that there will be a difference in co-cultural orientations between straight allies who work in a primarily queer workplace (LGBT Majority) compared to those who work in a primarily straight workplace (LGBT Minority). Independent-samples *t*-tests were calculated comparing the mean scores of LGBT Majority to the mean scores of LGBT Minority along dimensions of preferred outcome (assimilation, accommodation, and separation) and communication approach (nonassertiveness, assertiveness, and aggressiveness). Considering that the conditions were relatively equal, Lavene's Test for Equality of Variances was used for significance. No significant results were found between the two groups along the dimensions of nonassertiveness ( $t(175) = 1.203, p > .05$ ) or assertiveness ( $t(174) = .677, p > .05$ ). Significant results were found for aggressiveness ( $t(4.425) = .344, p < .05$ ). In terms of aggressiveness, the mean of the LGBT Minority group was significantly lower ( $M = 3.43, sd = .83$ ) than the mean of the LGBT Majority group ( $M = 3.48, sd = .56$ ). When in a workplace with a majority of queer people, straight allies tended to show more aggressive behaviors.

Significant results were found for all three elements of preferred outcome: assimilation ( $t(9) = -1.426, p < .05$ ), accommodation ( $t(3.981) = -2.794, p < .05$ ), and separation ( $t(4.900) = -1.575, p < .05$ ). For assimilation, the mean of the LGBT Minority group was significantly higher ( $M = 3.85, sd = .62$ ) than the mean of the LGBT Majority group ( $M = 3.64, sd = .91$ ). When in a workplace with a majority of straight people, straight allies tended to assimilate into the dominant structure of straight culture. For accommodation, the mean of the LGBT Minority group was significantly higher ( $M = 3.87, sd = .75$ ) than the mean of the LGBT Majority group ( $M = 3.39, sd = 1.00$ ). When in a workplace with a majority of straight people, straight allies also



tended to accommodate straight culture. For separation, the mean of the LGBT Minority group was significantly higher ( $M = 2.47, sd = .67$ ) than the mean of the LGBT Majority group ( $M = 2.22, sd = .95$ ). When in a straight-majority workplace, straight allies simultaneously separated themselves from the dominant structure. Therefore, H1 was partially supported. See **Table 1** for a summary of these results.

H2 proposed that there will be a relationship between variables of heteronormativity and communication competence among straight allies. A Pearson correlation was calculated examining the relationship between straight allies' reports of heteronormativity and perceived communication competence. A weak, non-significant correlation was found ( $r(110) = -.119, p > .05$ ). Heteronormativity is not generally related to communication competence. However, when correlations were run between subscales of the heteronormativity scale and the various subsets of communication competence, a weak negative correlation was found ( $r(110) = -.20, p < .05$ ) between subscale scores of normative behaviors and communication competence when talking to strangers. Straight allies who believed more in normative behaviors tended to have less communication competence with strangers. Therefore, H2 was partially supported. See **Table 2** for a summary of these results.

Table 1. Independent samples t-test of preferred outcome and communication approach between LGBT majority and LGBT minority groups

	<i>LGBT Majority</i>		<i>LGBT Minority</i>		<i>t-test</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Non-Assertive	3.43	.70	3.26	.75	.68
Assertive	3.26	.82	3.25	.76	.68
Aggressive	3.48	.65	3.43	.83	.04*
Assimilation	3.64	.91	3.85	.62	.003**
Accommodation	3.39	1.00	3.87	.75	.05*
Separation	2.22	.95	2.47	.67	.03**

*Note.* *N* = 110

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 2. Correlation matrix for attitudes and behaviors of heteronormativity and communication competence

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Heteronormativity <sup>a</sup>	-										
2. Essentializing Gender and Sex <sup>b</sup>	.95**	-									
3. Normative Behaviors <sup>b</sup>	.91**	.73**	-								
4. Communication Competence <sup>a</sup>	-.12	-.06	-.18	-							
5. CC <sup>c</sup> Public	-.08	-.05	-.11	.87**	-						
6. CC Meeting <sup>d</sup>	-.13	-.09	-.16	.89**	.80**	-					
7. CC Group <sup>d</sup>	-.11	-.05	-.18	.93**	.74**	.74**	-				
8. CC Dyad <sup>d</sup>	.03	.07	-.03	.75**	.66**	.61**	.71**	-			
9. CC Stranger <sup>d</sup>	-.14	-.08	-.20*	.90**	.76**	.75**	.84**	.49**	-		
10. CC Acquaintance <sup>d</sup>	-.11	-.06	-.16	.94**	.80**	.88**	.88**	.79**	.72**	-	
11. CC Friend <sup>d</sup>	.02	.06	-.02	.72**	.77**	.70**	.64**	.88**	.44**	.73**	-

Note. *N* = 110

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

<sup>a</sup> Heteronormativity and Communication Competence are totaled scales.

<sup>b</sup> Essentializing Gender and Sex and Normative Behaviors are subscales of Heteronormativity

<sup>c</sup> CC: Communication Competence

<sup>d</sup> Subscales of Communication Competence

## **DISCUSSION: STUDY 2**

This study aimed to look at differences in co-cultural orientations among straight allies who work in either predominantly straight spaces or predominately queer spaces along with examining connections between heteronormativity and communication competence. Overall, this study creates a unique profile of allyship as performative when contextualized in predominantly heterosexual organizational settings. It also creates a foundation from which heteronormative attitudes can be studied for their various implications in communicative workplace behavior. First, the demographic of straight allies in this study is typical compared to past research, in that research participants were majorly women (Fingerhut, 2011) and younger in age (Montgomery & Stewart, 2012). It is important to note that this study is relatively restricted (and represented) by the author's Midwestern, liberal, and collegiate surroundings. However, the study also included a variety of people from different age groups, challenging the idea that allyship and LGBT-supportive behavior is only exclusive to younger generations of people. Smith, Son, and Kim (2014) note an increasing trend toward homosexual acceptance in both behavior and value judgments across time, even when examining the same generational cohorts.

### **Assimilating into Heterosexual Workplaces**

Second, the idea that straight allies assimilate and accommodate straight culture in the workplace while simultaneously separating themselves from it deserves a thorough discussion. It is relatively unsurprising that straight allies, when operating in predominately heterosexual spaces, ignore the identities of LGBT employees in favor of the greater heterosexual population. Assimilation into heterosexual workplace culture is historically and culturally situated.

Sociological understandings of work and sexuality contextualize the two as incompatible when considering Western, Judeo-Christian scripts that supersede organizational behaviors. This understanding is not to say that workplaces treat sexualities equally; rather, it suggests the *visible* or *deviant* sexualities face harsh repercussions in the workplace. LGBT employees are othered when compared to heterosexist structures. While it is possible to examine the nuances of heterosexism when juxtaposed with queer sexualities (Butler, 1990), these distinctions still contribute to LGBT employees being considered an embodied bastardization to the rule of separating work and sex (Burrell, 1984). In these contexts, oppression is two-fold: not only are LGBT employees muted and discriminated against, but their discursive absence also reifies heteronormative practices in the workplace, such as organizations enabling ‘heterosexual complementarity’ between male and female employees (Cynthia, 1985), organizations structurally privileging traditional family structures while continuing to other alternative ontologies and identities (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014), and heterosexism being generally unregulated when LGBT voices are suppressed (Camara et al., 2012). Therefore, it may not necessarily be that straight allies are consciously assimilating into heterosexual workplace cultures, but rather, are consequently muting and ignoring LGBT employees due to heteronormative rewards, inevitably promoting assimilation in the first place.

Without interaction between LGBT employees and straight employees/allies, organizational structures run the risk of enabling prejudices, stereotypes, microaggressions, and blatant discrimination. When straight allies assimilate into heterosexual cultures, it can be assumed that their use of communication strategies may not significantly differ when interacting with LGBT employees. This lack of difference can ultimately disrupt LGBT livelihood, in that these employees can be labeled as incompetent or immoral (Camara & Orbe, 2010). Razzante

and Orbe (2018) also outline many issues when dominant group members ignore co-cultural differences, such as ignoring one's privilege, remaining neutrally silent in situations of injustice, blaming the victim, and endorsing the status quo. When structures of heteronormativity exist, discrimination against people who identify as straight allies might also promote assimilation. One study's sample found that 33% of straight allies worried about being seen as queer in their advocacy efforts. A majority of the sample perceived negative effects of being an ally, such as being teased, harassed, threatened, and/or avoided by their peers (Goldstein & Davis, 2010). Brooks and Edwards (2009) found similar results, in that straight allies perceived possible backlash in supporting LGBTQ+ communities, such as being harassed. This finding may rationalize the actions of straight allies assimilating and accommodating straight workplace culture in order to protect themselves from face threats.

It is important to note that straight allies preferencing assimilation into heterosexual workplace cultures does not warrant the onus of responsibility being solely placed on them for ending discrimination in the workplace. While contact between workplace allies and disadvantaged group members promotes positive relations, it simultaneously reduces the efficacy and collective efforts of LGBT employees. Straight allies' efforts to connect with LGBT employees can disrupt in-group dynamics that serve to uplift LGBT communities and motivate them toward more effective fights for justice. Two phenomena possibly occur when straight allies use ineffective (assimilative/heteronormative) communication strategies with LGBT people. First, intercultural interactions reduce prejudice and the use of stereotypes between both dominant and nondominant group members, reducing a sense of difference between groups and the idea of dominant group members as oppressors. This changed dynamic inevitably reduces motivation for LGBTQ+ folks to keep fighting against injustice. Second, straight allies may

bring privileged communicative acts, such as being the center of attention, into spaces where it is not appropriate (Droogendyk, Wright, Lubensky, & Louis, 2016). Therefore, assimilation may serve as a performative tactic on the part of straight allies to provide discursive space for LGBT-led advocacy and resistance to occur. Baker and Lucas (2017) mirror this notion in acknowledging that, while allies are at least involved in space making, they are only considered part of the communicative process that otherwise involves LGBT employees collectivizing, hiding identities for professional gain, and remaining quiet in the greater workplace to avoid conflict. This boundary-making, while difficult to conceptualize in the current study, still promotes assimilation in that straight allies feed into greater heteronormative structures by psychologically distancing themselves from LGBT employees.

### **Accommodating Heterosexual Workplaces**

Straight allies may simultaneously accommodate heterosexual workplace culture for a myriad of reasons. Accommodating involves a balanced interplay between acknowledging both dominant and nondominant group member needs. In this case, straight allies are communicating in ways that acknowledge heterosexual workplace culture while also keeping their identities visible. In one interpretation, straight allies may communicate their identity openly because identifying as socially supportive to disadvantaged groups potentially elicits positive perceptions. Rasinski and Czopp (2010) note that allies receive more positive perceptions when confronting prejudice compared to when disadvantaged group members do so. Therefore, communicating self may not only help LGBT employees, but also benefit the ally whilst operating in heteronormative structures. This interpretation feeds into two potentially problematic facets of allyship: social desirability bias and virtue signaling. Social desirability bias refers to the warped

data that comes from a participant's need to come across as good: "Unfortunately, the basic human tendency to present oneself in the best possible light can significantly distort the information gained from self-reports. Respondents are often unwilling or unable to report accurately on sensitive topics for ego-defensive or impression management reasons" (Fisher, 1993, p. 303).

While social desirability bias is a limitation of the study itself (a concept described later), it could also be a vehicle through which allyship and accommodation are connected. If straight allies are seen as socially desirable in a workplace, straight allies could accommodate their identity in a way that signals their esteemed selves in the workplace. Brook and Edwards (2009) note that allies deem the rewards of their behavior as situated in social surveillance and desirability: "If you're trying to do the right thing, then the reward is having done it. Because it was right. The reward is to know you did the right thing. If an audience had been watching me, I would be OK" (p. 143).

It is in this fashion that virtue signaling, or disclosing information (even if it's inauthentic) in the hopes of gaining upward social mobility (Miller, 2007), can become problematic. Here, allyship starts to become performative, as an act that has disingenuous or potentially nefarious properties. Straight allies may not be presenting themselves in a way to address inequality, but rather, gain social capital for upward mobility in the workplace. Another interpretation (one that is more optimistic) could see accommodation in this context conceptualized as a reaction to LGBT employees taking advantage of liaisons, people who can provide social and organizational support in times of need (Camara et al., 2012). As a result, straight allies' communication behavior is seen as accommodation when in tandem with more disadvantaged groups.



## **Separating from Heterosexual Workplaces**

Straight allies also separate themselves from heterosexual workplace culture. While readers may consider all these actions contradictory to one another, the three preferred outcomes can be explained when considering the various rewards and costs associated with co-cultural strategies (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). Assimilation potentially rewards normative behavior. Accommodation potentially rewards socially desirable behavior and activism on the part of LGBT employees. Finally, separation can serve as a strategy that manifests when a straight ally begins to understand, and fight against, structural inequalities. In this case, the reward for separation is equality.

Separation can serve as a psychological delineation from mainstream heteronormative cultures. This communicative behavior is akin to the response, ‘Yeah, I’m straight. But I’m not like *those* straight people.’ There are several reasons for why separatist behavior among straight allies could occur. First, straight allies may separate themselves, not only from straight culture, but, any culture that contributes to organizational and institutional oppression. For individuals to act as allies, they must interrogate existing ideologies that contribute to oppression (e.g., meritocracy, biological essentialism, etc.). If individuals can reject a powerful ideology, they are more likely to understand mechanisms of power and privilege that affect disadvantaged groups, thus promoting distancing from dominant cultures and enabling intervention (Drury & Kaiser, 2014; Major et al., 2002). It can be assumed that straight allies relatively reject mainstream ideologies related to heteronormativity, but respond to it differently depending on organizational climate along with the unique combination of costs and rewards present at the time. Stotzer (2009) notes that straight allies increasingly exhibit frustration at people who neither acknowledge nor fight for LGBT livelihood, mirroring previously described concepts in

ideological negotiation and rejection. Additionally, separation might occur because straight allies see themselves as increasingly similar to LGBT employees. In this case, straight identity and culture become disjointed as understandings of oppression increases. Smith (2011) confirms the concept of *courtesy stigma*, in that straight allies willingly take on associated stigma related to the LGBT community. Therefore, allyship may act as separation in times where people take on the burden of oppression even when they do not have to do so.

### **The Role of Aggression in LGBT Workplaces**

While a majority of findings in this study were related to co-cultural strategies used in predominantly straight workplaces, these data also showed a predisposition for straight allies to act aggressively when in LGBT-dominated spaces. It is hard to say in what forms aggression plays out in LGBT-dominated spaces due to their being a lack of significance in the study; however, there is research to support a connection between aggressiveness and switched positionality. When traditionally dominant group members find themselves in situations where they are the minority, they often react in ways that are similar to nondominant group members, however, such strategies are typically more aggressive and potentially harmful (O'Hara & Meyer, 2003). In situations of switched positionality, it is common for dominant group members to empathize with understandings of discrimination; however, when that understanding is internalized, discourses of reverse discrimination may cause aggressive attitudes. Kimmel (2015) describes the power dynamics at play when dominant group members respond to perceived discrimination in often aggressive ways:

I was on a TV talk show opposite four white men...These were four angry white men who believed that they, white men in America, were the victims of reverse discrimination in the workplace. And they all told stories about how they were qualified for jobs, qualified for promotions, they didn't get them, they were really

angry...And the reason I'm telling you this is I want you to hear the title of this particular show. It was a quote from one of the men, and the quote was, "A Black Woman Stole My Job." And they all told their stories, qualified for jobs, qualified for promotions, didn't get it, really angry. And then it was my turn to speak, and I said, "I have just one question for you guys, and it's about the title of the show, 'A Black Woman Stole My Job.' Actually, it's about one word in the title. I want to know about the word 'my.' Where did you get the idea it was your job? Why isn't the title of the show, 'A Black Woman Got the Job?' or 'A Black Woman Got A Job?'" Because without confronting men's sense of entitlement, I don't think we'll ever understand why so many men resist gender equality...Look, we think this is a level playing field, so any policy that tilts it even a little bit, we think, "Oh my God, water's rushing uphill. It's reverse discrimination against us. (p. 29-31)

In this case, dominant-as-nondominant group members may feel aggressive when they begin to understand their positions as contextually oppressed. However, an underlying assumption here is that aggressive approaches are matched with preferred outcomes of accommodation or separation. There are possibilities in which traditionally dominant group members may aggressively assimilate into an LGBT-dominated atmosphere in an attempt to reap the benefits of social inclusion. Through behaviors of mirroring, dissociating, etc. (See Study 1), straight allies may feel the need to erase any potentially problematic element of their identity to fit in. Not doing so may result in organizational consequences.

### **Heteronormativity and Communication Competence**

Finally, the lack of association between heteronormativity and communication competence may not speak to the incompetence of straight allies, but instead to the context surrounding communication skills in the workplace. While Montgomery and Stewart (2012) did find a negative correlation between heteronormativity and gay/lesbian activism, this correlation did not generally translate over to communication competence in this study. Communication competence relates to a variety of circumstances including the size of the audience and the type of relationship between speaker and an audience member (i.e., stranger, acquaintance, or friend).

Activism may require specific modes of communication while measures of communication competence are more generalized. Additionally, measures of communication competence are based on perceptions, not actual behavior (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). Considering many straight people consider sexual orientation an unimportant social category, it may be reasonable to assume that straight allies perceive no need for communication competence in the realm of allyship (Camara et al., 2012).

One interesting finding in this study is the belief that normative behavior (i.e., splitting men and women up into public and private spheres of work, supporting cross-sex parenting only, etc.) is inversely related to communication competence with a stranger. While it is a weak correlation, this relationship may represent implicit biases we carry for people we do not know. Internalized stereotypes and judgments align with the normalized construct of heteronormativity (Suter & Daas, 2007). Negative implicit biases are more likely to happen among people we do not know. Greenwald and Krieger (2006) summarize ingroup implicit biases—the tendency for people to favor agents within particular social circles. If strangers act outside one’s social circle, implicit biases are more likely to occur. What remains uncertain is the link between normative behavior and communication competence. Perhaps attitudes about normative behavior lead to preemptive discrimination against populations they deem inferior (i.e., women, gay men, etc.). For example, if a man believes highly in the separation between men and women, he might experience negative face when interacting with a female stranger due to his existing value judgments.

## **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions**

This study has several strengths and limitations. In using CCT-S, this study expanded the theoretical framework of Co-Cultural Theory, not only methodologically, but theoretically in studying straight allies as nondominant group members. This study also provides a rationale for why straight allies may bring potentially problematic communicative practices into the workplace when dealing with LGBT populations, and it gives greater insight into what strategies straight allies use when acting in the greater sphere of heterosexuality. These results also provide a small, but interesting link between areas of communication competence and heteronormativity. Unfortunately, this study was limited due to methodological flaws. The diversity in this sample was predominately white and female, a sample that cannot and should not be applied to the general population. While the Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs scale was useful in gathering general assumptions related to heteronormativity, more work is needed on articulating a scale that measures heteronormative attitudes and beliefs in organizations specifically. Additionally, while communication competence is a trusted measure, it may be inaccurate in describing the supportive behaviors of straight allies. While communicating effectively in a variety of settings and with a variety of people may promote allyship, it may not fully explain the supportive behaviors necessary to defend, argue, and fight for a population. Future research can work on operationalizing the concept of advocating behaviors. Finally, questions asking about straight ally identity may feed into social desirability. Many subjects may feel guilty about saying no to being a straight ally, in that it may make them psychologically confront prejudice.

Future research can focus on expanding the boundaries of Co-Cultural Theory along with more deeply exploring relationships between heteronormativity and activism. Studies can continue to focus on dominant group members that may operate in majority-as-minority

contexts, developing an interactive view of power between dominant and nondominant groups instead of just analyzing how nondominant groups negotiate oppression. The relationship between heteronormativity, implicit biases, and communication competence can be more thoroughly explored. Additionally, just as Lapinski and Orbe (2007) created scales for Co-Cultural Theory, researchers can also conceptualize scales related to Dominant Group Theory (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). Researchers can also create scales related to institutional heteronormativity. Overall, the work of Lapinski and Orbe (2007) is admirable: Scholars should continue to create measurements originally meant for qualitative research, bridging the gap between communication philosophies and expanding heuristic value.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In analyzing straight allies for the purposes of explicating ‘straight communication,’ examining co-cultural strategies in both interpersonal and organizational settings, and expanding the multidimensional framework of co-cultural theorizing by challenging positionality, this dual-study provides a rich profile of straight allyship. Study 1 explicated various co-cultural strategies that straight allies use in queer conversations and spaces, forming a model of complex duality that engages both praxis and theory in the realm of social justice. Study 2 looked at the pragmatic and contextual effects of allyship in the workplace, finding that heteronormative structures tend to pervade any chance for communicative support between straight allies and queer employees. When taken together, these studies provide a holistic picture of what allyship looks like in context. Professional workplace norms are going to create a matrix of differentiated cost and rewards compared to interactions occurring outside of that environment. It is relatively unsurprising and inconsequential that straight allies detail assimilative strategies concerning queer culture that hold little-to-no bearing when analyzing workplace cultures. First, Study 2 did not find any significant results related to predominantly queer workplaces, other than aggressive communication approaches (a finding that was confirmed in both Study 1 and Study 2). Considering predominantly queer workplaces are rare, this finding is relatively unsurprising. Some straight allies may not have the experience to respond accordingly to these questions.

Second, while Study 2 did find data to support behavior in predominantly straight spaces, it is hard to make conclusions comparing assimilation into queer spaces (Study 1) to straight-on-straight interactions in predominantly straight spaces (Study 2). However, the fact that straight allies readily assimilate into queer spaces outside of work reflects the material consequences of

workplace behavior. Openly advocating for queer people may result in being labeled a social justice worker, being discriminated against, or even fired. This observation does not uphold claims of reverse discrimination, but rather, underscores the pervasiveness of heteronormative attitudes in workplaces that stops social support from happening.

Third, and finally, the contradiction between the two studies adds to the idea of allyship being a performance rather than an identity. Considering privilege grants social mobility to straight people, allyship is a voluntary behavior that can be switched on and off depending on situational and contextual constraints. In this case of these two studies, straight allies seem to perform queer similarity unless there are norms of professionalism and heteronormativity in the workplace. This conclusion is problematic for several reasons. If allyship is simply a strategy muted by various contextual factors, its relevance is barely distinguishable from other behaviors, such as friendship, kindness, etc. Additionally, if allyship is considered culturally admirable (at least between and among liberal spaces), it's flimsy boundaries reveal it to be virtually synonymous with performances of virtue signaling. In other words, if straight allies are only going to act as an ally to save face among queer people, what is the point? If allies cannot act as a bridge between queer and straight populations, who or what is to say they are any different from homogenous straight populations, other than the performative statements of allyship themselves?

Outside of assimilation, strategies of accommodation and separation had many similarities between the two studies. Just as straight allies separate from queer culture to experience guilt, reflexivity, and boundary maintenance, straight allies in the workplace assimilated into straight workplace culture. This combination of findings may alleviate concerns of straight allies upholding heteronormative behavior in the workplace, in that, rather than



ignoring queer people out of negativity, they might be doing so in order to develop positive space. Additionally, both studies found that straight allies accommodated their identity, both to queer and straight people. This combination of findings is interesting for two reasons: 1. Accommodation occurring between queer and straight people simultaneously upholds straight allyship as an identity that exists hierarchically within heterosexual structures. In other words, straight allies exist in a liminal space that is neither fully entrenched in queer or straight ontologies, and 2. Translation as an outcome in Study 1 may be related to this finding, in that straight allies must consistently toe the line between queer and straight messaging to act as a bridge between the two populations.

## CONCLUSION

Straight allies have the power to uplift queer populations, but this power is not innate. Straight allies instead have the *choice* either to uplift or discriminate against, to support or to ostracize, to acknowledge or to ignore. It is direly important that queer people not be the only ones responsible for their emancipation, and if straight people identify as agents of change, they should willingly take the call to enact social justice. What frightens me as a queer person, and researcher, is that straight allyship seems to be nothing more than a virtue signal, a performative label that holds no bound when communicative push comes to materialized shove. While more research is needed to understand the motivations behind communicating boundaries between straight and queer populations, I leave this study with a simple call to action. For the straight allies reading this, I ask: do better.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval and Renewal



**To:**

Stephen Spates  
Communications  
Stephen Spates

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval

**Submission Type:** Initial

**Study #:** IRB-FY2019-261

**Study Title:** Straight Allies as Co-Cultural Agents

**Decision:** Approved

**Approval Date:** January 17, 2019

**Expiration Date:** January 17, 2020

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the period indicated.

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Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:

**PI:** Stephen Spates

**Co-PI:** Stephen Spates

**Primary Contact:** David Dooling

**Other Investigators:** David Dooling



**To:**

Carrisa Hoelscher  
Communications  
Carrisa Hoelscher, Stephen Spates

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval

**Submission Type:** Renewal

**Study #:** IRB-FY2019-261

**Study Title:** Straight Allies as Co-Cultural Agents

**Decision:** Approved

Approval Date: January 30, 2020

Expiration Date: January 29, 2021

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

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This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:

**PI:** Carrisa Hoelscher

**Co-PI:** Carrisa Hoelscher, Stephen Spates

**Primary Contact:** David Dooling

**Other Investigators:** David Dooling

## Appendix B: Conditions

**LGBT Minority Condition.** You are a successful employee at a well-known organization in town. Your job as an employee is to create ideas that help management implement procedures on an organizational scale, aide peers in their ability to do their jobs, and give productive feedback to subordinates to help them effectively do their jobs. On any given day, you work with about 20-25 people. The individuals that you work with vary. Some people you work with as a team. Others you compete with for having the best ideas. The makeup of your organization is **straight**, meaning that the majority of people with are **straight**. The minority of people are LGBTQ (10%).

**LGBT Majority Condition.** You are a successful employee at a well-known organization in town. Your job as an employee is to create ideas that help management implement procedures on an organizational scale, aide peers in their ability to do their jobs, and give productive feedback to subordinates to help them effectively do their jobs. On any given day, you work with about 20-25 people. The individuals that you work with vary. Some people you work with as a team. Others you compete with for having the best ideas. The makeup of your organization is **LGBTQ**, meaning that the majority of people with are **LGBTQ**. The minority of people are straight (10%).