Navigating allyship: Straight and queer male athlete's accounts of building alliances

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Abstract

In this article the authors explore the ways that allyship and queer-straight alliance-building are constructed by a group of men who have participated in a men's health promotion and human rights project to promote inclusion in and through sport. Examining ten participants' accounts, collected through online semi-structured interviews, we explore the benefits and challenges of alliance-building between privileged and marginalised group members by foregrounding both straight and queer voices and experiences. We conclude with reflections on the challenges encountered in the health and human rights project as indicative of both the limitations and the productive possibilities for (un)learning allyship and developing more 'horizontal' forms of alliance-building through highlighting pluralistic voices and experiences.

Key Words: masculinity; allyship; sexuality; sport; homosociality

Introduction

Reference to 'allies' from a social justice perspective generally refers to people "from a privileged group who make intentional choices to support or work for the rights of those from the oppressed group" (Goodman, 2000, p.164). Resultingly, 'allyship' tends to be defined in terms of the positioning of privileged groups relative to marginalised groups. However, allyship necessarily requires at least a dyadic relationship *between* the privileged and the marginalised. As Forbes and Ueno (2020) note, although the focus on privileged groups has generated research "important for understanding allies' motivations and experiences, they have left queer accounts of allies and allyship unexamined" (p.160). It is, therefore, necessary to think of allyship in terms of the mutual practices of alliance-building that includes the

voices and experiences of both dominant and discriminated group members. In so doing, the process of doing allyship, the alliance-building between groups that is a key component of social justice, can be better understood.

In this article, we explore how a sexually and gender diverse group of men, who collectively participated in a social justice project ran by a non-governmental organisation (NGO), engaged in allyship activities. The NGO's programme, which involves taking part in naked photoshoots, sells products to raise money for an associated charity while also educating the participants about "healthier masculinity, inclusion, gender equality" and, according to the NGO's mission, "empowering sportsmen to become voices for equality". We are particularly interested here in the ways that the men, both straight and LGBTIQ+ athletes, build alliances across sexual and gender identities. We pay attention to both straight and queer narratives of allyship and alliance-building. We end this paper by exploring how the encounter between different views of allyship practices provide the preconditions for a productive practice of (un)learning about allyship, forming the basis for allyship based on 'horizontal' and reciprocal alliance-building.

Conceptualising Allyship and Alliance-Building

Research on allyship has foregrounded both the benefits and limitations of privileged groups and group member's relationships with the marginalised. This is significant for allyship engagement amongst men, who typically hold positions of privilege. This is particularly true for White, straight, cisgender, middle-class, able-bodied men – although these different identity facets signal the strands of privilege and marginalisation that intersect the mosaic of men's identities, making clear demarcations of dis/empowerment somewhat messy. Nevertheless, due to the persistence of patriarchal norms, 'man' is a typically privileged identity.

Research has pointed to the benefits of men's allyship with women as a way of mobilising the privileged resources that they have access to in the name of social justice (Goodman, 2000). It has been posited that dominant group members are more likely to listen to other members of that group (Bishop, 2002; Kaufman, 2001; Sharma, 2019). Consequently, dominant group members may be able to use their unearned privilege to amplify the voices of the disadvantaged and "break through others' ignorance and oppression" (Bishop, 2002, p.118).

There are also personal benefits to engaging in allyship. For example, straight men's allyship with gender and sexual minorities has been indicated to help develop a sense of belonging, a moral identity, and a sense of self-worth (Bridges & Mather, 2015; Duhigg et al., 2010; Ueno & Gentile, 2015). Additionally, Worthington et al. (2005) suggest that understanding sexual minorities and their experiences can inculcate important self-understanding for heterosexual people.

Similarly, men's engagement in alliances with marginalised groups involves a challenging and changing of (their own) masculinities. Lapointe (2015) observed that the straight men in their study who participated in gay-straight alliances nurture a new, more open form of masculinity that is rooted in support and understanding. As has been pointed out, we are all implicated in the gender order and men are damaged by patriarchy and its attendant -isms too (albeit in different arguably lesser ways) (Flood, 2007; Goodman, 2000). Consequently, participating in relationships of allyship with marginalised groups creates space for the complex but real possibility of men putting the puzzle of masculinity together in novel ways (Kehler & Martino, 2007; Luyt & Starck, 2020).

In contrast to these benefits of (straight) men's engagement in allyship practices, other research has pointed to limitations. Prominently featured in this research is the reproduction of heterosexism within allyship spaces. Mathers, Sumerau, and Ueno (2018) highlight this in

the context of a privilege afforded to heterosexual members of a mixed-sexuality advocacy group. This is a dynamic that other authors have noted in relation to men's engagement with feminist social justice. For example, Flood (2007) describes how women have "sometimes seen men take over and erode women-orientated projects" (p.9). In a similar vein, Linder and Johnson (2015) emphasise the case of men participating in a university programme to tackle violence against women who sexually assaulted female students as evidence of poor allyship practices. Challenging the conceptualisation of such violence as allyship gone wrong, Sharma (2019) frames these inequitable power dynamics "as an illustration of the fact that profeminist men are not immune to patriarchal privileges and practices" (p.114).

Additionally, other authors have pointed to the barriers to straight men's engagement in allyship activities. Numerous barriers are identified in this research including patriarchal practices, fear of stigmatization, the maintenance of power, complicity, and seeing gender and sexuality as unrelatable or unimportant issues (Goldstein 2017; Hearn, 2001; Kahane, 1998; Sharma, 2019).

Whilst this research raises important and significant attention to the conceptualisation and instantiation of (straight) men's allyship, it is notable that it focuses on the dominant group (i.e. straight men). This leaves out the important aspect of the relationship *between* the privileged and the marginalised. Forbes and Ueno (2020) explain that "it is important to study allies from multiple angles, including marginalized people's accounts, to attain a more accurate understanding of allies' perceived role in identity-based movements" (p.160).

There has been considerably less research examining queer engagement in alliance building and allyship from the perspective of queer group members. Forbes and Ueno (2020) explore this gap, drawing on interviews with LGBTIQ+ students in the US. The authors found that queer students' expectations of straight allies sat along a spectrum with, on the one hand,

expecting allies to be receptive to queer students personal and individual needs, and on the other hand, expecting allies to be active supporters of the broader queer community. Notably, the students expressed these positions through discussions of the intersections of privilege and marginalisation that comprise their own identity constellations. This speaks to another reason to explore both straight and queer voices in alliance building activities: delineation of privileged and marginalised is a contextual matter. Dominant group members may also occupy positions of marginalisation and vice versa. This complicates simplistic understandings of dominant group members as allies. Additionally, Ueno and Gentile (2015) note in their study of friendships between straight and LGB college students that LGB students develop and present a sense of acceptance and an ability to integrate into other communities than only that of sexual minorities.

Recognising the agency and experiences of marginalised groups in alliance-building is necessary if we understand allyship to be a reciprocal process. Here, we add to this relatively small amount of research on straight and queer engagement in allyship relationships by exploring straight and queer men's experiences of engaging in alliance-building in the context of their participation in sometimes nude photoshoots for and NGO's health and human rights promotion programme.

Sexuality, Masculinity and Men's Sport

As noted above, straight cisgender men are typically less involved in allyship activities than they might be due to various barriers (Goldstein 2017; Hearn, 2001; Kahane, 1998; Sharma, 2019). Not least of these is the heteronormative constructions of dominant or hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Pascoe, 2007). In such cases, heterosexist ideals intertwine with

masculinity such that enactments such as allyship, intimacy, care, and vulnerability are to be avoided in favour of typically dominant, rational, and expressly heterosexual displays.

Alternative conceptualisations of masculinity have also been posited by critical masculinities scholars. For example, Elliot (2016; 2020) talks about 'caring masculinities', defined by a rejection of domination, care, emotionality, and interdependency. Such enactments of masculinity offer counter-narratives to hegemonic notions of masculinity and are, according to Elliot (2016), "a critical form of men's engagement in gender equality" (p.254). Men's allyship activities are intimately related to performances of masculinity.

Similarly offering alternative narratives to masculine domination, Haywood et al. (2018) discuss the notion of "horizontal homosociality", referring to "relations [between men] that are based on emotional closeness, intimacy and a non-profitable form of friendship" (p.67). Although not explicitly about allyship, the notion of horizontal homosociality explores the formation of caring and supportive relationships between men – something that can be extended to the gendered milieu of alliance-building.

Typically, men's sport has been a space in which dominant, hegemonic masculinity has been practiced and performed (Connell, 1995; Lenskyj, 2012; Messner, 1991; Wellard, 2009). The typical requirements for aggression, domination of the opponent, suppression or masking of pain and vulnerability, and mastery over and discipline of the body has made men's sport a prominent socio-cultural site of the forms of hegemonic masculinity that are detrimental to care and allyship. The heteronormative nature of men's sports is evident in the dearth of openly LGBTIQ+ players in many men's professional sports including football, ice-hockey, and basketball. However, other research has pointed to the growing inclusivity of men's sports. Indeed, some have pointed to a growth in athlete-activism in recent years (Bryant, 2019; Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Haslett et al., 2020), demonstrating the possibilities for

challenges to and transgressions of masculine and heteronormative codes which have traditionally dominated in sporting spaces.

Data

We recruited ten participants for online semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Semi-structured interviews allowed us to be responsive to the participants within a framework for talking about their experiences of taking part in the nude photoshoots. The interviews originally took place online due to relaxed but still existent social distancing restrictions in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even once they were relaxed further, we continued to conduct interviews online due to the benefits they provided in terms of reduced travel, costs and time for participants and researchers. Whilst there is evidence that being able to take part in research from the comfort of one's own home without a researcher physically present can ease participants and encourage participation (Knott-Fayle & Peel, 2022), it is possible that online interviews place some limitations on interactional fluency with negative impacts on the ability to build rapport (O'Connor & Madge, 2017).

Despite any potential issues with developing a communicative relationship between participants and researchers, the interviews were characterised by rich and in-depth conversations. The participants were asked about their motivations for taking part in the programme, their experiences of taking part and their understandings of the social justice programme's objectives. However, from these prompts, the conversations traversed topics including but not limited to body-image issues, media representations of masculinity and sport, experiences in conventional and inclusive sports teams, the culture of 'banter' in changing rooms, responses to social media support and abuse, complicity in heteronormativity, and development as allies.

The plethora of topics covered attest to the richness of the conversations as well as the openness of the participants. It is perhaps unsurprising that the participants were open and willing to talk about their experiences due to their participation in the relatively unique photoshoot experience and the very act of volunteering to participate in our research project indicates an eagerness to share. They were, however, also notably open in their responses, offering accounts of eating disorders, gender and sexual identity and experiences, bullying, living with HIV, and other personal and evocative events and emotions. These accounts were often provided without probing questions. Instead, they developed through more organic conversation and illustrated the participants willingness to share and discuss their experiences. It is possible that for some, particularly the participants who had invested many years in the photoshoot project, this was a display of the efficacy of the project which purported amongst other things, to develop and show men in a more open and vulnerable light.

All the participants participate in sports and physical activities in some way. This is significant because, as noted above, sport has been criticised for reproducing and legitimising codes of masculinities underpinned by ridicule and exclusion of women, as well as men who transgress heteronormative codes of masculinity. It also means that despite different experiences and relationships with their bodies, the participants all appeared relatively athletic – something which seemed to be demonstrated in various accounts of sub-20-minute 5k runs, disciplined gym regimens, and biomechanical knowledge of the body. The conversations about gender, sexuality, and allyship are therefore situated against this sporty backdrop to the participant's lives.

Of the ten participants we spoke to, two participants (Augustus and John) identified as non-binary – the rest identified as cisgender men. Fred, Charles, and Sean identified as straight. The rest of the participants identified as a sexual minority in some way – Chris as bisexual,

John as pansexual, and Matt, Mikey, Ricardo, Jake, and Augustus as gay. Despite all being open and willing to talk during the interviews, some of the queer participants also asked for more clarity on the purpose of the study before the interviews indicating a degree of trepidation. It is notable that only three of the ten participants that spoke to us identified as straight considering that the programme itself was originally only open to straight men and only recently had begun recruiting a more sexually- and gender-diverse range of participants. It is noteworthy insofar as it reflects some of the difficulties in recruiting straight men (particularly, White, able-bodied, cisgender, middle-class men) to social justice projects.

The participants ages ranged between 25-50, with an average age of 35. John (50) and Augustus (42) were the oldest two participants with Charles (25), Matt and Fred (both 27) being the youngest. Most identified as middle- or upper-class with only Chris identifying as working class. They also all held at least an undergraduate degree, with five holding a masters and one a doctorate. These aspects of the participants' backgrounds were relatively homogenous and indicate a lack of diversity in terms of socio-economic status and education. However, these educational backgrounds also seemed to ease their comfort with the interviews as they were familiar with research with half having conducted their own research at masters or doctorate levels. For example, Jake, who worked as a medical clinician and held a doctorate, was interested in our methodology and research questions and spoke about his own phenomenological research on men living with HIV.

There was similar degree of homogeneity of participants' ethnicity with 8 identifying as White and only Ricardo (Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin) and Fred (biracial – Black and White) identifying otherwise. Similarly, only one participant (Augustus) identified as having a disability (HIV+). Whilst these aspects of homogeneity amongst the participants create some limitations, it is the gender and sexual diversity that we are primarily interested in here.

Methods

The interview transcripts were read and re-read with attention paid to the topics of masculinity, body image, and allyship. These topics were our focus due to researcher interests and the stated aims of the photoshoot project – namely, to represent sportsmen in more open, intimate and vulnerable ways, to educate participants and audiences about homophobia in sport and in society more broadly, and to invite sportsmen to become social justice advocates and allies. The team developed themes from the data which were predominantly drawn out from the literature on masculinity, allyship and body image. We took this approach because we employed a form of critical thematic analysis which considers "how the pattern results are connected to larger social ideologies" (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p.95). As such, critical approaches to thematic analysis build on the frameworks provided by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019) to foreground critical concerns, namely the recognition of power as well the examination of injustice and oppression and how they become reified or disrupted through social actions (Cannella & Lincoln, 2015). Consequently, our primary focus was making sense of the patterns in the interview data based on how they related to broader ideological and discursive currents of power and inequality, specifically in relation to masculinity, sexuality, body-image, and allyship.

Analysis

Our discussion below centres on the construction of alliance-building and allyship in straight and queer men's accounts of participating in the naked photoshoots of the health and human rights promotion programme. We explore how the programme provides an important educative space for both the straight and queer men in different ways. We then explore the

more ambivalent aspects of allyship expressed by some (particularly LGBTIQ+) participants. These more equivocal accounts illuminate the ways in which heteronormativity can seep into a social justice project professing to challenge "structural racism, homophobia, misogyny and toxicity of hegemonic masculinity". Finally, drawing on previous research on power and marginalization in educational spaces (Hytten & Warren, 2003), we offer an alternative reading of the challenges and suggest that instead of simply indicating the limitations of building alliances in pluralistic spaces, they present a way to push those limitations and develop a more 'horizontal' form of alliance-building by paying attention to the complex and sometimes challenging experiences of men's straight-queer allyship.

Becoming allies: Learning about allyship

The coming together of queer and straight men in the context of the social justice programme, particularly one with the unusual vulnerability associated with the communal nudity in the naked photoshoots, offers a space for learning, a chance for significant educative possibilities through queer-straight interactions. Bridges and Mather (2015) highlight the importance of venturing outside of one's privileged group when working to fight oppression, noting that engagement in social justice for a group of White men meant "seeking and finding connections with members of non-privileged groups. These new communities became important contexts for learning" (p.160). For the men that took part in this social justice programme, the shared queer-straight space presents a similar context for learning.

The programme is typically presented as transformational to the straight men's allyship, exemplified by Fred, who states:

> Like now I would say no, I wasn't an ally because now I- I know that I can do way more to be an ally, but back then maybe a little bit because you know I- I hung out in these groups where there was a lot of LGBT people in it, especially in a country

> where it was a taboo thing, you know. But now I realise that if you want to consider yourself an ally maybe you need to do a little bit more. (Fred)

In this extract Fred describes undergoing a transformation of becoming an ally. He looks back critically on his prior allyship activity, namely, socialising with LGBTIQ+ people. Fred also acknowledges and makes a useful distinction between ally-by-association and ally-by-action.

It is significant that these transformational narratives rely on a move from more passive forms, such as socialising with LGBTIQ+ people, to a more active engagement in allyship – as Fred states it above, "if you want to be an ally maybe you need to do a little bit more". The expression of visible and active allyship is significant for straight cisgender men because the entanglement of homophobia and sexism with hegemonic masculinities means that participation in allyship activities may weaken men's privileged masculine status (Lapointe, 2015; Pascoe, 2007). Additionally, the potential of having one's masculinity or heterosexuality called into question because of engagement in allyship activities can create a fear of "stigma by association" (Goldstein, 2017, p.346). Thus, straight cisgender men's relationship with masculinity can dissuade active engagement with allyship projects. One straight cisgender participant, Charles, explicitly recognises this potential:

> Because of my involvement in this project and my very strong ties with the LGBT community you know some people were like "Oh yeah, Charles is gay" and stuff, and my automatic reaction to this was to almost kind of react aggressively and try to prove that I wasn't, and I'm like that's homophobic of me and I shouldn't- I shouldn't be scared of people calling me gay because whatever the fuck, I don't care and like if I- if I did that in front of a gay friend I probably offend them without even- without even knowing it. (Charles)

Whilst Charles grapples with the association with the queer community and questions over his straightness, he examines this masculinised reaction of aggressiveness and recognises it as a problematic homophobic behaviour. Thus, the stigmatisation by association that often repels straight White cisgender men from engaging in allyship, though present, is dismantled by the straight men participating in this social justice programme. In fact, their transformation from passive to active allies demonstrates a shift towards explicit and unmistakable participation in allyship practices.

Although interpersonal relationships with the queer community can be a source of social stigmatisation for straight men, as Charles indicates above, these relationships formed in part through the programme provides the men with valuable social justice literacy, which is apparent in their active participation and also in their reflexive engagement with their past allyship practices. Critical introspection and recognising one's own complicity in systems of oppression is central to effective allyship practice (Burrell, 2020; Kumashiro, 2002; Peretz, 2018; Sharma, 2019). In both Fred's and Charles's expressions of allyship, they critique their past practices. Fred reflects on the insufficiency of simply socialising with LGBTIQ+ people as a form of allyship, whilst Charles challenges his own reaction to questions over his (hetero)sexuality. Taking part in the social justice programme therefore allows them, to a certain extent, to take a critical stance on (their own) allyship.

Existing research has highlighted the importance of straight men's interaction with the LGBTIQ+ community in learning about injustice and developing allyship responsibilities, but the learning possibilities for LGBTIQ+ people remains under-explored. In our interviews, we noted that the queer men also expressed that they found the interaction with the straight men enlightening. Insofar as allyship necessarily involves an alliance of two or more parties, this is an important point to note. For example, Ricardo, a gay cisgender man, explains:

> I don't have the opportunity or I don't put myself out there to be meeting straight people. So for me, just opening up and like listening to their conversations, their points of view, it was- it was fun for me. I- I feel like it took a little bit of my misconception or- or my prejudice of rolling my eyes, "Oh no you go to this kind of party… like what you're talking about girls like, what? Ugh!" (Ricardo)

While the straight men learn about social injustice, their own participation in the programme as straight men and how to be allies, some of the queer men such as Ricardo report finding the experience enlightening, dispelling of misconceptions about straight men. Ricardo expresses his recognition of these misconceptions through a parodic display of his attitude towards what he imagined straight culture and conversations to be about (certain kinds of parties and "talking about girls… Ugh!"). Consequently, by bringing men of different sexual and gender identities together, this social justice programme provides space for learning not just for straight men but also for some of the queer men. Recognising the mutuality of allyship practices, this learning is beneficial to the building of alliances. The coming together of queer and straight men in a shared social justice project highlights the productive learning that can emerge from pluralistic spaces. These accounts paint a picture of care, interdependency and a rejection of domination – that is, of "caring masculinities" (Elliot, 2016, 2020). However, these optimistic expressions of queer-straight alliance-building do not tell the whole story.

Disrupting allyship: Challenges to learning

Though significant, accounts of the transformational aspects of learning about allyship and becoming allies overlook the challenges of building queer-straight alliances. As John, a pansexual, non-binary participant, describes:

> I think what it's demonstrated to me is how difficult allyship is in- in reality. There's a certain bit of, it's easy to say you want to be an ally or that you're an ally and trying to be an ally, but actually the- the act of being an ally is quite challenging because there's going to be aspects of any behaviour of all of us that then get challenged through that allyship and how that plays out and that's- that's very difficult and the day-to-day actual practical elements it- it becomes difficult… and I think it's sort of a bit of there's a sort of- sometimes I think with allyship there can be a sense of innocence in terms of people wanting to be an ally and- and working at being an ally, but then there's sort of actually sometimes being an ally is you get challenged in your own areas which can be quite uncomfortable and it brings up some of the issues that you're uncomfortable with within yourself and that's one of the challenges of being an ally. (John)

John describes how the coming together of queer and straight men in a social justice programme brings the difficulties and challenges of allyship into focus. The "innocence" with which allyship can be engaged with is arguably apparent in some of the straight men's accounts. For example, Fred's and Charles's self-critique of their previous poor allyship functions in a narrative of transformation through which they have transitioned from poor allies to good allies. With allyship providing allies with a sense of self-worth and morality (Duhigg et al., 2010; Ueno & Gentile, 2015), as well as being a central part of individual and group identity construction (Bridges & Mather, 2015), the appeal of success stories is understandable. However, such accounts potentially obscure the necessary on-going nature of learning and practicing allyship, in effect masking the ways that they remain privileged and complicit in heteronormativity and cisgenderism or other forms of discrimination. Consequently, reflecting Burrell's (2020) research on men as allies in gender-based violence prevention, the narratives of transformation which provide a framework for success stories of

becoming and being allies may also act as a dissociative resource in which men can distance themselves from the problems of oppression compared to other men, in turn precluding self-reflection of one's own position within structures of discrimination and privilege.

Many of the LGBTIQ+ participants provided more critical accounts of taking part in the social justice programme than those in the previous section. John describes a specific instance of "some of the younger guys who would challenge themselves how many press ups you can do". This moment indicates a seeping in of conventional and typically heteronormalized changing room culture of physical competition (see for example, Wellard, 2009). John goes on to state that they "didn't feel particularly comfortable" with this "competitive" interaction. Matt, a gay cisgender man, replied to the question of whether he felt a sense of allyship during the shoots simply, "To be honest, no, just because I don't think they interacted with us massively". These tensions were perhaps most strikingly evident in an incident recalled by two of the queer men, which took place at a photoshoot in the gym area of a gay sauna:

> One of the participants who I'm not gonna name made like a throw away joke about wanting to go on safari tour and I kind of shot it down in sort of "You have to be respectful" like "You're in someone else's space. You might find this really strange and alien but you're the alien not them. This is a men- men who have sex with men's venue and that is the purpose of it, it is licensed for that purpose, we are here you know on kindness and courtesy to- to do something… but we are the interlopers. So, it's not for you to go on safari because you're in a zoo"… so I sort of had to educate and inform. (Mikey)

As Mikey, a gay cisgender man, recalls, at least one straight man reacted to being in the sauna by expressing his interest in the venue in problematic ways ("wanting to go on safari tour"). It is possible that this straight man expressed this in an attempt to convey comfort and

a desire to learn – of allyship, even. However, not only is the expression of a "safari tour" viewed as marginalising and offensive, but, as Mikey points out, this is problematic because they are visitors in this queer space, a necessary space because of historic legal and moral restrictions on men having sex with men. As with Mathers et al.'s (2018) description of the reification of heteronormativity in a mixed-sexuality LGBTIQ+ advocacy group, this incident exemplifies how uncritically taking up an ally identity can reproduce heteronormative power dynamics, in this case with the straight men entering a queer space to view it as a spectacle rather than recognising the limitations of their own knowledge and experiences and the possibility of learning.

Another significant way that allyship is produced in heteronormative ways is evident in the curtailing of queer desire, or expressions of it, in the presence of straight men:

> I'm quite flirtatious as a person anyway so you know, you sort of- you may get aroused by some people's bodies and you think "yeah, I- I quite like that". On the other hand, you're in a professional, you know, arrangement. You- you're all doing things in a- for a sort of public facing campaign. So, you have to behave yourself as well. (Augustus)

Augustus, who identified as gay and non-binary, describes here how queer desires are suppressed and inexpressible within the social justice programme for some queer participants at times. This (self-)disciplining of non-heterosexual desire is justified by reference to professionalism. That is, in a professional context one is expected not to display or act on sexual inclinations. However, notably it was only queer men who ever expressed any curtailment of sexuality. This could be read as the result of the all-male nature of the project. But it also ties with research on "heteroprofessionalism" (Davies & Neustifter, 2021; Mizzi, 2013, 2016), which elucidates how discourses of professionalism "reduce gender

expansiveness in workplaces by encouraging queer individuals to self-present in a hetero and cisnormative fashion" (Davies & Neustifter, 2021, p.1). The stymying of queer desire reported by some of the queer participants highlights how heteronormativity, in this case through discourses of professionalism, can pervade even the space of the social justice programme .

Significantly, the potentially subversive space populated by mixed-sexuality men openly and consensually naked together is scaffolded by this heteronormativity. The straight participants do not describe having to quell any (hetero)sexual desire. They do however repel the possibility of (homo)sexualised readings of the naked photoshoots. For example, Fred, a straight cisgender man, describes his trepidation around taking part at first:

> You immediately assume that every gay guy is going to be into you… I felt that coming out of me, so like, OK, [first photographer's name] is there with the camera and [second photographer's name] as well there, they're probably like, you know, mentally getting off on- on this moment. I feel like they're kind of taking advantage of me because of that- because I consented to being naked for the aim of the project but not for their own like in the moment, you know, getting off on- on what's going on… but I mean, after a moment I realise like no, it's- it's we're all in the same boat and we're all trying to achieve the same thing, it's nothing to do with that. (Fred)

The workings of heteronormativity can be seen here with this straight participant's presentation of anxiety about taking part in the naked photoshoots, stemming from the presence of LGBTIQ+ men, being assuaged by a reassurance that there was no queer gaze upon his body. As Wellard (2009) observes of the changing room setting, the "only apparent taboo appeared to be the overt demonstration of (homo)sexuality…. the presence of this taboo seemed to be indicated by the absence of such displays" (59). Thus, the repudiation of

queer desire in men's nude spaces is notable in its absence. With straight men's participation in this social justice programme made contingent upon queer men not "getting off", the heteronormative disciplining of desire pervades how these queer men must act in this space – namely concealing any same-sex attraction or the possibility of it. Consequently, the space is latently produced in heteronormative ways, disrupting the narratives of easy allyship and queer-straight alliances. As such the embodying of "caring masculinities" (Elliot, 2016, 2020) expressed in the previous section are shown to be more complicated than they first appear. If these caring expressions are premised on rejecting domination and embracing care and interdependency, then the accounts of heteronormativity and distancing from complicity indicate the persistence of more conventional, sporty masculinities. However, this is not simply to repudiate the important learning and allyship-building expressed by the participants. Instead, as we go on to argue, it is the foregrounding of these challenges and limitations that makes critical space for an ongoing and subversive form of alliance-building.

Horizontal alliances: (Un)learning how to do allyship

The more ambivalent accounts of allyship practices call into question those of simply becoming and being allies laid out in the first section. Recognising this tension affirms the importance of exploring the plurality of voices involved in allyship relationships as some queer participants illuminate different shades of the alliance-building process that the straight cisgender participants do not. These more nuanced accounts make it apparent that narratives of allyship success can mask the ways that allyship practices can remain constrained by heteronormativity and, as a result, end up reasserting such dynamics. Inevitably, there are limitations to this allyship, but recognising such limitations can also provide the foundation for (un)learning by laying bare the ways that straight men are positioned within

heteronormative gender orders, even as social justice allies. Eschewing complexity in favour of allyship success stories disallows the possibility of confronting and challenging the limits of straight men's experiences, understandings of social (in)justice and allyship. Thus, it is in the challenges to what has been learned, to what is known, about allyship that makes space for an ongoing and necessarily incomplete process of (un)learning allyship.

Here, we build on Hytten and Warren (2003) who, in their critique of the reification of Whiteness in educational contexts, make it clear that the discourses used to reinscribe racial power can also provide instances of learning by bringing to the surface the ways that one might be complicit in structures of oppression. As Hytten and Warren (2003) put it, "the use of the discourse is a way of moving towards critique" (p.88). To revisit the incident in the gym area of the gay sauna described by Mikey, we can see both the reproduction of heteronormativity but also the ability to challenge it. As Mikey describes it, he counters the problematic assertion ("going on safari tour") with a challenge. As a result, these straight allies are confronted with the limitations and inconsistencies of what they know about what allyship looks like and their own status as allies. With Mikey's challenge constructed to "educate and inform", this confrontation is not simply a challenge to poor allyship practice, but a chance to reflexively engage with the ways that they remain complicit in structures of oppression. Therefore, the incident can be read as one in which discourses and practices of oppression are brought to the surface rather than remaining invisible – leading to critical discussion and (un)learning.

These challenges are possible because of the pluralistic environment, the coming together of queer and straight men in the context of this social justice programme. This creates space for more 'horizontal' alliance-building to take root with non-normative dynamics emerging, in this case for a gay man positioned to guide and inform. Haywood et al. (2018) describe the possibility for "horizontal homosociality", which is "relations that are based on emotional

closeness, intimacy and a non-profitable form of friendship" (p.67). Whilst we do not read these instances as friendship-building per se, we do explore the intimacy and support that develops in the context of the naked photoshoots elsewhere (Knott-Fayle et al., 2023). Pease (2007) suggests that profeminist men's allyship to women should be centred on accountability to women. In other words, allyship requires cultivating relations in which the target group are able to act as guides. By the same token, it is important to recognise that allies should not put the burden of education onto the shoulders of the oppressed (Bishop, 2002).

The possibility for more horizontal moments of alliance-building balances these competing practices with relations predicated upon reciprocity. The encounter between the simplistic but optimistic understandings of being and becoming allies and the challenges posed to those narratives provides the preconditions for productive horizontal forms of allyship. The former indicates the willingness of these straight allies to engage in and learn about allyship, the latter prevents these understandings becoming settled and uncritically reproducing heteronormativity. Whilst learning about social (in)justice allows for these straight men to see allyship as taking-up one's role as an ally, confronting the limitations of their understandings of being allies means reconsidering doing allyship as a process of making, rather than taking, space. The straight men, at times, recognise this ongoing nature of doing allyship and the necessarily incomplete process of (un)learning, stating

> "I know so many times I've acted like- like I- like I wasn't an ally and- and so you need to- it's very hard to reflect on. It's very hard to reflect on but it's a journey and it's probably going to take me a lifetime and I probably will never reach perfection" (Charles).

This indicates an important opening, a fissure in the closed narratives of successful allyship, through which limitations can be recognised and therefore challenged and stretched – an opening made possible by the inclusion of marginalised queer voices and experiences of allyship.

Conclusion

The process of (un)learning as we have laid it out here should not be understood in a linear fashion, moving from simpler to more complex understandings of allyship, but rather as comprised of mutually constitutive moments of learning and unlearning. An issue with understanding allyship in a linear model of development is that it suggests an endpoint. As we have posited here, the assumption of having become an ally can preclude the possibility of ongoing reflexive engagement (Waling, 2019) and disassociate allies from their continued complicity in oppressive relations (Burrell, 2020). This was apparent in the overly simplistic success stories laid out in the first analytical section and the challenges levelled against them in the second. The process of (un)learning instead is a cyclical one, with learning and unlearning underpinning each other. Hence, though we offered a critique of some of the learning that took place, the purpose was not to discount the importance this allyship engagement, but instead to understand the necessarily incomplete nature of allyship. Allyship therefore is not a case of *being* an ally but is something that one *does*. And an important part of doing allyship is making space for marginalised voices and the possibility of being challenged and cultivating horizontal alliance-building. We have highlighted here how the challenges and discomfort of alliance-building can be the catalyst for the cycle of (un)learning. Consequently, productive allyship should not be understood as based on harmony. Instead, it is the encounter between discordant understandings of the world and of allyship that underpins productive reciprocal alliance-building.

Not only is it important to create spaces of pluralistic alliance-building, but research and researchers also play a role. As noted by Forbes and Ueno (2020), failing to recognise the necessary mutuality of allyship and overlooking marginalised voices and experiences leaves a big part of allyship practices and relationships unexamined. Taking Forbes and Ueno's (2020) observation seriously here, we found that the success stories offered by the straight participants were disrupted somewhat by the more ambivalent accounts of queer participants. From this more nuanced perspective, a deeper understanding of the productive challenges, the complexities, of queer-straight alliance-building was able to be developed. Thus, to be understood, horizontal forms of alliance-building require a foregrounding of both straight *and* queer, privileged *and* marginalised, voices in research.

For the purpose of the analysis, we positioned the queer and straight men respectively on the margin-centre dynamic. However, in reality, they occupy "border identities" (Adams and Zuniga, 2016) which straddle the ostensible binary of privilege and oppression. Our simplification is justified for the clarity of the analysis, but it is important to note some significant absences as a result of these "border identities". Apart from John, who, as the oldest participant aged 50, engaged with the way that his age intersected with masculinity and sexual identity, as well as passing mentions of allyship with women, intersectional discussions were absent. Peretz (2018) notes, "existing understandings of allyship in activism are limited, however, because they often lack an intersectional lens" (p.288). There was no discussion of how the men's participation in the project may be aided or made easier by their being able-bodied, or White, or relatively affluent – axes upon which all of the participants occupied at least one privileged position. Here, we explored intersections of sexuality and gender with masculinity allyship but exploring a more ethnically, socio-economically, or (dis)ability diverse range of voices would be an important development in future research. The relative homogeneity in terms of (dis)ability, ethnicity, and socio-economic status may

have contributed to the absence of these points of discussion. This may also be a point of departure for future research. However, these absences also further evidence the productive possibility of margin-centre encounters and pluralistic spaces as a way of bringing to the surface and confronting complicity in systems of oppression.

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