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Moral Identity in Friendships between Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Students and Straight Students in College

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College

ABSTRACT

People construct moral identities for being a supportive affiliate of stigmatized groups. To extend past research that focused on such identities within formal organizations, this study seeks to identify the process of moral identity construction in a personal setting—friendships between gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) people and straight people. Analyzing data from in-depth interviews with college students, we show that straight students claim moral worth by emphasizing their deliberate decisions to develop and sustain friendships with GLB people and by highlighting how the friendships led them to personal enlightenment and political engagement. GLB students, as a stigmatized group, also claim moral worth by emphasizing their ability to transcend the community boundary and to be accepted in the larger society. Students make such claims as they strategically link these aspects of cross-orientation friendships to existing moral discourses in the larger society and draw on resources available in the organizational and life course contexts.

Moral Identity in Friendships between Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Students and Straight Students in College

Moral identity is a type of self identity that people develop about having moral worth or being a good character (Katz 1975; Kleinman 1996). Being a parent and being a volunteer in a community organization are examples of moral identity. Like other identities, people construct and sustain moral identity through identity work—they label, signify, and define their identities while interacting with others (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Among various strategies people use to construct moral identities, one strategy is to draw on their affiliations with stigmatized groups and show their sympathy for them. Past research has examined how social service workers and volunteers (Deeb-Sossa 2007; Holden 1997; Kolb 2011) and political group members (Fields 2001) construct moral identities through their affiliations within formal organizations as they utilize unique resources available in the organizational settings. However, little is known about how the process takes place in personal relationships, where people do not have these resources and face unique constraints. To fill the gap in the literature, the present study examines how straight people derive moral worth from their friendships with gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) people.¹ Further, unlike previous studies that focused on dominant group members' moral identity construction, we also demonstrate how GLB students, as a stigmatized group, construct moral identities around their friendships with straight people.

Construction of Moral Identity

Symbolic interactionists have identified various strategies that people employ to construct moral identities (Mason-Schrock 1996; Sandstrom 1990). For example, mythopoetic men claim their superiority to women and other men by drawing on Jungian psychology, myths, and fairy

¹ Although there are many phrases that describe sexual orientation, we use “straight,” “gay,” “lesbian,” and “bisexual” in this paper because our respondents used these phrases most frequently.

tales and defining their manhood as strong and wise as well as emotionally sensitive, compassionate, and nurturing (Schwalbe 1996). These studies show that the process of moral identity construction often involves “identity talk” or verbal construction of self worth (Snow and Anderson 1987) and “subcultural identity work,” in which people aid each other’s effort by engaging in group activities and giving feedback on each other’s personal narratives (Schwalbe 1996).

In this paper, we focus on moral identities that people construct for being a supportive affiliate of stigmatized groups. Scholars have provided several examples of this type of moral identity in past research (e.g., Kolb 2011). In Holden’s (1997) study of a homeless shelter, for example, volunteers underscored their sincere enjoyment in helping less fortunate people. They also drew on their volunteer role to claim moral worth—they underscored that they treated their clients as “friends” despite their role that allowed them to make rules and control clients’ behaviors. In Deeb-Sossa’s (2007) study of a community health clinic, female coordinators claimed their moral worth by employing feminist discourses—they empowered their female clients, clarified their options, and helped them take control over their reproduction, health, and body. Further, they used their challenging work conditions (e.g., high work load, clients’ hostility) as resources for their moral identity construction by stressing that those challenges did not discourage their strong passion for the work. In these studies, social service workers’ moral claims emphasized their noble decision to become associated with stigmatized individuals as well as their support that went beyond their formal duties, which in turn helped them present their authentic sympathy for the stigmatized individuals. These studies illustrate that moral identity construction involves aligning behaviors and relationships with culturally engrained “symbolic codes” (Alexander 1992; Loseke 2009) that evoke positive thoughts and feelings such

as sympathy, authenticity, and dedication. Further, to maximize their moral worth, actors improvise their strategies by drawing on resources available in specific organizational settings (i.e., volunteer role, work conditions).

In addition to these formal affiliations within organizations, personal relationships with stigmatized individuals provide opportunities for moral identities. Being a parent of a non-heterosexual child is one example (Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004; Fields 2001; Johnson and Best 2012). Being a parent itself is a moral identity because it indicates that the person makes sacrifice to provide a home and unconditional love for the child. However, parents of GLB children face a threat to their parent identity because children's sexual orientation may indicate parents' failures in raising them "properly." To restore their parent identity, they become "super parents" by exerting and presenting extra effort in protecting their children from discrimination (Fields 2001). These results highlight that strategies of moral identity construction may be specific to the form of the personal relationship for which people construct moral identities.

Friendships as a Relational Setting of Moral Identity

Friendships with stigmatized individuals present another relationship setting for moral identity construction. For example, some white people draw on their friendships with racial minorities to avoid being labeled as racists (Bonilla-Silva 2003), and those who hold strong antiracist identities use interracial friendships as evidence for their noble ideologies (Hughey 2012). These past studies of interracial friendships addressed how people construct moral identity from *having* personal relationships with racial minorities, but they paid little attention to what actually goes on in these friendships and how people interpret their friendship interactions.

Friendship is commonly defined as a "voluntary, personal relationship, typically providing intimacy and assistance, in which the two parties like one another and seek each

other's company" (Fehr 2000, p.20). Like service worker roles (Deeb-Sossa 2007; Holden 1997; Kolb 2011), the voluntary nature of the friend role may help people claim moral worth about choosing to be friends with stigmatized individuals despite the risk of facing "courtesy stigma" (Goffman 1963). Unlike relationships with clients in service organizations, however, people develop and sustain friendships with an expectation that they treat one another as equal (Allan 1998). Therefore, they cannot claim moral worth for *treating* their friends as equal (Holden 1997). Further, because friendship dyads are not strictly embedded within specific organizations, people may not have many organizational resources to draw on.

As a relationship setting for moral identity construction, friendships also differ from parent-child relationships. Friends expect each other to provide support and companionship, but those expectations are not as extensive as parent responsibilities, thereby lowering the bar for becoming "super friends" through providing extra support. At the same time, the friend role itself does not provide as much recognition in the society as the parent role, and therefore being a "super friend" may not necessarily help people claim as much moral worth as being a "super parent." In addition, friendships are unique in the sentiments people are expected to display such as open-mindedness and sincerity (Blieszner and Adams 1992; Fehr 1996), which may impact how people construct moral identity within the relational context.

Among various forms of friendships, cross-orientation friendships involve distinct motivations, meaning, and advantages. In adolescence and young adulthood, some straight people come to identify as "straight allies" for GLB people (Stotzer 2009) and express their progressive political ideologies through their cross-orientation friendships and their participation in community or school organizations such as Gay Straight Alliances (Russell et al. 2009; Stotzer 2009). In many studies, straight people cite intellectual growth as an important benefit of

having cross-orientation friendships (Castro-Convers et al. 2005; Galupo and St John 2001; Muraco 2012; Oswald 2000). Specifically, they report that they learn about GLB people and sexual diversity through these friendships. We conceptualize such statements as straight people's narratives of "moral experience"—a dramatic transformation in the ways people evaluate their and others' moral worth (Goffman 1963; Yang et al. 2006).

Moral experience often occurs as a consequence of a major life event. For example, becoming ill or receiving a medical diagnosis negatively affects the ways people view themselves and others as they face stigma at the interaction and institutional levels (Schneider 1988). Past research has focused on negative transformations, but moral experience may reflect positive transformations. For example, gay men living with AIDS interpret their health changes as the opportunity to rethink their sexual habits and discover the importance of sexual intimacy in committed relationships (Sandstrom 1996). This result also demonstrates that people do not just experience moral transformations but also create narratives about the transformations, which become a rhetorical resource for identity talk (also see "rhetoric of self change" in Frank 1993). In the present study, we apply the concept of moral experience to cross-orientation friendships by demonstrating how college students present their friendships as an evidence for positive transformation.

So far our discussions have focused on how straight people as a dominant group may construct moral identities around their cross-orientation friendships, but we also consider the possibility that GLB people draw moral worth from these friendships. Past research has shown that stigmatized or subordinate groups attempt to elevate their statuses by establishing affiliations with the dominant group. In high school, for example, "average" students may try to join a popular crowd by befriending its members (Milner 2006). In the college context, some sorority

members develop affiliations with high-status fraternity members by performing the role of “little sisters” (Stomblor and Padavic 1997). However, because such studies focused on the impact of youth’s affiliations on their positions in a popularity hierarchy, the studies provided little information about how subordinate group members make moral claims as they draw on their affiliations with the dominant group.

As members of a stigmatized group, GLB people do not necessarily agree with each other about the moral meaning of cross-orientation friendships. Those who are deeply committed to the GLB community may see those friendships as a threat to the community, which has developed around their opposition to the heterosexual oppression (Moon 1995). Other GLB people attach more positive moral meaning to cross-orientation friendships, for example, by emphasizing unique opportunities to learn about straight people and heterosexuality and to develop a sense of connection to and acceptance in the broader society (Galupo and St John 2001; Muraco 2012; Weinstock and Bond 2002). Further, although many GLB people acknowledge the importance of the closely knit GLB community, some seek cross-orientation friendships as an alternative space for socialization (Muraco 2012). The present study examines how GLB students strategically draw on these different meanings of cross-orientation friendships as they construct their moral identity.

Young Adulthood and College as Contexts of Moral Identity Construction

Our study focuses on cross-orientation friendships among college students in young adulthood, and these organizational and life course contexts may strongly shape the process of moral identity construction. In young adulthood, people seek to develop independence from parents, extend their social networks outside family, and form and express their ideologies

(Arnett 2005; Settersten 2007). Developing friendships, especially those that transcend social boundaries, may be an important means to demonstrate one's success in these life stage goals.

Although friendships are not embedded within specific organizations to the same extent that the relationships between staff and clients are embedded in social service organizations, people often develop and maintain friendships in specific organizational contexts where they engage in joint activities (Feld 1982; Ueno et al. 2012). For our respondents, college campuses serve as the organizational context for their cross-orientation friendships. Although some degrees of heteronormativity persist, college campuses provide a more accepting climate for GLB people and straight people who support sexual diversity than other social settings (Ghaziani 2011; Kane 2012). In recent years, the social boundary between GLB and heterosexual students has become blurry on college campuses as GLB student organizations have started to incorporate progressive straight students as their members (Ghaziani 2011). The implications of the increasing acceptance of same-sex sexuality in these life course and organizational contexts for moral identity construction are not clear, however. On one hand, such contexts may allow straight students to express their support for GLB friends without risking their own status. On the other hand, it may lessen the degree of moral worth straight students can claim for having GLB friends.

In sum, the purpose of this study is to examine how college students construct moral identity in cross-orientation friendships. People claim moral worth for sympathizing with and providing support for stigmatized individuals, but past studies tended to focus on this type of identity work within formal relationships. Some studies examined interracial friendships as a personal setting for moral identity development, but they left unexamined how people interact in these friendships and how they make claims about the moral significance of the interactions. We

seek to fill this gap in the literature by analyzing in-depth interviews with college students in cross-orientation friendships.

METHODS

We obtained a convenience sample at a state university in the southeastern US. Between 2010 and 2012, email invitations were sent to students enrolled in sociology courses. The invitations also asked students to forward the information to others who might be interested. To recruit more participants, we also employed a chain referral method by asking existing participants to forward the invitation email. While recruiting participants, we conducted initial data coding and evaluated the extent to which new participants confirmed, refuted, or elaborated existing themes (i.e., “theoretical sampling,” Charmaz 1990, 2000). Recruitment continued until we determined that the data were saturated and that additional respondents did not provide additional insights.

To be included in the study, participants had to be currently enrolled as undergraduate students, identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and have at least one straight friend *or* identify as straight and have at least one gay, lesbian, or bisexual friend. In all, 16 GLB and 16 straight students participated. These students were not friends with each other. Although interviewing both sides would have provided fuller data on each friendship dyad, we opted to interview only one side to achieve a sufficient sample size. The sample included a slightly greater number of women (56% of the sample). White students comprised a majority of the sample (69%) although we also interviewed seven Hispanic students and three students with other racial background. Participants’ age ranged between 19 and 23 with an average of 20.5. Participants had known their friends for 3 months to ten years with an average of 2.1 years. The sample did not necessarily represent the university student body. Compared to other students, for example, they

may have had more positive attitudes toward cross-orientation friendships and thus stronger motivations to construct moral identity around their cross-orientation friendships. Nonetheless, the sampling strategy allowed us to obtain a sample suitable for this exploratory study.

The second author and trained assistants conducted the interviews. Interviews were in a semi-structured format, and they took place in a private office on campus and lasted about 45 minutes. Participants were first asked to list their friends, identify sexual orientation of each friend, and then answered detailed questions about one of their other-orientation friends. In the first 19 interviews, the detailed questions targeted each participant's closest other-orientation friend. In the remaining 13 interviews, the interviewer selected which other-orientation friend the detailed questions targeted in order to collect more data on types of cross-orientation friendships that were not well represented in the first set of interviews (friendships involving two men and friendships with moderate levels of emotional closeness).

Moral identity was not the initial focus of the study, but it emerged as we analyzed early interviews. In those interviews, students consistently hinted their moral worth as they responded to questions such as “What are advantages of having X as a gay/lesbian/bisexual/straight friend?” “Is there anything you learned from having X as a gay/lesbian/bisexual/straight friend?” Further, when asked to describe their friendship activities and conversation topics, many students implied that those friendship interactions made them better persons. In later interviews, we added a question to encourage students to elaborate on their sense of moral worth—for straight students, we asked “You have a gay/lesbian/bisexual friend, but some people do not. Why do you think that is?” We asked a similar question to GLB students.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through a series of procedures including initial coding, memoing, and focused coding (Charmaz 2006). The first author coded all

interviews. The initial coding identified specific segments of interview transcripts that represented students' moral claims as well as original main themes (e.g., coming out, advantages, disadvantages, inequality). This process also involved memoing to help identify different kinds of moral claims and the contexts in which these moral claims occurred. The focused coding used more detailed codes to classify different kinds of moral claims regarding how cross-orientation friendships represented or increased moral worth.

We conceptualized students' comments in two ways. First, we treated them as students' descriptions about how they constructed their moral identities within their cross-orientation friendships. In this conceptualization, students' comments represented only indirect data of moral identity construction because we obtained them only through students' descriptions, and we did not directly observe friendship interactions in action. In the second conceptualization, we treated students' comments as their "identity talk" (Snow and Anderson 1987) or their "claims" for moral identity (Goffman 1959, 1963). As students conversed with interviewers, they presented their moral identities by interpreting their cross-orientation friendships.

Conceptualized this way, the data provided important insights into how students integrated those moral identities into their self concepts and reflected on them while talking with the interviewer outside the friendship context. Straight and GLB students were similar in some of the ways in which they made moral claims, but we discuss the results from the two groups separately because the meaning of cross-orientation friendships differed between the two groups.

STRAIGHT STUDENTS' MORAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Straight students' moral claims emphasized three aspects of cross-orientation friendships—noble friendship choice, sexuality enlightenment, and political involvement. The first claim addressed how straight students chose to have GLB friends and therefore emphasized

their existing moral worth before they met their GLB friends or before they found out about GLB friends' sexual orientation. The other two types of claims highlighted increases in their moral worth as consequences of friendship interactions.

Noble Friendship Choice

Many straight students hinted their moral worth even before discussing specific behaviors or interactions in their cross-orientation friendships because for them, having those friendships indicated their noble decision to enter or sustain friendships with GLB people. They often made such claims when they compared themselves to other straight students who did not choose GLB friends. Joel had a gay friend, whom he had known for 13 years. He explained how he approached the friend by making the following comment:

I'd say I'm more open to being friends with a gay person. I'm not homophobic. I'm not right-wing conservative, you know? I'd say, I'm with the time.... It's modern. It's a choice. I just see him as a person.

Joel thus negatively framed conservative ideologies and distanced himself from people with such ideologies. At the same time, he highlighted his special ability to see GLB people at a personal level. His quote thus illustrates how he tied his friendship choice to societal discourses, particularly those prevalent in college campuses, that negated rigid attitudes and celebrated open-mindedness. It should be noted that many factors may have contributed to the development and survival of the friendship, but his comment focused on his deliberate choice, thereby hinting his moral integrity. Some straight students offered narratives about how they developed such integrity. For example, Gene explained how he came to have four GLB friends, which comprised a half of his close friendship circle,

Both of my parents are professors, and my mom teaches sexuality to doctoral students. I've always grown up with our family friends [who identified as gay or lesbian]. I never really thought anything of it, but I think that had a lot to do with it. Just having awesome, amazing people in my life who happened to be gay.... I just think I was lucky to be raised the way I was.

Although Gene modestly attributed his friendship choice to his early socialization, he indicated that the effect was indirect—his professor parents and their family friends did not necessarily tell him to befriend GLB people, but they provided a “lucky” social environment that helped him become a good person who would voluntarily choose to befriend GLB people. Straight students’ emphasis on deliberate choice thus indicated their effort to underscore their high moral standards before the friendship development or GLB friends’ orientation disclosure. None of the straight students gave such explanations about their conscious decisions to have straight friends, indicating that they saw cross-orientation friendships as a unique resource for moral claims.

Sexuality Enlightenment

The second type of straight students’ moral claims addressed their personal growth through cross-orientation friendships. These claims tended to come up when straight students explained advantages of having cross-orientation friendships. They stressed that the friendships provided unique opportunities to learn about various aspects of non-heterosexual orientation including sexual experience, diversity within the GLB community, and stigma. For example, Antonio commented on the impact of his cross-orientation friendship this way:

Coming from a conservative background, knowing gay people gives me the opportunity to become more open-minded toward gay people. I only know a few gay people, but they

are all very different. Not all gay people are the same, and they can be great people.

They are great people, just like anybody else.

Antonito thus contrasted his past self (“from a conservative background”) to a transformed self (“open-minded”) and attributed the enlightenment to his cross-orientation friendship. He underscored the change by sharing the insight he had gained (“not all gay people are the same”). These transformations described by straight students were probably not as dramatic as those experienced by those who go through major life events such as life threatening illness (Frank 1993; Sandstrom 1996), but straight students *presented* the change as “moral experience” (Goffman 1963; Yang et al. 2006), which shifted the ways they viewed themselves and others. Clearly, there were many other opportunities to learn about sexual diversity through the media and college courses, but straight students did not consider these factors when describing their transformations, perhaps to emphasize the significance of their direct interactions with GLB friends.

Straight students generally relied on their self-assessment of attitudes or knowledge to describe their enlightenment, but Angela presented more tangible evidence. She had a close bisexual friend, whom she had known for nine years. She happily described the friendship:

She was my first kiss for a girl (laughs). I guess she just made me more open-minded about things. I don't have to date girls, and I don't like considering myself bisexual. I'll only date guys, but she's just made me more relaxed in the world of gay, lesbian, bisexual people.

In this comment, she mentioned her kiss to substantiate her claim of becoming a “more open-minded” and “relaxed” person. Despite the change, Angela continued to distance herself from bisexuality (“I don't like considering myself bisexual”), perhaps reflecting the ambivalent view

on sexuality among young straight women today—same-sex behaviors are hip as long as they are displayed by those who identify as straight (Diamond 2005). In the symbolic interactionist framework, Angela's comment can be viewed as a form of "othering" (Schwalbe et al. 1994), in which dominant group members set the border between them and the subordinate group to sustain their status. This aspect of Angela's comment is ironic because it contradicts her intention to present her open-mindedness.

Not all cross-orientation friendships provided opportunities for sexuality enlightenment because GLB friends had mixed feelings about their sexual orientation. For example, when asked whether he learned anything from his gay friend, Joel responded,

Um, no, not really. Anything I've learned from my gay friends, I've learned it from my more flamboyant gay friends. He's more...it's hard to say...he's a very liberal person, but he dresses preppy, and he's not flamboyant. He doesn't put himself out there like he wants everyone to know he's gay. It is just who he is. He has this very conservative air.

Joel thus hinted that this particular gay friend was too preppy and not flamboyant enough to teach him about gay experiences. He did not give up claiming his moral worth for being a liberated person, however; he often referred to his "more flamboyant gay friends" during the interview to present his moral worth. This example illustrates that claims for enlightenment require exposure to something unusual or even exotic to highlight the transformation from the old self to the new one.

Political Involvement

The third type of straight students' moral claims emphasized that they had not only become more liberated at the intellectual level but also changed the way they were engaged in the community. Specifically, some straight students reported that they had become politically

more active in sexuality movements after coming to know their GLB friends. Given the nature of the data, we cannot determine whether these straight students actually made significant contributions to the movements or not, but the important point is that they presented their political participation as a respectable behavior that promoted social equality. As making such claims, straight students made a link between their behavioral changes resulting from their cross-orientation friendship to societal discourses that celebrated politically motivated social engagement. Cross-orientation friendships thus helped straight students construct or strengthen their identity as “straight allies” at the community level (Goldstein and Davis 2010; Stotzer 2009), which allowed stronger moral claims than being a friend of a sexual minority. This finding does not necessarily suggest that the straight friend identity was less important than the ally identity, however. The ally identity partly depended on the friend identity because a straight person could not be a true ally without a personal friendship with a GLB person.

Straight students’ presentations of their increased political involvement also targeted social discourses specific to their life stage and organizational contexts. For example, Susan had a close gay friend, whom she had known for seven years, and she commented how the friendship affected her:

Having him as such a close friend has got me more interested in gay rights and gay activism. I find it more fun and interesting (to have a gay friend than a straight friend). By framing her participation in sexuality movements as “fun and interesting,” Susan emphasized that the friendship fulfilled her personal desire for self exploration—an attitude valued for and among young adults (Arnett 2005). Similarly, Sophia commented,

My entire group of friends goes to (the local gay pride march). I don’t know [if] we’re kind of odd, but it’s nice to have a friend to go with.

By emphasizing that her “entire group of friends” participated in the political event, Sophia indicated that she belonged to a special group of students, and by jokingly describing the group as “kind of odd,” she distanced herself and her friends from other straight people who discriminated against GLB people or showed no interests in sexual equality issues. Because friendships were not strongly embedded within organizations, they lacked certain resources for moral identity construction (e.g., organizational roles), but they provided access to external resources such as political events in this example.

Some straight students hinted their strong internalization of the ally identity by commenting on their behaviors outside the cross-orientation friendships. For example, Natalie had a very close gay friend, whom she met in a high school drama class. She passionately explained how sexuality stigma affected her gay friend by describing homophobia *she* encountered in her everyday life:

I met a kid recently (in one of my classes)... The gay and lesbian film festival was going on, and I was talking to him about it. He sounded really uninterested, and I was like, “What do you mean?” “Why would you say something like that?” He said, “I don’t know, I guess it’s because I am a little homophobic.” It’s weird because I see him around gay people, and it’s not unless you actually talk to them that they will be nice to your face. But when you’re alone with them, they can be like “I really hate the blah blah.” So it’s everywhere, and it’s unavoidable, and it’s just so big that it amazes me just how many people that I know are slightly homophobic.

Like Natalie, some straight students harshly criticized other straight people. Using negative phrases and presenting strong emotions, they distanced themselves from other straight people and sought to establish their superiority to these people. Further, by emphasizing homophobia in

the society, they highlighted GLB friends' challenges and thus increased the moral significance of their sympathy and support for the friends. A similar technique of moral identity construction was observed in a previous study of service organization staff, who claimed the importance of their service to the clients by emphasizing the clients' difficult living conditions (Deeb-Sossa 2007). Harsh criticisms of other people seemed particularly important, and perhaps necessary, for deriving moral worth from friendships, in which one is expected to show some levels of sympathy and support. Further, in the current historical context characterized by the increasing acceptance of same-sex sexuality (Savin-Williams 2005; Thompson 2007), it was no longer uncommon to have GLB friends and provide support for them. In other words, straight students may have felt the need to exceed the expected levels of support to present their virtuous character, in a similar way that parents of GLB children had to become "super parents" to earn moral worth (Fields 2001).

GLB STUDENTS' MORAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

GLB students did not claim moral worth for having cross-orientation friendships as frequently or explicitly as straight students, perhaps because the moral significance of having a dominant-group friend was not as clear as that of having a subordinate-group friend.

Nonetheless, some GLB students hinted their moral worth by emphasizing two aspects of their friendships including sexuality enlightenment and network expansion.

Sexuality Enlightenment

Like straight students, some GLB students reported that they had learned to appreciate sexual diversity through their cross-orientation friendships. For example, Abigail, a lesbian student said, "I've learned how girls can feel about guys because I've never really known that." Living in a heteronormative society, GLB students knew much about heterosexuality, but they

believed that personal conversations with straight friends helped them discover how straight people “feel” in their romantic relationships. Another lesbian student, Cassandra elaborated,

I see them [straight people] in a new light, really. I used to be straight, but it seems so weird now seeing my straight friends.... It’s kind of funny. I sort of see myself. I could have been that, but I’m not. It just gave me a new perspective.

Like straight students who talked about learning opportunities in cross-orientation friendships, GLB students who used this strategy of moral identity construction emphasized the differences between GLB and straight people (e.g., “a new perspective”). Cassandra’s comment above also underscored her hipness—a trait highly valued among young adults—by suggesting that she was a kind of person who enjoyed learning about these sexuality differences and had the ability to imagine herself with a different sexual orientation. According to previous research, some GLB people see befriending straight people as a disloyal behavior to the GLB community (Moon 1995). In contrast, young GLB people in this study were more open to cross-orientation friendships, perhaps because of sexual minorities’ increasing integration into the mainstream society (Savin-Williams 2005) and the increasing presence of straight people in the GLB community (Ghaziani 2011). Their approach also resonated with the current social discourses that emphasized social integration and diversity.

In addition to learning about heterosexuality, some GLB students pointed out that having straight friends helped them learn about how straight people saw them. David, for example, had several close straight friends and talked about one of them, whom he had known for four years,

I think if you just have one type of friends, you really become closed off to how other people are. [Being friends with her,] I would judge people less. She’s really girly-girl

type, and a little bit “stuck-up.” If I didn’t know her as well as I did, I would probably assume that she would have a problem with gay people.

Like David, some GLB students believed that GLB people could hold prejudice against straight people, and that cross-orientation friendships helped them overcome their stereotypes and prejudice about straight people. In these comments, GLB students hinted their moral experience by positively framing the change in their attitudes, for example, from being “closed off” to “judge people less” in David’s comment above. Like straight students, GLB students thus discussed their enlightenment by drawing on symbolic codes of undesirable and desirable attitudes to describe their previous and current selves. Another gay student, Tim elaborated on this point in the following comment on his close straight friend, whom he had known for eleven years:

I feel like being friends with Andrés this long has just really, really helped me be comfortable with who I am, and just realize there are people out there like him that are indeed heterosexual males who I don’t typically identify with, but they are open and cool, and we can find stuff we have in common.

Tim thus believed that his cross-orientation friendships not only taught him about his friend’s supportiveness but also helped him develop a sense of trust in “people out there.” He hinted a further moral increase by noting a change in the way he saw himself (“be comfortable with who I am”). Tim thus emphasized moral aspects of these changes by drawing on symbolic codes of self confidence and trust and by pointing out that his friendship had helped him successfully accomplish life stage goals of establishing a sense of self.

Network Expansion

In addition to personal growth at the intellectual level, GLB students underscored increases in the size and coverage of their social networks to claim their enhanced virtues. They had close GLB friends with whom they socialized, but they claimed that having straight friends in their social networks had unique importance. For example, Kevin had more straight friends than GLB friends in his personal network, and he made the following comment when explaining how he felt about one of his straight friends,

I'm very lucky to have him as a friend because I know there's a lot of homosexual males and females that don't have great friends, and all they do is hang out with homosexual friends or people that they're comfortable with. But I have a lot of friends that are gay and straight, male and female that are open with me. They accept me for who I am. I'm lucky that I'm not restricted to only have gay friends because I am gay.

Kevin interpreted having cross-orientation friendships as evidence that straight people "accept me for who I am," thereby implying his good character. He seemed to attribute his cross-orientation friendships to his respectable effort and special ability although he modestly acknowledged the "lucky" situation. Further, by contrasting himself to other GLB people who only "hang out with homosexual friends," he emphasized his superiority to those people. This behavior is similar to straight students' "othering," but in this case, Kevin as a subordinate group member, attempted to distance himself from other members of the subordinate groups (i.e., "defensive othering," Schwalbe et al. 1994).

Vicky, a bisexual student, made a similar comment about other GLB people who did not have straight friends,

They're uncomfortable around straight people. I have a couple of gay friends who have told me straight out that they're more comfortable going out with people who are gay because then they don't have to explain themselves or they're not gonna get weird questions or stuff like that.

Are you different from those GLB people in any way?

Other than having straight friends, I feel like I have so many friends of different backgrounds and cultures and races. I think [that's] probably the biggest difference.

Like Kevin, Vicky attributed other GLB people's lack of straight friends to their inability to socialize beyond their comfort zone. By generalizing the sexual diversity to other aspects of her network composition ("many friends of different backgrounds and culture and races"), she highlighted her ability to establish connections across social boundaries, thereby grounding her moral identity in the societal emphasis on diversity and social integration. Interestingly, she made this comment despite the fact that she had not disclosed her sexual orientation to her friends. She explained, "I am not out, (but) I feel like I'm pretty comfortable and confident about it." Although her comments seemed incoherent, having straight friends may have helped her believe that she was comfortable with her sexuality.

Highlighting the moral importance of having straight friends, some GLB students offered explanations about why others do not have straight friends. Here is an example provided by a gay student, Nate:

I would think it would be because they had a rough time coming out, and then they probably lost faith in everyone wanting to be around them and being true to them....

They're afraid of falsity and people being fake.

Nate's personal network included more straight friends than GLB friends. In the above comment, he emphasized other gay people's failures and negative attitudes ("lost faith" and "afraid"), and by doing so, he elevated his relative moral worth. When asked to elaborate on how he differed from these other gay men who did not have straight friends, he continued, "I guess, I'm more trusting and forgiving, maybe? I don't hold grudges?" These claims by GLB students are similar to straight students' comments that emphasized their noble friendship choice in a sense that both groups addressed their existing moral worth that led to their decision to develop or sustain cross-orientation friendships. However, whereas straight students tended to highlight their sympathy for stigmatized people or their passion for social equality, GLB students underscored their ability and effort to cross social boundaries.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how college students constructed moral identities in cross-orientation friendships. By doing so, we sought to demonstrate how moral identities develop in personal relationships as opposed to relationships within formal organizations or family. Like social service workers (Holden 1997; Kolb 2011) and parents of GLB children (Fields 2001), straight students constructed moral identities through their affiliations with stigmatized individuals, or GLB people in their case. College students may have had limited opportunities to meet such individuals, but friendships provided easy access without a lot of responsibilities. Straight students' strategies for moral identity construction were similar to those of social service workers and parents in a sense that they emphasized their authentic companionship, sympathy, and support for stigmatized individuals. Further, like social service roles, the voluntary nature of the friend role helped straight students show that their support for GLB people reflected their inner virtue, instead of obligations. Although this form of moral claims has been observed in

previous studies of cross-group friendships (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Hughey 2012), the present study provided more details about how people make such claims—they emphasized their deliberate friendship choice while overlooking other factors of friendship development, and they presented narratives about how they had become moral individuals who would make such respectable decisions.

A lack of organizationally sanctioned roles constrained straight students' moral identity construction in cross-orientation friendships, however. As described in previous studies, social service workers use their higher-status roles within the organizations to highlight the moral significance of their sympathy for lower-status clients (Deeb-Sossa 2007; Holden 1997; Kolb 2011), and parents amplify the moral worth they have within the parental role by fulfilling their parenting responsibilities beyond expectations (Fields 2001). These resources were not available in friendships due to the equality expectation and the weaker responsibilities for relationship partners (Allan 1998; Blieszner and Adams 1992). Further, friendships imposed a unique constraint—although straight students seemed to provide much support for GLB friends by listening to friends' daily challenges as sexual minorities, they could not take much credit for their support to sustain a sense of reciprocity and exchange balance, which is critical for sustaining friendships (Roberto 1996; Rook 1987). One way to deal with the lack of organizational resources and the constraints in friendships was to turn to themselves by crafting narratives of “moral experiences.” In the narratives, they described how the friendships helped them learn about sexual diversity, develop sensitivity to the issues, and consequently grow as a person. Past research on moral experience has focused on negative life events and their negative consequences on self concepts (Goffman 1963; Schneider 1988, Yang et al. 2006), but the

present study demonstrates that people may have positive moral experiences or create positive narratives (Sandstrom 1996).

The study further demonstrated that subordinate groups, as well as dominant groups, may draw their moral worth from their cross-group friendships. Past youth research has described how subordinate group members attempt to increase their status in the popularity hierarchy by developing friendships with dominant group members while distancing themselves from their own groups (e.g., Milner 2006). GLB students' moral construction was distinct from these attempts in two points: (1) their moral claims focused on their ability to interact with people outside their own group; and (2) they had no interest in joining the majority group and sustained their minority group identity. When constructing moral identity this way, GLB students underscored how different their straight friends' perspectives and experiences were from their own, instead of emphasizing similarities.

The study also highlighted that people complement each other's identity work in friendship dyads. For example, straight friends helped GLB friends restore their moral identity by sympathizing with them about their challenges with sexuality stigma, and GLB friends endorsed straight students' moral claims by expressing appreciation for their acceptance and support. These results thus indicate that joint moral identity work does not need to focus on a shared identity as in subcultural identity work (Schwalbe 1996). People in dyadic relations, and perhaps those in larger networks, may mutually reinforce different moral identities by playing complementary parts in social interactions. In this sense, moral identity construction in cross-orientation friendships seem to operate in a way similar to "facework," in which people help each other preserve front-stage identities through ritualized interactions (Goffman 1967). In the present study, we only interviewed one side of each friendship dyad. Interviewing both sides or

directly observing dyad interactions will provide greater insights into friends' complementary roles in moral identity construction in future research.

Finally, the study underscored how people skillfully utilize symbolic codes to construct moral identity. College students gave positive meaning to their current behaviors by drawing on culturally shared codes such as open-mindedness, social engagement, acceptance, confidence, trust, passion for social diversity and integration. They also gave negative meaning to their past behaviors and other people's behaviors by using other codes such as rigidity, isolation, rejection, fear, indifference. These symbolic codes are particularly important in the life stage context of young adulthood and in the organizational context of college, thereby making these codes more effective for students' moral claims. This finding indicates that moral identity construction in friendships is strongly shaped by life stage and organizational contexts that embed these friendships, and they call for future research that focuses on other contextual configurations.

Overall, the results provided important insights into how friendships serve as a relational setting for moral identity construction, thus extending the existing literature, which focuses on relationships within formal organizations. Whereas some symbolic interactionists seek to identify "general" social psychological processes that operate across different relational settings, the present study illustrates that relational settings matter at least for moral identity construction because they shift the meaning of individual and group attributes, set behavioral and emotional expectations, and specify constraints and resources for these processes. The present study also extends the symbolic interactionist understanding about friendships, which has concentrated on conceptualization of friendships as a context for "facework" (Goffman 1967), socialization (Fine 2006), emotion work (Staske 1998), and construction and management of gender, racial,

immigrant, and sexual identities (Adams 2011; Barrett 2013; Valenta 2009, Wilkins 2012).

Friendships, especially those that transcend social group boundaries, serve as a unique context for moral identity construction and narratives of moral experience.

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