Curiosity, Passion, & Proximity: Motivations for Attending Safe Zone Trainings

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Curiosity, Passion, & Proximity: Motivations for Attending Safe Zone Trainings

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Abstract: LGBTQ+ social justice educational interventions (SJEIs), usually named Safe Zone or Ally Training, offer opportunities for knowledge acquisition and reflection. Ideally, they provide components necessary to cultivate allyship through the development of a liberatory consciousness (Love, 2018) through increasing awareness, engaging in analysis, considering actions, and reflecting on accountability. In this instrumental case study (Stake, 2000) focused on 17 graduate students, faculty, and staff at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic, we used liberatory consciousness as a conceptual framework to examine motivation for attendance. Three findings emerged: (1) curiosity, (2) passion, and (3) proximity. Implications of these specific factors contributing to the participants’ motivation to attend LGBTQ+ SJEIs are offered for both higher education practitioners and researchers.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ social justice interventions, allyship, ally development, liberatory consciousness

Introduction

Higher education currently faces policy and legislative agendas with aims to curtail the scope of diversity, equity, and inclusion work, and, in some instances, end its existence on campus (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2023). Of specific interest related to this manuscript are efforts to silence, erase, and restrict the dignity and lives of trans and queer (TQ) people (Branigin & Kirkpatrick, 2022). At all times, and especially in the current political climate, TQ communities need allies, advocates, accomplices, and collaborators (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022; Indigenous Action Media, 2014; Squire, 2020). Since the 1990s, Safe Zone/Safe Space/Ally Trainings emerged as one of the earliest campus-based efforts to educate about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) identities (Draughn et al., 2002; Poynter & Tubbs, 2008; Woodford et al., 2014). These trainings seek to provide both content knowledge about and action steps to address inequities TQ communities experience (DeVita & Anders, 2018). Because of their focus on cultivating allies who will interrupt normative regimes of heterosexism and trans oppression/cissexism, we refer to them as LGBTQ+ social justice educational interventions (SJEIs; Catalano, 2022). As such, LGBTQ+ SJEIs seem to be ideal sites to explore what it means to engage in allyship.

Our qualitative research project invited LGBTQ+ SJEI attendees from Purple Public University (PPU, a pseudonym) to reflect on their experiences, motivations, and learning. The broader project sought to examine participant characterizations of what it means to engage in allyship and what it means to engage in work to create more inclusive campus cultures. For this manuscript, we explored participants’ impetus to enroll in the campus-based LGBTQ+ SJEI. Our main research question was: How do participants describe their motivation to attend LGBTQ+ SJEIs? Additionally, we had a sub-research question of: What do those motivations reveal about allyship?

Literature Review

Our exploration of why participants chose to attend LGBTQ+ SJEIs and what those motivations might reveal about allyship requires us to explore a few key areas of literature. First, we describe the scholarship about LGBTQ+ SJEIs to examine their emergence and intentions. Next, to gain an understanding of who tends to enroll and participate in diversity trainings, we must turn our attention to literature outside of higher education. Lastly, given that the ostensible goal of LGBTQ+ SJEIs is to develop allies, we turn to the literature and research on allyship within higher education. Our goal is to provide the foundational information necessary to understand LGBTQ+ SJEIs, who might attend them, and what skills and/or content they may gain from attending that would enable them to act as allies.

Safe Zones

In the past three decades, most scholarship about Safe Zones (SZ) described their emergence at specific institutions (e.g., Torres et al., 2016) or their design and components (e.g., Poynter & Tubbs, 2008; Woodford et al., 2014). Of the early extant empirical research specifically about LGBTQ+ SJEIs, Evans’ (2002) research focused on how the display of allyship through a sticker, sans any interactive educational intervention, impacted perceptions of campus climate. Research on interactive ally training programs’ outcomes and
curriculum determined many did not “prioritize preparing allies to confront LGBT prejudice and discrimination” (Woodford et al., 2014, pp. 319-320). Adjacent literature examined the roles of LGBTQ+ advocates on campus (e.g., Broadhurst et al., 2018) and the experiences of TQ professional’s advocacy work on campus (e.g., Oliveira et al., 2023; Ortiz & Mandala, 2021; Pryor & Hoffman, 2021).

More contemporary research gave attention to the experiences of facilitators, such as the benefits and challenges facilitators of LGBTQ+ SJEIs experience (Catalano, 2022), descriptions of facilitation skills (Catalano et al., 2023), and experiences of nonbinary and trans facilitators (Catalano & Wagner, 2024). Other research attended to LGBTQ+ SJEIs designs, components, and approaches (Catalano & Simms, In press), concerns about the use of specific activities within designs (Catalano, Wagner, et al., 2024), and the influence of LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitation on perceptions of campus (Catalano & Perez, 2023). Lastly, Catalano, Tillapaugh, et al. (2024) used Ahmed’s (2012) tick box diversity—as in diversity and inclusion work is as insubstantial as ticking a box, not actual substantive actions—to reveal how LGBTQ+ SJEIs function as a form of institutional benign neglect through unenforceable authority, administrative gaslighting, and scarcity of resources. The surge of these contemporary publications adds significantly to the scholarly landscape about LGBTQ+ SJEIs, and yet there remains little focus on attendees. Specifically, what motivates individuals to attend LGBTQ+ SJEIs, and how might such attendance influence how they make meaning of allyship?

Who Attends Diversity Trainings?

Outside of higher education research, human resources, psychology, and organizational behavior literature are rife with research about diversity training, including attention on participation (e.g., Kulik et al., 2007) and poor individual performance in a training if motivation is absent (Baldwin et al., 1991; Maier, 1973; Mathieu & Martinez, 1997). Wiethoff (2004) posited that motivation for diversity training engagement was linked to positive or negative attitudes toward behavior, perception of desirability of the behavior in relation to group norms, and amount of effort needed to be successful in the behavior were predictive factors, the three components of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Other research found that participant agency (choice about whether to attend) has a significant influence on their motivation to learn (Baldwin et al., 1991), and the work environment, including supervisor support, influenced employee motivations to attend (Noe & Schmitt, 1986; Noe & Wilk, 1993).

Shifting back to higher education, Lindsey et al. (2015) studied undergraduate student experiences with diversity training. They asserted that “the relative effectiveness of diversity training can be enhanced by increasing motivation in carefully framed and designed programs that appeal to particular types of people” (Lindsey et al., 2015, p. 614). Specifically, they found that the type of training design (e.g., perspective taking, discrediting stereotypes) influenced the impact of the diversity training (Lindsey et al., 2015). Their overall findings suggested that perspective-taking designs “may be particularly beneficial for individuals who need the training more than others (i.e., individuals who are low in empathy)” (Lindsey et al., 2015, p. 615). In short, those who desire to engage in allyship have a higher likelihood of enrolling in and participating in diversity training, and those who lack internal motivation to attend will benefit from perspective-taking designs (i.e., activities that encourage thinking about how others experience the world).

Allyship

A taken for granted term in much of this literature is allyship. In higher education and student affairs scholarship, Broido’s (2000) work characterized social justice allies as those with a dominant identity who advocate on behalf of those with targeted or minoritized identity/identities. Similarly, in a volume dedicated to the development of social justice allies, Reason et al. (2005) described allies as those whose dominant group identity/identities cause doubt on the sincerity of their allyship. Allies are action-oriented individuals who must engage in continuous reflection and who must unceasingly consider how to engage in discussions (e.g., speak up, listen, step back) (Reason et al., 2005). In the context of a SZ training, white, cisgender, and/or heterosexual attendees may place themselves in the learner role and rely on those with minoritized identities (e.g., trans, queer, TQ People of Color) to reveal the asymmetrical power dynamics of identities. The challenge of an ally definition is that it creates a false binary where those with privilege (identity/identities) are outsiders and distances them from the work of social justice.

Edwards (2006) expanded this conceptualization to create a model of social justice ally development. The purpose of his model was to serve as a tool “to help aspiring allies more consistently engage in the type of anti-oppressive actions that would result in members of the oppressed group identifying them as allies” (Edwards, 2006, p. 54). Edwards (2006) cautioned about intellectualizing allyship by those seeking to do social justice work, noting that intellectualizing could result in individuals being hyper-fixated on their fears of making mistakes and an agrandizement of ally behaviors. Additionally, these conceptualizations of allies construct a binary of insider/outsider that tends to oversimplify minoritized populations as a monolith. For instance, in respect to this research, TQ allyship may lead to confabulations of gender and sexuality and fail to consider how multiple social identities vary in salience and interact with each other to significantly influence how individuals experience privilege and/or oppression (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022). Allyship as an identity or way to consider actions of coalition building requires more capacious considerations than through a single vector of analysis.

At the same time, if we think about ally as an identity, then such an assertion requires additional examination because to claim an ally identity may function as a form of virtue...
signaling or what Tosi and Warmke (2016) called moral grandstanding. The purpose of moral grandstanding is to convince others “that one is worthy of respect and admiration because one has some particular moral quality…. To grandstand is to turn one’s contribution to public discourse into a vanity project” (Tosi & Warmke, 2016, p. 199). As DeVita and Anders (2018) cautioned, TQ campus populations sometimes interpret signs, symbols, or declarations of TQ allyship as a form of moral grandstanding. However, these signals are not always dubious or suspect actions. Kodipady et al. (2022) chose reputational signaling (what they deemed a less pejorative term) to “focus more on the potential benefit to one's reputation that comes with being seen as the kind of person who would behave virtuously” (p. 583). Regardless of the language used to characterize self-assertions of ally identification, minoritized individuals may be skeptical when those self-declarations do not correspond to supportive actions.

A challenge to any discussion of ally identity and allyship action is how it also functions to recenter cisgender and/or heterosexual experiences. This focus is intentional because an ostensibly primary role of LGBTQ+ SJEIs is to develop “a critical mass of heterosexual and cisgender individuals who support LGBTQ+ individuals” (DeVita & Anders, 2018, p. 65). What this attention brings to the fore is Oaster’s (2019) work on cisgender fragility (also applicable to heterosexual fragility), where the existence and expression of trans/nonbinary people evoke such discomfort from cisgender people as to make their needs primary. Attention to cisgender and heterosexual fragility manifests in how LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitators try to soften approaches and take on caretaking of cisgender and heterosexual participants who express discomfort when confronted with their privilege and/or discomfiting expressions of queerness and trans*ness (Catalano & Perez, 2023). Additionally, LGBTQ+ SJEIs tend to narrowly focus on gender and sexuality instead of broadly addressing broader dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression (Christiaens & Noble, 2023; Self & Hudson, 2015). As a consequence, LGBTQ+ SJEIs fail to interrupt white comfort (Abblebaum, 2017; Lange et al., 2023). At the same time, the work of liberation must be a concerted effort between cisgender and/or heterosexuals and queer and trans people (Love, 2018). Efforts to bring about change through LGBTQ+ SJEIs require consideration of what motivates individuals to register and participate in educational endeavors.

Conceputal Framework

Love’s (2018) conceptual framework for the development of a liberatory consciousness guides this research. Through the lens of liberatory consciousness, social justice is aspirational and continuous work (the work of allyship). Individuals must build their capacity for enacting socially just change (becoming allies), which they can do using four components: awareness, analysis, action, and accountability. Developing a liberatory consciousness is not a linear process; however, for simplicity, Love (2018) described them as separate components: awareness (noticing the impact of systems of power), analysis (assessing how systems of power contribute to ideological and structural power differences across groups), action (taking steps to interrupt how oppression operates), and accountability (cultivating the reciprocal relationships necessary to live with integrity in a world marked by oppression).

Connected specifically to the scholarship on higher education, liberatory consciousness guided and/or inspired research as a mechanism to reveal the facade of trans inclusion (e.g., Catalano, 2015) and bolstered Stewart and Nicolazzo’s (2018) advancement of trickle up high impact practices (TUHIPS). Other scholars used liberatory consciousness to frame approaches to advising and supporting in student affairs (Wagner & Catalano, 2022), critically approach masculinities (Tillapaugh et al., 2019), and question the transactional dynamics of allyship (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022). For our work in this specific study, this framework encouraged our thinking to (re)consider more capacious understandings of allyship to aid in the transformation of higher education into places and spaces that contribute to a world of inclusion, belonging, and relationships of abundance (brown, 2017).

Pragmatically, a liberatory consciousness framework inspired the structure of a semi-structured interview protocol to explore how LGBTQ+ SJEI attendees described ideas about allyship in terms of awareness, action, analysis, and accountability. These four components of a liberatory consciousness also prompt our thinking about implications by imagining opportunities to interrupt institutions and systems that perpetuate dominance, exclusion, and violence (Ahmed, 2012; Ferguson, 2012; Young, 1990).

Methodology

As a collective of critical scholars, we approached this work using epistemological bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001), bridging both constructivism and critical theory to understand the complexity involved in allyship. Given the dynamics involved in the work of LGBTQ+ SJEIs, we recognized that epistemological bricolage offered a way to trouble “the limitations of a single method” and allows insights into “...what is missed by traditional practices of validation” (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 681). By using the aforementioned liberatory consciousness model (Love, 2018) as a theoretical framework, we aimed to understand participants’ meaning-making of their identity and definitions of ally and allyship (via constructivism) but also how that meaning-making is done via the sociopolitical structures and systems in which they live (via critical perspectives).

We used an instrumental case study approach (Stake, 2000) to frame our use of LGBTQ+ SJEIs as an entry point to access those more likely to be familiar with different notions of allyship or what it means to be an ally. Bound in the context of a singular institution, PPU, 17 attendees of the campus’ LGBTQ+ SJEI were interviewed, each serving as a unique case for this study. Using an instrumental case study method allows for the concrete and contextualized study of attendee making-meaning of LGBTQ+ SJEI experiences—not a focus on the LGBTQ+ SJEI per se—and how that might permeate...
into their lives and professional practices (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2000). In this way, the instrumental case study approach is particularly useful because LGBTQ+ SJIEIs are not the primary interest, just a vehicle to explore allyship (the phenomenon under study) and creates a bounded case to explore participants’ thinking about the dynamics of allyship (Stake, 2000).

Site

PPU is a large public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States (U.S.) with an undergraduate enrollment of over 25,000. The main campus is in a bucolic setting and boasts over 600 student organizations and a robust athletics program. PPU offers over 100 undergraduate majors, includes professional graduate schools, and over 100 master’s and doctoral degree programs. There are over 2000 faculty, including part-time instructors, and well over 10,000 staff. The overall PPU demographics reflect estimates of over 60% of undergraduate students, over 40% of graduate students, and over 80% of faculty and staff who identify as white. PPU does have an LGBTQ+ Center, established after 2010, with two full-time staff positions. The LGBTQ+ Center designed and facilitated the SZ program (the campus’s LGBTQ+ SJEI intervention) and recruited volunteers to facilitate and invites those volunteers to develop new SZ electives.

In this specific case study at PPU, the initial LGBTQ+ SJEI consisted of a five-week curriculum using the campus’ learning management system (LMS) to store readings and host discussion boards, and use video conference software to convene weekly hour-long synchronous meetings. We use “SZ 101” to refer to the entry-level LGBTQ+ SJEI that is open to all staff, faculty, and graduate students. Additional LGBTQ+ SJIEIs, referred to as electives, are offered on topics such as trans and nonbinary identities, intersex and asexual identities, queer histories, and Black queer experiences. It should be noted that the structure of PPU’s LGBTQ+ SJIEIs are somewhat different from many other colleges or universities; many LGBTQ+ SJIEIs elsewhere are often short-term, one-time trainings or workshops (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008) and certainly not a five-week cohorted synchronous course experience. This was very unique to PPU. The LGBTQ+ Center is responsible for all logistical and content aspects of the LGBTQ+ SJIEIs and employs a diverse team of facilitators within and beyond their staff.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

The LGBTQ+ center staff at PPU sent out the call for research participants, which included a link to an interest form with a demographic questionnaire, to those who completed any of their campus-based LGBTQ+ SJEI within the last 12 months of the call (we chose this specific time parameter to ensure that attendees could adequately remember what they learned from their participation, but also to reflect on how they had applied their learning from the LGBTQ+ SJEI in their work and lives). Twenty-two individuals responded to the call for participants; 17 accepted the invitation to schedule an interview. PPU’s SZ and this research reflect opt-in-only opportunities. We cannot know if individuals felt pressure from an office or supervisor to attend the SZ. What we can confirm is that all participants described attending based on their own interests and clearly expressed interest in participating in the research project. The call for participants explained that Author1 sought to understand attendee experiences in the SZ and how the training potentially contributed to thinking about allyship.

Catalano conducted one Zoom interview with each participant, lasting between 45-60 minutes, using a semi-structured interview protocol to encourage expansive answers (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Interview questions covered participants’ backgrounds with LGBTQ+ SJEI, experience with the LGBTQ+ SJEI, and ideas about allyship. Catalano sent each participant their transcribed interview to review, which used participant pseudonyms, redacted participant-specific information, and, in some cases, questions seeking clarity and/or thoughts about potential additional redactions as a form of member-checking. Then, Catalano engaged in holistic coding for first-cycle coding and pattern coding for second-cycle coding (Saldaña, 2021). Catalano engaged in analytical memo writing and then shared those memos with Tillapaugh, Wagner, Dockendorff, and Tissi-Gassoway, serving as data auditors, as a form of transparency to uphold trustworthiness, credibility, and quality (Saldaña, 2021). Throughout our data analysis, the authors used Love’s (2018) concept of liberatory consciousness as a lens for understanding the themes and patterns that were emerging. In particular, we examined the emergent themes (discussed in more depth below in the Findings section) using Love’s aforementioned concepts of awareness, analysis, action, and accountability to consider the ways systems of power and oppression were showing up within participants’ narratives and informing and mediating their motivations to attending LGBTQ+ SJIEIs and how those motivations might inform their experiences of allyship.

Participants

Of the 17 participants, eight identified as having a mainly administrative position, three identified as graduate students, three identified as faculty, two identified as staff, and one as a researcher. All demographic questions were open-field, and Table 1 provides the exact language participants used to describe their pronouns, gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality. We included their role on campus through general categories. Each of the participants was assigned a pseudonym if they did not choose one for themselves.

Positionality

As a group of five queer researchers, of which three identify as trans/nonbinary, we approached this research as individuals with both personal and professional investment in LGBTQ+ SJIE research. As participants and facilitators of LGBTQ+ SJIEs, we recognize the complexity of what they hope to accomplish. We also name our collective whiteness (four white identifying individuals and one white presenting person) as an influence on all aspects of this research project and
endeavored to continuously recognize how our racial privilege created limitations to all aspects of this project that might be invisible to us. As educators, we share an investment in engaging in work that seeks to infuse liberatory possibilities into higher education through our research, pedagogy, and advising. For us, this project is an effort to understand how to invite scholars and practitioners into work as allies towards larger social justice movements.

Limitations

We want to recognize an important limitation of this study: whiteness. Our research team and participants are almost exclusively white. Of the 22 potential participants, only five identified as people of Color, and we do not have demographic data about overall SZ 101 participants. It could be that SZ 101 PPU participants reflect the institutional demographics of over 80% white-identifying faculty and staff. However, currently, we do not know that to be true, and even if it is true, what does that mean about why faculty and staff of Color choose to (or not) participate? We also assume the white identity of Catalano, the demographics of PPU, and other variables influenced those who chose to participate in the study (e.g., overall demographics of SZ participants).

Findings

Our findings elucidate participant motivation for LGBTQ+ SJEI participation. We determined three overlapping themes to characterize participant motivations: curiosity, passion, and proximity. Overall, participants had a keen interest in learning as their motivation for participation in LGBTQ+ SJEIs, as is evident by 16 out of 17 participants attending at minimum two LGBTQ+ SJEIs (SZ 101 and Trans and Nonbinary Identities). Of those 16, twelve of them attended a third LGBTQ+ SJEI on asexual and intersex identities and experiences, and five of those participants attended a fourth LGBTQ+ SJEI on contemporary trans and queer People of Color. We describe their motivations for attending as three overlapping reasons for participation of curiosity, passion, and proximity.

Curiosity

All but three of the participants had previous experience with an LGBTQ+ SJEI, whether at PPU or a previous institution of higher education where they attended or were employed. Some participants attended PPU as a student and chose to attend the LGBTQ+ SJEI as a staff member or administrator. Artemis shared:

I've always been curious about what happens in the Safe Zone courses. As a student, I knew about them, but I never took them because I was a student. ...I was really basically just curious about what the content was.

As a “gay man…ish person,” Artemis’ curiosity was about content and how the LGBTQ+ SJEI educated participants about TQ communities at PPU. Chris, too, expressed curiosity about the content, but for a different reason. As someone who came to work at PPU from a different geographic region, he had a different perspective about the necessity of certain content:

[What motivated me to take this virtual course was to get up to speed on using terms and pronouns, because... I’m not used to using pronouns because it never really mattered to me or my friends, ... straight, gay, trans, they were all over the spectrum, and it was just a nonjudgmental environment where people didn’t feel the need to tell you what their preferences were.

For Chris, a mainly hetero white male, his curiosity was about understanding this different culture where pronouns were
important since, in his estimation, that was irrelevant knowledge where he previously lived.

Participants also expressed curiosity about how their learning and actions might be applicable within the context of their professional roles. In this way, curiosity was a way to describe how participants sought to be a better support for students and/or colleagues. For instance, Jess disclosed:

I'm a grad student and I was looking at ways to be a better mentor for my students. And I am queer, but I don't have a lot of opportunities to do the kind of readings that I want to do. And a better understanding of queer theory, which is, it's just not something that I get as a [academic area redacted] person.

From Jess’ perspective, they were unconvinced that, even as a nonbinary, bisexual, and demisexual individual, her knowledge level was sufficient to support her students. Additionally, as her graduate program was not in an academic discipline focused on TQ identities and experiences, they wanted the opportunity to learn in a structured environment. Similarly, Roe revealed there were several trans students who went through transition processes in the program where she works. She opined there was an increase in diversity among new students and wanted to increase her knowledge. She reflected:

First of all, I wanted to be a better ally and support them [the students] better, but also I am queer myself, so it wasn't a few years ago until I was super comfortable with, so perhaps to become a better ally to myself, I decided to take all three trainings.

Roe’s motivation for participation was about self-awareness and a broader sense of allyship as much as it was to be an adequate support for students in their work.

Passion

Passion for learning was another motivation for participation. Passion, as we describe it, involves learning in order to take action. As Brooke described, she was involved in a program as an undergraduate that focused on increasing retention for students from minoritized groups. She explained:

I learned a lot through that program, and just instilled this passion within me of wanting to make sure people feel supported in fields that I love. So, I’ve been just trying to educate myself about different groups and different communities that I can create a safe space for.

Her curiosity and passion overlapped to amplify her motivation to support others and create campus environments where students can thrive. The focus on transforming campus climates to a more welcoming and hospitable place was a significant motivation for attending LGBTQ+ SJIEs. Haley shared that she is “just a really intrinsically motivated person when it comes to learning more about social justice topics.” Her work also includes inclusion and diversity work, which she believes says to others, “I need to be informed.” Her passion for learning, coupled with her job title and the perceptions others have of her competencies, were significant motivators for her participation in LGBTQ+ SJIEs.

Passion was also seen in participants’ statements about engaging as an ally amidst the current sociopolitical climate for TQ individuals, whether in their local, state, or national community. For instance, Jess reflected that their involvement as an ally was rooted in enacting allyship, not just identifying as such, particularly in light of legislative efforts to negatively affect TQ people. They named, “I think a lot of people could say that they’re allies, but don’t actually engage in a lot of; oh, what about all the trans legislation that’s happening? And a lot of people are like, ‘Oh, that’s sad.’ And don’t do anything about it.” Relatedly, Lindsey’s passion was clear in her discussion of wanting to avoid virtue signaling as an ally. She explained, “I feel like there’s so much virtue signaling inherent in using that term [ally] for yourself that I’m like, ‘I’m just not going there.’ Problematic.” Similar to Jess, Lindsey was reflecting on the fact that many individuals in today’s society may consider themselves an ally but fail to take direct action to demonstrate real allyship and advocacy. For many participants, a desire to be a better ally was not enough; rather, allyship and advocacy required intentional efforts to eliminate barriers to inclusion.

Proximity

Lastly, again overlapping with the other themes, was how proximity to TQ communities, identities, and experiences was motivational for participation in LGBTQ+ SJIEs. Proximity took shape in two different ways. First, the virtual dynamic allowed the training to feel conveniently located, enabling them to attend the SZ 101 and LGBTQ+ SJIEs. And second, participants expressed a responsibility to attend because of their closeness to TQ communities.

The ease of attendance because of the virtual modality of the LGBTQ+ SJIEs was often described as a positive, even if they shared a wish for in-person. For instance, Lindsey explained,

Okay, so first things first. I have always, always preferred face-to-face to online. Even before pandemic days. Pandemic reinforced that to me a thousand-fold. I'm an extrovert. I just do better in person, period. I totally recognize that virtual format is super convenient. … Honestly. I think face-to-face would be ideal.

The experience of learning and sharing in an in-person environment was preferable to some participants because of the visceral experience, or what Lindsey described as “talking about emotional stuff.” Yet, she recognized that had it been face-to-face, it would also:

https://doi.org/10.60808/46f3-ex25
Journal of Queer and Trans Studies in Education. 2024. 1(2), Article 3.
make it less accessible, including for myself. And so, I have to say, I think the virtual experience is probably a really, a good main option, even though ideally if people could do it face-to-face, oh, that would be so much better. Because you're talking about emotional stuff, and I just think that stuff is usually better face-to-face for people that that works for.

Participant preference for an in-person LGBTQ+ SJEI was less important than the ability to conveniently access the educational opportunity; they recognized how the virtual dynamic made the training more accessible to them and their schedules.

While there are different design considerations for a virtual versus an in-person LGBTQ+ SJEI, the ease of attendance was significant for most participants. Sys was quite explicit when he shared, “I probably wouldn't have done it if there wasn't a virtual component just because [department] is off campus, and it would just take too much time to go to campus and get back.” Given that PPU is a large university, the ability to access the course from anywhere actually placed participants from across the institution in closer proximity to each other. Sys went on to add:

There is, I think, something missing from in-person contact. But one, just a side note, that's kind of fun, the Safe Zone class that I took that just ended, we're all going to go out for lunch next week, and so I'll get to meet these people in person, so I'll be able to get that experience.

In his experience, the lack of physical proximity may have actually inspired more intentional efforts of participants to meet face-to-face and continue to build on their connections.

Proximity also describes how a motivating factor for participation was close relationships with someone or people who identify as within TQ communities. For example, Lily had a child who came out as trans and gay. In Louetta’s case, a family member came out as nonbinary, and this was quite unfamiliar to her. She shared how the timing of this family member coming out was near the time of the Pulse Nightclub shooting, and Louetta disclosed,

And I remember them saying how scared they were at the time and I just was like, well, I can't do anything for that, but I can at least learn. And it might not be something that I can comprehend totally, but I can learn as much as I can and I can be an advocate where I can be.

For Louetta and other participants, proximity to those within TQ communities was a motivator for attending an LGBTQ+ SJEI.

Proximity to others also included engagement in broader social justice efforts. Alex described colleagues whom he respected having stickers indicating attendance at the LGBTQ+ SJEI on their door and laptop as piquing his interest. Yet, what really struck a chord for motivation with him was his self-assessment: the proximity of his beliefs to his actions. He shared how, during an interview at a different university, half the questions asked him about his social justice engagement. He named:

I had very little to say about it. I came away very impressed with them and not so much with myself. And decided that, "Oh, I really want to get involved in this area." Then the social justice, Black Lives Matter stuff really hit me, and I think all well-meaning people. So I really wanted to get more involved in my community and working in diversity and inclusion.

For Alex, proximity was not just about who was near him, but also about how he positioned himself in respect to engagement in social justice movements and efforts. Among the participants, curiosity, passion, and proximity emerged as central themes for their motivation to attend LGBTQ+ SJEIs. In the next section, we provide a discussion of the three themes as they relate to Love’s (2018) concept of liberatory consciousness.

Discussion

Participants in the study articulated a desire to invest in allyship through LGBTQ+ SJEIs. Participants’ motivation to attend LGBTQ+ SJEIs was spurred by curiosity, passion, and proximity. We connected these motivations to engage in LGBTQ+ SJEIs to the four elements of a liberatory consciousness framework of awareness, analysis, action, and accountability (Love, 2018). The function of continuously practicing these four elements can inspire “humans to live ‘outside’ the patterns of thought and behavior learned through the socialization process that helps to perpetuate systems of oppression” (Love, 2018, p. 611). Participants’ curiosity demonstrates a desire to increase awareness and analysis, while passion exposes their desires to take action and be held accountable for transforming their sphere of influence into more inclusive LGBTQ+ environments and relationships. For example, participants’ interest in learning terminology and gleaning more information about socio-political dynamics are both efforts to increase awareness and recognize where action is necessary. Attendance at multiple LGBTQ+ SJEIs beyond SZ 101 is both a form of action and analysis through engaging in critical reflection on TQ issues outlined in the curriculum.

We recognize the action and accountability steps embedded in enrollment and participation in the five-week-long LGBTQ+ SJEI. As it pertains to accountability, participants described how their choice to enroll was an effort to be accountable in their role within or outside of TQ communities. Whether participants felt a responsibility to be better for TQ family members or the students they worked alongside, most described a clear imperative that being an ally required action and accountability. Moreover, in each instance, their motivation to participate began as a desire for action to make positive, equity-minded social change in their community. Participants’ motivations were a personal investment in
developing their own LGBTQ+ allyship. In addition, they expressed dubiousness that attendance in an LGBTQ+ SJEI was a sufficient action for allyship; they characterized LGBTQ+ SJEI as a form of moral grandstanding (Tosi & Warmke, 2016) or transactional experience (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022).

Finally, proximity served as a motivator for participants in the study and a potential way to characterize their participation as allyship (Edwards, 2006; Reason et al., 2005). Proximity describes both the convenience of the available training and individual participants’ explanation of their close relationships with TQ individuals in their personal or professional lives. While some participants craved opportunities to discuss the subject matter in person, they were practical about the ease of virtual participation. Synchronous and asynchronous online learning allowed for adding SZ 101 and the other LGBTQ+ SJEIs offered at PPU to a presumably already full schedule. This may have made it more likely for them to take steps to augment their learning through participation in the five-week curriculum and, thus, be doing something to show up for TQ communities. At the same time, the participants’ actions and accountability remain on an individual level, and opportunities still exist for how LGBTQ+ SJEIs could inspire connections to larger justice movements and transformational institution-based projects.

Participants could have chosen independent learning opportunities through reading, screening films, or passive participation by scrolling through information via social media groups (development of awareness and opportunities for analysis). Instead, and important in these findings, participants were invested in more than their individual development precisely because they registered for a SZ 101 or LGBTQ+ SJEIs. Whether they recognized it or not, participants chose an endeavor that had a collective aspect, as LGBTQ+ SJEIs required them to interact with others and build community through dialogue, critical reflection, and consciousness-raising. The five-week and mini-cohort approach to the LGBTQ+ SJEIs at PPU offers a potential that needs amplification. We wonder how PPU’s construction of curriculum serves as a resistance mechanism to institutional benign neglect (Catalano, Tillapaugh, et al., 2024) in response to the persistence of trans and queer antagonism. Our findings indicate participation in PPU’s LGBTQ+ SJEIs appeared to thwart what could function as a tick-box approach to diversity (Ahmed, 2012) because participants described investment in taking individual responsibility for institutional transformation. In addition, participants recognized the need to act collectively for institutional transformation beyond attendance at the LGBTQ+ SJEIs. Absent from our findings was participant awareness of broader institutional investment in LGBTQ+ inclusion. Through participants’ choice to attend LGBTQ+ SJEIs and engagement in the development of their liberatory consciousness, participants engage in learning and bring to fruition the espoused goals of the SJEI on both individual and institutional levels (Catalano, Tillapaugh, et al., 2024).

Still, PPU’s SZ 101 program is a bit atypical given the documentation available in the current literature. The five-week sessions with additional electives describe opportunities that exceed how most LGBTQ+ SJEIs are primarily one-time educational sessions (Catalano & Simms, in press; Woodford et al., 2014). Even those that occur through a series are more likely to be a three-sessions that focus on different topics (e.g., queer identities, pronouns, and asexuality), not a five-week scaffolded curriculum (Catalano & Simms, In press). Certainly, even with these robust and intensive curricula, along with participants who have a dedication to learning, limitations exist when it comes to the efficacy of this LGBTQ+ SJEI. Still, we wonder about the kinds of individual and campus transformations that could be possible if students, staff, and faculty on other campuses had access to similar LGBTQ+ SJEI opportunities.

Implications

We focus our implications in the realms of research and practice. We remain curious about what it means to cultivate and conceptualize allyship, especially on campuses with limited LGBTQ+ SJEI offerings and/or those that lack staff who have dedicated time and resources to the development of comprehensive LGBTQ+ SJEIs. Tangential to our findings for this manuscript was how embedded within most participants’ responses was a murkiness about what it means to be an ally. While there has been increased attention to equity-related work in higher education, such as LGBTQ+ SJEIs in recent years, there is still a dearth of scholarship about allyship and its development. In particular, much of the existing literature seems focused on Safe Zone and ally development programs that were created and implemented at the turn of the century. Now, 20 years later, there is a need for contemporary research that examines multiple aspects of LGBTQ+ SJEIs and their impact, particularly about ally development, including motivations for participation in LGBTQ+ SJEIs. We consider this manuscript a first step towards a larger research endeavor about LGBTQ+ SJEIs as pathways toward allyship. At the same time, we acknowledge that the limitations of this study in terms of the overrepresentation of white participants raise questions about how individuals describe their impetus for enrollment and engagement. Where more attention is necessary in future research and practitioner application is how race and racial justice intersect with approaches to allyship. There must be more explicit attention to how whiteness mediates the conceptualization, design, facilitation, and experiences of LGBTQ+ SJEIs. Specifically, there must be research focused on approaches to LGBTQ+ inclusion that are intersectionally expansive as a liberatory endeavor.

As for implications for practice, participants were motivated by passion or the drive to act upon their learning. LGBTQ+ SJEI designers can address this motivation by emphasizing both subject matter and action steps in their programmatic offerings. For instance, LGBTQ+ SJEIs could incorporate opportunities for praxis into the curriculum, requiring participants to work collaboratively with others to use the knowledge gained in the program to identify a problem or issue
on campus and take steps to address it. Such an approach provides benefit to the participants as they act upon the passion for justice or proximity to trans and queer communities that compelled their initial interest. It further allows for meaningful connection and relationship building beyond workshop conversations as participants work alongside one another on a project to improve the campus for and with the trans and queer communities.

Practice-based implications from this research also include some significant logistical considerations for those responsible for LGBTQ+ SJEIs on their campus. First, we want to recognize that practitioners responsible for SJEIs must navigate climates with pervasive anti-DEI efforts, and that is cognitively and emotionally draining. What we found inspiring from our findings is how PPU’s five-week design demonstrates that there are campus constituents willing to engage in an LGBTQ+ SJEI that inspires sustained dialogue. While a one-time session that lasts five hours might offer some efficiencies, five sessions of one hour each with a week between that includes asynchronous discussion posts provides time for reflection that bolsters learning (Rogers, 2002). We speculate that this type of scheduling creates more opportunities to demonstrate and contemplate allyship, as well as build longer-lasting relationships between participants. The virtual aspect of PPU’s LGBTQ+ SJEIs also allowed for the dovetailing of curiosity, passion, and proximity. While participants noted a desire for in-person sessions for privacy and connections, they also recognized they were able to ensure their attendance because they need not travel from home or office to attend. Lastly, the smaller size and cohort-based approach of SZ 101 (and all LGBTQ+ SJEIs) lent itself to participants building smaller communities of connection. We suspect that this might inspire additional accountability between cohort-mates and enhance liberatory ideas of allyship.

Content and conceptual opportunities abound for LGBTQ+ SJEIs. For instance, we wonder what it would mean to consider how LGBTQ+ SJEIs—or SJEIs broadly—to begin with liberation instead of hoping to get there in the final session. It is not a surprise that participants found allyship an elusive concept, or even a contentious term when liberation or what it means to imagine a more expansively queer- and trans-inclusive future was not necessarily a planned aspect of the SZ 101. To be fair, even at five-weeks, there is a limitation to what an LGBTQ+ SJEI could cover and still provide adequate opportunity for attendee interest to direct conversations. A significant challenge for those responsible for construction and facilitation was how to balance the desire articulated by participants for (more) future education and how a five-week LGBTQ+ SJEI was a strenuous time commitment.

Concluding Thoughts

We recognize the existence of DEI-related offices remains uncertain—and will remain so—as institutions close offices and eliminate positions, placing those doing DEI work in precarious positions. Those who provide SJEIs of all types, and LGBTQ+ SJEIs specifically, will require careful choices in wording (e.g., advertising, learning outcomes) to sustain these opportunities, as well as the jobs of those who offer them. Practitioners will feel these challenges unevenly based on institutional geography, type, and leadership. Additionally, practitioners responsible for this work will face concerns and demands from an array of constituencies, including critique from those who question whether the use of more circumspect language is a form of complicity with conservative demands.

We must consider how to harness LGBTQ+ SJEI attendee motivations with mechanisms for learning, recognizing that many participants shared how signing up was the accountability they needed to learn. As educators in all areas of education consider the role of allies, we urge them to consider the concept as a form of individual and collective consciousness-raising (accountability through awareness and analysis development) that could lead to transformation (actions) to transform campus places and spaces. What LGBTQ+ SJEIs offer campuses is an avenue through a singular component that feeds into what should be a larger institutional effort to engage in social justice education (Catalano & Simms, In press).

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